

# Investigating Japanese College Student Preferences for Native and Nonnative Speaker English Teachers: The Case of Advanced Students

Takaharu Saito

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## 1 . Introduction

The issue of preferences for NESTs or NNESTs has been widely discussed in the TESOL literature. According to Hall and Cook (2013), a majority of TESOL theorists and methodologists have supported the assumption that a new language (the target language) should be taught and learned monolingually, without use of the learners' local language in the classroom. Based on this assumption, NESTs, native speakers of the target language, are often preferred, taking on a special status as ideal linguistic models due to their greater English proficiency and ease.

Ma (2012), however, insists that “having linguistic competence in a

language does not automatically make one a good teacher” (p. 282). For most, it is axiomatic that teachers are made and not born. Widdowson (1992), meanwhile, argues that teachers’ linguistic knowledge should not be more highly regarded than their pedagogical expertise, admitting that NESTs have experience as English language users and play the role of informants in teaching English, but noting that NNESTs have experience as English language learners and play the role of instructors.

Medgyes (1994) acknowledges that NESTs and NNESTs differ in language proficiency and teaching behavior, but argues that each can complement the other. In particular, he highlights positive aspects typically associated with NNESTs, such as providing a good model, supplying pertinent information about the English language, showing empathy, and assisting students effectively through use of the shared mother tongue. Particularly in EFL contexts, NNESTs’ shared linguistic background plays an important role in conveying meaning effectively, maintaining class discipline, and enhancing teacher-learner rapport in the classroom (Hall and Cook, 2013; Ma, 2012; Saito, 2014). In support of the importance of the shared mother tongue, Cummins (2007) claims that foreign-language learning tends to be enhanced by teachers drawing students’ attention to the similarities and differences between the two languages.

Among the issues involved in the NEST/NNEST discussion, student perceptions of both types of teacher have recently begun to attract attention. In one study, Mahboob (2004) concluded that ESL students at a U.S. university did not have a clear preference for either NESTs or NNESTs, but rather accepted the strengths and unique attributes of

both. Similarly, a number of pertinent studies on student perceptions of both types suggest that both are seen as possessing their own strengths, weaknesses, and unique characteristics (e.g., Benke and Medgyes, 2005; Butler, 2007; Cheung and Braine, 2007; Kelch and Santana-Williamson, 2002; Lasagabaster and Sierra, 2005; Moussu, 2002; Saito, 2014).

Investigating student perceptions is of great importance because their views as consumers are valuable for improving the effectiveness of teaching. In light of this, the present study aims to explore Japanese advanced-English college student preferences for NESTs or NNESTs, and to reveal key factors influencing such preferences.

## 2. The study

The purpose of this study, then, is to investigate advanced Japanese college student preferences for NESTs or NNESTs, in an EFL context, Japan. In the study, NNESTs share the local language, Japanese, with their students. This study involves mixed methods research, with both a closed question (quantitative method) and an open question (qualitative method) being employed, in order to explore student preferences for NESTs or NNESTs, and their views on the potential advantages and disadvantages of each teacher type. The student preferences are quantitatively assessed using a traditional Likert scale for the closed question, which asks the students to determine the strength of their preference for one teacher type or the other. Then an open question asks the students to freely describe the reason(s) why they made the choice they did in answer to the closed question, based on the

assumption that the students' more nuanced perceptions would be best observed in the dynamics of their written expressions.

## 2. 1 Participants

The author taught English at a mid-sized private college in Japan, in the fall of 2014, and obtained permission from three instructors teaching advanced English classes to ask their students to complete a related questionnaire. On October 27 and November 18 of 2014, the 85 students enrolled in these advanced English classes were invited to complete a questionnaire on the given topic. Of the three classes invited, one consisted of second-year students (33 in total) taking a course (called English D) in basic English conversation. The other two classes (52 students in total) were taking a course called English E, which prepared second-year students for the TOEIC test.

These 85 second-year students were classified as advanced based on their examination results in the previous spring and fall semesters (their first year as college students). Thus, in this private college, the students were regarded as advanced, with high motivation in general, though their English proficiency might be relatively low in comparison with that of students at highly prestigious academic institutions. The 85 students were asked to write their answers to the open question in their first language, Japanese, as this enabled them to express their thoughts more freely, smoothly, and adroitly than if forced to use their limited English.

## 2. 2 Questionnaire

As aforementioned, the data were collected through closed and open

questions (for the Japanese version of the questionnaire, see Appendix A). First, students were asked to answer the following five-point Likert-scale closed question:

Question 1: Which do you prefer, native (NEST) or nonnative (NNEST) English speaking teachers? Please circle one of the following sentence numbers.

1. I prefer NESTs.
2. I somewhat prefer NESTs.
3. It's hard to say, either way.
4. I somewhat prefer NNESTs (Japanese).
5. I prefer NNESTs (Japanese).

After this closed question, the students were asked an open question concerning their choice in Question 1:

Question 2: What was the reason(s) for your choice in Question 1? Please feel free to describe your reason(s) in detail.

Note that these questions were presented in Japanese, and respondents were asked to answer in Japanese, so that they could most freely relate their own experiences and thoughts regarding their preferences. Approximately 10 minutes were provided for completing the questionnaire.

## 2. 3 Procedure

The administration of the questionnaire was conducted in class at the end of the fall semester, in October and November of 2014. Of the 85 questionnaires collected, 11 were disqualified, with some students merely expressing their preference for NESTs and NNESTs without exploring their opinions in detail, and others answering off-topic with regard to the

reason(s) for their choice in the Likert-scale answer. Thus, a total of 74 questionnaires from Japanese college students were analyzed in the study.

In the case of the open question (Question 2), content data analysis was conducted, in order to identify, in the written responses, noteworthy attitudes and themes regarding student preferences. The researcher first carefully read the student comments several times, and then coded them using different highlighting, to generate a pertinent list of categories. Therefore, the categories emerged through the process of data analysis, on the assumption that students' more nuanced preferences would be best observed in the uncategorized dynamics of the data itself.

### 3. Findings and discussion

The next sections present and discuss the analysis of the questionnaire data. As the student responses were written in Japanese, the passages cited from the open question have been translated into English by the author.

#### 3. 1 Findings regarding the closed question (Question 1)

Regarding Question 1, of the 74 respondents, 2 students (3%) chose Number 1 ('I prefer NESTs.');

Response	Count	Percentage
Number 1 ('I prefer NESTs.')	2	3%
Number 2 ('I somewhat prefer NESTs.')	10	14%
Number 3 ('It's hard to say, either way.')	25	34%
Number 4 ('I somewhat prefer NNESTs.')	28	38%
Number 5 ('I prefer NNESTs.')	9	12%

10 (14%) chose Number 2 ('I somewhat prefer NESTs.');

25 (34%) chose Number 3 ('It's hard to say, either way.');

28 (38%) chose Number 4 ('I somewhat prefer NNESTs.');

and 9 (12%) chose Number 5 ('I prefer NNESTs.'). The mean score for the five-point Likert-scale question was 3.43. The fact that 37 students

(50%) chose either Numbers 4 or 5 suggests that, of the students who expressed a preference at all, most would at least somewhat prefer NNESTs (Japanese English teachers), while 25 students (34%) expressed no decided preference, leaving only 12 students (16%) at least somewhat preferring NESTs.

The following bar-chart (Figure 1) shows the distribution of student preferences for either NESTs or NNESTs (Japanese English teachers). The chart suggests that, in general, advanced-English Japanese college students with high motivation at least somewhat prefer NNESTs. The next section explores the reasons for their preferences, through analysis of their written responses.

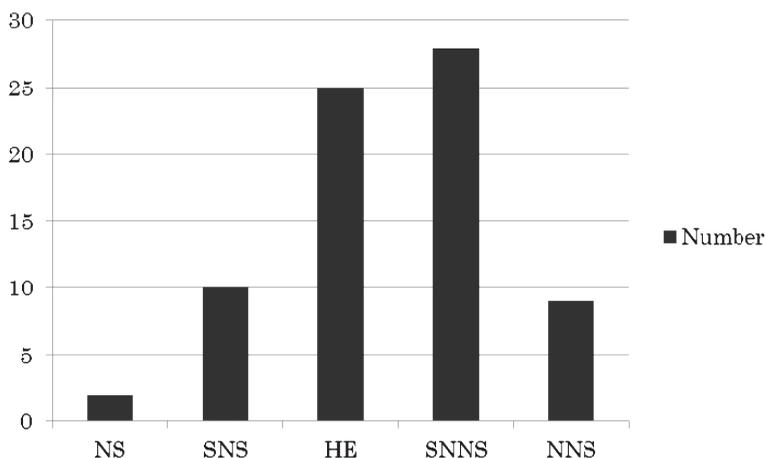


Figure 1. Distribution of student preferences for either NESTs or NNESTs (NS, SNS, HE, SNNS, and NNS: number of students choosing Number 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, respectively)

### 3. 2 Findings regarding the open question (Question 2)

In Question 2, students were asked to freely explain why they made the choice they did in Question 1. In this section, students' written responses concerning each of the five preference statements are examined.

#### 3. 2. 1 Regarding the choice of Number 1 ('I prefer NESTs.')

Of the 74 respondents, two showed a decided preference for NESTs (Native English speaking teachers), explaining:

- I can only gain an opportunity to talk with NESTs in English class, not outside the class. In Japan, in the era of the global society, English is needed for communication. Grammar-oriented instruction cannot improve practical English. So I prefer to have NESTs, to get used to communicating with foreigners. (Student #30)
- NESTs do not use Japanese at all in English conversation class. First, I have difficulty in understanding, but am sure to gradually learn English from them, and can see how weak I am in English, in front of them. This English-speaking environment is not created in NNESTs' lessons. (Student # 2)

The two students seem to feel that NESTs can enhance English learning due to their lack of adequate Japanese proficiency, and can create an authentic English speaking environment in class. Such an environment is needed when students want no alternative but to practice English communication. The two students are clearly eager to learn

practical English from NESTs with authentic English proficiency.

### 3. 2. 2 Regarding the choice of Number 2 ('I somewhat prefer NESTs.')

Of the 74 respondents, 10 chose this statement; somewhat preferring NESTs, because they rely on NESTs' perceived superior English proficiency, especially their accurate pronunciation, as shown in the following representative comments:

- At college, I want to learn more natural English expressions from NESTs. (Student #8)
- Since my current focus is on learning English pronunciation, I want to listen to NESTs' pure expression. (Student #25)
- I can learn real English from NESTs. In addition, their lessons are enjoyable. (Student #26)
- I can learn living English from NESTs. I should learn English expressions through conversation and use it practically. (Student #40)
- I'd rather have NESTs because they speak practical English as their mother tongue. NNESTs are not good at English conversation. (Student #62)

The students' use of "more natural," "pure," "real," "living," and "practical" in describing NESTs' English appears to indicate a strong belief in the native speaker as an ideal linguistic model. These students want to expose themselves to the English-speaking environment created by NESTs, in order to improve their English speaking and listening-comprehension skills. One student, who had two weeks of overseas

experience in Canada, felt strongly the need to practice English through English conversation and debate. Another wanted to listen to NESTs' English as much as he could, in order to get used to it because he was thinking about studying abroad in an English-speaking country in the near future. Like those of the students in the previous section, their responses evidence their eagerness to learn practical English through NEST instruction.

### 3. 2. 3 Regarding the choice of Number 3 ( 'It's hard to say, either way.')

Of the 74 respondents, 25 chose this statement, and the following are representative of this neutral position toward both types of teacher:

- I could not say either way. NNESTs' lessons are easy to understand with the use of Japanese, and NESTs' pronunciation is good. (Student #24)
- Both teachers have advantages. Since NESTs speak authentic English, I can improve my listening comprehension skills. NNESTs are helpful in that they can explain difficult concepts from the Japanese point of view. (Student #18)

These excerpts indicate that the students acknowledged the unique attributes of both types of English teacher. They perceive NESTs as having good English proficiency, in pronunciation for example, and believe they can improve their listening and speaking skills through NEST instruction. Yet, at the same time, they appreciate NNESTs' experience in learning English as an additional language, while sharing the same local language (Japanese) with their students, which enables

them to anticipate students' learning difficulties, meet the needs of their students with unusual sensitivity, and provide appropriate information about the language.

Some students did not focus as much on the respective advantages of the two teacher types, but rather on personal factors and teaching styles:

- Rather than talking about NEST/NNEST issues, I think English teachers should teach English in a polite way, so that even weak students can feel at ease in English lessons. The school authorities should employ teachers who have struggled to learn English and can empathize with weak students. (Student #55)
- I do not care about NEST/NNEST issues. What matters is whether I can enjoy learning English or not. (Student #73)

Indifferent to any specific preference for NESTs or NNESTs, these students wished to receive instruction from English teachers who could provide weak students with emotional support, and offer lessons that are easy to understand and enjoyable. In other words, the students focused their preferences on teaching styles that would match their learning styles.

The majority of responses regarding this choice implied no particular preference for either teacher type, and perceived both teacher as complementing each other, including NESTs' role as linguistic informants and NNESTs' role as instructors who have pertinent knowledge about the target language.

### 3. 2. 4 Regarding the choice of Number 4 ('I somewhat prefer NNESTs.')

Of the 74 students, 28 chose this statement, with a majority focusing on the two teacher types' respective ability to use language intelligible to students; as illustrated by the following comments:

- Since I am not good at English, I have difficulty understanding NESTs' English pronunciation. (Student #33)
- I have difficulty understanding NESTs' English-only lessons. (Student #35)
- Due to my lack of English proficiency, I have difficulty communicating with NESTs, and also have difficulty asking them questions, though I prefer NESTs for English conversation. (Student #61)
- I have difficulty with what NESTs are talking about in class, and cannot keep up with their lessons (Student #63)

Though classified as advanced at college, these students had difficulty understanding what NESTs were talking about in class. NESTs' rapid speech, without appropriate use of the students' local language (Japanese), hampered the students' understanding of lessons. Conversely, students highlighted the benefits derived from NNESTs' use of the local language:

- I prefer to have NNESTs because they can explain difficult English concepts in Japanese. (Student #17)
- I prefer to have NNESTs because I can learn English grammar in detail from them. (Student #20)
- I feel at ease asking NNESTs questions in Japanese. (Student #39)
- I feel it is easy to communicate with NNESTs, which in turn

enhances my learning (Student #51)

- I can sympathize with NNESTs. I can communicate with them in Japanese. (Student #15)

NNESTs' appropriate use of their local language appears to facilitate students' understanding in lessons, provide students with a linguistic and pedagogical tool for communication when asking questions about learning English, and even reduce students' anxiety by creating a friendly atmosphere. One student somewhat preferred NNESTs because they could better meet the needs of students:

- My current focus is on preparing for the TOEIC test. So I somewhat prefer NNESTs who can teach how to prepare for the TOEIC test. (Student #29)

This student perceives NNESTs as more effectively meeting the needs of students, such as in preparing for examinations, probably because NNESTs share the same cultural, educational, and linguistic background, and once traveled the same road, as their students.

The students in this section appreciated NNESTs' use of local language in teaching English while admitting NESTs' linguistic authenticity. This finding is important for future English education, given the currently predominant assumption that new languages should be taught monolingually, without use of learners' local languages. At the same time, in light of such student responses, NESTs should at least be sensitive to the need for making adjustments, both in their speech rate and in their expectations, in order to effectively address their students' level of English proficiency.

### 3. 2. 5 Regarding the choice of Number 5 ('I prefer NNESTs.')

Of the 74 respondents, 9 chose this statement, with most reporting difficulty in understanding the English-only teaching of NESTs:

- I cannot understand NESTs' lessons at all. He keeps speaking in English for 90 minutes in class. I feel as if he was reciting an English charm which I can hardly understand. I do not want to be classified as advanced. It is painful for me to take lessons I cannot understand. (Student #37)
- NESTs use only English in class. I have difficulty understanding lessons when NESTs use English vocabulary I do not know. I have to ask questions in English. But I am sometimes unable to ask questions well. NNESTs' lessons are easy to understand, and improve my English. Since we share the same Japanese background, it is easy to ask questions. I am really satisfied with NNESTs' lessons. (Student #49)
- NNESTs can teach English grammar in detail. NESTs' English conversation is not important for me. I am not good at NESTs' English-only lessons. (Student #53)

Similar to the students who chose Number 4, these students felt it was easy to understand what NNESTs taught in class, mainly due to NNESTs' ability to use the local language. NNESTs' use of the local language to explain grammar rules and difficult English vocabulary was valued highly by these students, and increased their understanding of lessons.

On the other hand, the students suffered from the serious gap between their level of English understanding and NESTs' English-only teaching style. Though classified as advanced, their level may simply

have been insufficient for them to benefit much from NESTs' English-only instruction. In addition, since the focus of NESTs' lessons was on English conversation, some students' intellectual needs, and specifically the need to explore more philosophical concepts in the local language, may not have been satisfied. NESTs may therefore need, at the least, to use Japanese equivalents when explaining difficult concepts or discussing important information such as syllabi, assignments, or examinations, in order to reduce their students' anxiety level and increase their comprehension.

#### 4. Summary of findings and discussion

Figure 1 suggests that, in general, advanced-English college students with high motivation at least somewhat prefer NNESTs to NESTs. Their written responses indicate that they make a distinction between NESTs' role as reliable linguistic informants with good English proficiency, especially with respect to pronunciation, and NNESTs' role as teachers who can provide students with pedagogical and emotional support. This finding supports Widdowson's (1992) distinction between the role of informants and the role of instructors in English language teaching.

Though some students prefer to have an English-only environment created by NESTs, in order to learn practical English, the students' general preference for NNESTs appears to stem primarily from intelligibility problems with NESTs; it is easy for the students to understand lessons given by NNESTs, because such teachers can provide effective support for the learning of English, due to the linguistic, cultural, and educational

background they share with their students. NNESTs' familiarity, then, with the teaching and learning context of their students may enable them to more effectively address students' actual needs.

In particular, use of the shared local language is an effective means for teaching English. NNESTs' use of Japanese is useful for explaining difficult concepts, including grammar rules; creating a friendly atmosphere for effective communication; enhancing student ease in asking questions in class; sympathizing with weak students; giving advice to students; reducing anxiety; and managing the classroom. This finding is in agreement with previous empirical studies conducted in EFL contexts (Lasagabaster and Sierra, 2005; Ma, 2012; Saito, 2014), probably because NNESTs and their students in EFL contexts usually share the same linguistic background. The finding also has important implications for improving students' understanding in EFL contexts, though the prevailing assumption is that the focus on a new language, without the use of learners' mother tongue, maximizes learning effectiveness.

The results of the study echo those reported in a number of previous studies (e.g., Benke and Medgyes, 2005; Ma, 2012; Mahboob, 2004; Medgyes, 1994) in suggesting that NESTs' forte is their perceived English language proficiency, and especially their accurate pronunciation. The use of "more natural," "pure," "real," "living," and "practical" by a majority of student respondents, in describing NESTs' English pronunciation, suggests a strong belief in the native speaker as an ideal linguistic model, illustrating what Phillipson terms the "native speaker fallacy" (Phillipson, 1992). It is apparent, in such responses, that the students hope to imitate the native speaker model, which they perceive as the ideal standard.

However, reliance on this native speaker model should be called into question if the goal of learning English is to use English as a lingua franca, a tool for international communication between different groups of people, because effective communication relies on speakers' mutual intelligibility.

NESTs typically give students more opportunity to practice English than NNESTs, as students are forced to communicate in English; and this opportunity is valuable for students in EFL contexts, such as Japan, because English is typically not used for daily communication in such contexts. However, given the common student complaint concerning difficulty in understanding NESTs' lessons, NESTs should consider making adjustments in their speech rate and choice of vocabulary to suit their students' levels.

## 5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate advanced-English Japanese college student preferences for NESTs or NNESTs, in an EFL context in Japan. The results suggest that these students tend to somewhat prefer NNESTs to NESTs, due to their comparative ease in understanding NNESTs' lessons, and to distinguish between the informant role of NESTs and the instructor role of NNESTs. Research into means of assisting these students to improve their understanding, through the effective integration of English practice opportunities and use of the local language in teaching, would appear to be of great value. It is clear that the opportunity to learn English from both types of teacher is beneficial to such college students; however, greater collaboration between the two is

needed, in order to effectively prepare students for professional life.

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## Appendix A

質問1. あなた自身は、ネイティブ・スピーカーの英語の先生、または日本人の英語の先生のどちらを好みますか。1から5のスコアで評価し、番号の一つに○をつけてください。

1 ————— 2 ————— 3 ————— 4 ————— 5  
ネイティブの どちらかと言えば、 どちらとも言えない どちらかと言えば、 日本人の英語の  
英語の先生が 良い 日本人の英語の先生 英語の先生が良い  
よい 先生が良い がよい

質問2. 上記の番号の一つを選んだ理由は何ですか。自由にくわしく書いてください。