

# Students' Attitudes towards Native and Non-native English Teachers in the Thai EFL Tertiary Context

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Article information	Abstract
<b>Article history:</b>	<i>This study explores the attitudes of 147 Thai undergraduate university students towards native English teachers (NETs) and non-native English teachers (NNETs) in various areas of English language instruction, namely: fluency, cultural knowledge, empathy, grammar, learning materials, classroom relationships, and motivation. Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered through an online questionnaire. Findings have shown that participants remained neutral in all areas of language instruction except for fluency and cultural knowledge, whereby they exhibited preferences in favor of NETs. Moreover, the results revealed that the participants mostly referred to teachers' personal pedagogical skills and knowledge, attributing to the quality of their teaching performance, which justified the participants' choices in favor of neutrality. These findings suggest that all teachers should be evaluated based on their personal pedagogical skills and knowledge rather than on their first language(s) backgrounds and/or nationality. Moreover, the findings suggest that both groups of teachers should be given opportunities to enhance their teaching expertise by redirecting their attention towards the diverging and multifaceted roles that a teacher plays.</i>
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## INTRODUCTION

English language teaching (ELT) has been driven by several theoretical inquiries. This includes those concerned with the contributions of native English teachers (NETs) and non-native English teachers (NNETs) to the teaching profession, particularly in relation to teaching practice in second language (L2) acquisition contexts. The differences between the two groups of teachers (NETs and NNETs) have been explored in numerous studies, including those that examine the strengths and weaknesses of each group. In such research, distinctions have been primarily made with reference to the advantages and disadvantages that each group possesses in relation to core areas and aspects of L2 instruction (e.g., the teaching of oral skills and grammar, or the first-hand lived experience of cultural knowledge, see Ayudhya, 2021; Medgyes, 1992, 1994; Songsirisak, 2017).

The current study aims to further explore this issue by providing insights into the role that L2 learners' attitudes play in defining the ideal teacher, thereby highlighting some key issues surrounding the controversy over the various roles that both groups of teachers play in the field of ELT. By doing so, it seeks to determine whether there is room for professional growth that applies to both groups of teachers, and whether steps and measures taken in this direction could influence future theoretical orientations and practices in the field.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **The NET-NNET dichotomy**

The NET and NNET dichotomy has long been studied, originating with Chomsky's (1965) definition of a native speaker (NS). The NS has been conceptualized to possess a perfect mastery of the language, so the concept of full language proficiency is inextricably linked to the definition of an NS (i.e., one who has been speaking a language as their first language since birth and was raised in that language). The NS definition also suggests that the speaker has acquired the language in a monolingual environment (as cited in Cheng et al., 2021, pp. 2–3). In comparison, a non-native speaker (NNS) is defined as an individual who learns a target language as a second or foreign language (Deng et al., 2023).

In the early 90s, the concept of the “NS fallacy” was brought up by Phillipson (1992, p. 185), who questioned the assumption that the ideal English language teacher is the NET. In the same year, Medgyes (1992) first described and discussed the differences between NETs and NNETs. Medgyes (1992) explains that NNETs remain permanent language learners and, therefore, the higher levels of linguistic competence and communicative proficiency that NETs possess would always be considered their most significant advantage that cannot be challenged by any other factors prevalent in the learning situation. However, the author argues that NNETs' deficiency in terms of linguistic competence could at the same time constitute their relative strengths.

Subsequently, Medgyes (1994) highlights several advantages of NNETs in the teaching profession. On the one hand, they can teach language learning strategies more effectively and provide successful models of English for learners to imitate and copy. On the other hand, they also end up being more understanding, empathetic, and sensitive to the series of difficulties faced by learners. Lastly, they often make use of the learner's mother tongue/native language (L1), which can largely facilitate the language learning process.

The respective strengths and shortcomings of NETs and NNETs have been examined in numerous studies conducted within a local Thai context, particularly in relation to the NS/NNS debate. Depending on teachers' nationalities and language backgrounds, they have been thus assigned different teaching roles and different courses to teach within a Thai university setting: listening and speaking or reading and writing.

Previous studies in English as a foreign language (EFL) in the Thai context suggest that NETs are more appropriate to teach listening and speaking classes, as they represent the ideal

provider and target model for fluency and overall oral proficiency (Ayudhya, 2021; Medgyes, 1992; Phothongsunan, 2017a, 2017b; Songsirisak, 2017; Suwanarak, 2010; Waelateh et al., 2019a). Interestingly, it is suggested that these specific attributes of the NETs enhance students' learning experiences in positive ways, contributing to their motivation to learn English and preferring NETs if given the choice (Phothongsunan, 2017a, 2017b).

NETs were also found to be more appropriate in terms of providing cultural content and offering insights into the L2 from a cultural perspective. In contrast to their non-native counterparts, they were regarded as more competent in terms of sharing various experiences and knowledge about the target culture with their students (Ayudhya, 2021; Songsirisak, 2017).

Regarding how the roles of NETS and NNETS are perceived while teaching grammar, previous studies conducted in Thailand examining students' perceptions suggest that NNETs were found to be more competent in teaching students' grammar knowledge, the rules, and structures of the language, and consequently, they tended to focus on accuracy in their classroom practices. Moreover, in line with Medgyes' (1994) hypothesis, NNETs were described as quite capable in terms of teaching and advising on language learning strategies and addressing students' learning problems. Furthermore, they were also seen as more understanding, supportive, and empathetic of students' learning experiences, as they often shared the same socio-cultural and/or educational backgrounds (Ayudhya, 2021; Songsirisak, 2017; Waelateh et al., 2019a).

While NNETs were perceived as more competent in terms of teaching grammar, they were rated lower in terms of promoting interactive classroom management and style compared to their native counterparts. Previous studies conducted in Thailand exploring the perceptions of students suggest that NETs tended to promote a more communicative, participatory, student-driven learning environment by encouraging classroom discussions, exchange of ideas, and by focusing on fluency and output throughout their teaching practices (Ayudhya, 2021; Phothongsunan, 2017a, 2017b; Waelateh et al., 2019a).

### **The globalization of English and the changing landscape of ELT**

Recent studies conducted in the Thai EFL context suggest attempts to deviate from the bipolar ideological divide between NETs and NNETs and move away from the monocentric view of teaching English, primarily for the purpose of achieving native-like competency and proficiency. This shift indicates efforts to change the status of English in the local educational context from an EFL model to that of an English as a lingua franca (ELF) model, a shift occurring in conjunction with the recent use of English in Thailand as a medium of communication between NNSs coming to Thailand from different cultures and with different L1s. This concept is further advanced by the Global Englishes (GE) framework that positions NNSs as not only English users but owners of the language, many of whom would most likely be the local learners' future target interlocutors (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2021; Boonsuk et al., 2023). Under these paradigms, Thai undergraduate students have developed an understanding of teachers' contributions beyond their nationality, L1, place of birth, or appearance, and increasingly place emphasis on teaching efficiency, cultural sensitivity, personal and professional characteristics, and the possession of proper credentials. Furthermore, it was found that students perceived

NNETs as equally proficient and capable as NETs in terms of teaching fluency and serving as sources of motivation in the L2 learning context (Boonsuk & Ambele, 2021; Waelateh et al., 2019b).

Yet, despite the growing awareness in support for recognizing the pluri-centric and evolving status of English in Thailand, including that of ELF and the GE paradigm in the local curricula, the teaching industry is still highly shaped by hiring practices supporting the ideology of native speakerism and linguistic hegemony. This is justified based on the preference for NS teachers, and often students' own native speakerism preferences (Boonsuk et al., 2023; Sahan et al., 2025). Here, native speakerism can be considered an ideology that favors the NS, as well as NS English and NS teaching methods (Comprendio & Savski, 2019). In examining job advertisements on the most popular ELT websites in Thailand and China, Boonsuk et al. (2023) found that institutions advertised positions specifically for NETs, prioritizing a particular appearance, race, or nationality over knowledge, experience, training, and qualifications. The authors suggest that such policies are justified on the grounds of conforming to the preferences of various stakeholders in the industry (e.g., parents, policymakers, teachers, and the learners themselves). As Sahan et al. (2025) argue, these policies not only result in biased, unfair, and discriminatory practices at institutional levels but also challenge the core ethical principles of equality and social justice needed in language education. Such policies are also inconsistent with the globalization of English and the changing views on the ownership of the language, as envisioned by the ELF and GE models in the literature. They also represent a striking contrast with the current demographics in Thailand, which feature more NNSs than NSs, leading to employment and educational inequities that deny many NNETs access to the job market while also depriving local students of exposure to the diversity of NNETs in the local population.

Amidst the dialectics between the binary NET-NNET polemic and students' supposedly shifting attitudes towards the global status of English, as well as teachers' evolving pedagogical roles, investigation of learners' preferences for each group of teachers and how students rationalize their attitudes towards NETs and NNETs is essential. It is also important to examine how students view teachers' inherent abilities versus their pedagogical abilities. As such, the current study derives its premises for analysis from the concepts of language competence and professional expertise as described by Árva and Medgyes (2000). In that study, these researchers attempt to compare teachers stated behavior with their actual behavior and investigate whether there is a discrepancy between perceptions about teachers and classroom realities. Their analysis is also based on the pioneering work of Medgyes (1994), who argues that the discrepancy in language proficiency existing between both NETs and NNETs accounts for most of the differences that are found in their teaching behavior, for which he refers to them as "two different species" (as cited in Árva & Medgyes, 2000, p. 357).

By examining Thai learners' attitudes towards NETs and NNETs and the rationales behind them, the present study aims to test the notions highlighted so far and provide further insights into understanding the various contributions that both groups of teachers could provide to the field of ELT in the Thai EFL tertiary context. Furthermore, this study aims to illuminate key controversial issues that will help promote new conceptual orientations and pedagogical practices regarding how the NET/NNET divide is envisioned and applied in the future Thai context.

## The current study

This research is based on Árva and Medgyes' (2000) study. However, it expands on their analysis by creating two similar concepts. It aims at assessing the development of both groups of teachers' various skills against the backdrop of two opposing sides of the continuum: innate abilities versus pedagogical abilities (see literature review for more details). Thus, this study tries to examine how Thai learners perceive the relationship between NETs and NNETs' prescribed roles (innate abilities) and their pedagogical abilities.

Accordingly, this study examines the views of tertiary students regarding the roles of NETs and NNETs in the following contested areas and aspects of ELT, namely: fluency, cultural knowledge, empathy, awareness, and understanding, grammar knowledge, learning materials, classroom interactions and relationships, and sources of motivation. By doing so, it seeks to uncover the existence of matches or mismatches between teachers' prescribed behavior as found in the mainstream literature and their actual behavior in the classroom context as assessed by 147 Thai participants (TP). It will do so by answering the following research questions:

1. What are Thai tertiary students' attitudes towards both NETs and NNETs?
2. How do Thai tertiary students rationalize their attitudes towards NETs and NNETs?

## METHODOLOGY

### Context and participants

The participants in this study were 147 university undergraduate students enrolled at seven different universities in Thailand, all of whom are ethnic Thai and whose L1 is Thai. They majored in various disciplines, including English. Ninety are female and fifty-seven are male. They range from first-year students to fourth-year students, and from 18 to 23 years of age.

### Instruments and data collection procedures

Data was collected through an online questionnaire (Tassev, 2024) created by the researchers and validated by four experts in ELT and partially inspired by studies conducted by Ahmed and Osam (2022) and Liaw (2012) that investigated learner attitudes towards NETS and NNETs in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Taiwan, respectively. The questionnaire was also used in a larger-scale study to examine the perceptions of Chinese, Korean, and Thai undergraduate university students towards NETs and NNETs. The research instrument contains 38 questions and four different parts. The questions in the first part focus on the participants' demographic information, such as nationality, L1, gender, year of study, and major of study, amongst other areas. The second part focuses on the general characteristics of NETs and NNETs from students' perspectives. The third part focuses on students' learning experiences and their attitudes towards NETs and NNETs at the university level. The questions in the fourth part focus on students' preferences for learning English with NETs and NNETs after graduation. An English version of the research instrument was provided to the participants, accompanied by an L1 translation and a video detailing how to complete the questionnaire successfully.

The focus of the present analysis was on examining students' learning experiences and attitudes to NETs and NNETs at the university level in the third part. The following seven variables were investigated: fluency, cultural knowledge, empathy, grammar, learning materials, classroom relationships, and motivation. Data was collected using both quantitative and qualitative methods, and for each variable, a pair of questions was used: one multiple-choice and the other open-ended, totaling 14 question pairs. In the first response option type, the participants were asked to indicate their preferences regarding both groups of teachers in terms of a specific variable (e.g., grammar teaching) by answering the multiple-choice question in the form of a Likert scale, consisting of three options: NETs, NNETs, or NEUTRAL. This response option type enabled the collection of data quantitatively. Data in the first response option type was then supported and validated by the second, open-ended response option type. By answering the open-ended question, the participants were allowed to explain, justify, and elaborate on their responses, using their own words and allowing for qualitative analysis. Further, unlike previous studies, this study included the option of neutrality. In this way, the participants were not limited to dichotomously choosing NETs or NNETs if they felt they held neutral views.

### **Data analysis**

The data was analyzed, considering both the quantitative and qualitative responses of the questionnaire participants. The results of preferences for NETs, NNETs, or neutrality with respect to the different variables (e.g., grammar teaching) are displayed numerically in the form of Table 1. The findings of the open-ended questions were categorized and analyzed thematically to examine recurring patterns and similarities among responses. Thus, the procedure adopted was thematic analysis, whereby categories were generated from the statements made by the questionnaire respondents.

The categories were identified and generated from the respondents' statements through a keyword analysis. These were detected after reading a sample of the students' answers. Each emerging category/theme was color-coded and then rated and presented based on the rate of its frequency as it appeared among the students' answers under the respective variable. In most cases, the students' original answers are quoted in this study exactly as they appeared in the survey.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This study compared NETs and NNETs, as evaluated by Thai learners. Specifically, the following aspects of ELT were analyzed: fluency; cultural knowledge; empathy, awareness, and understanding; grammar knowledge; learning materials; classroom interactions and relationships; and sources of motivation. The results of the study are presented in Table 1 below. The relationships between students' choices with respect to each variable and the underlying themes/categories that emerged in support of those choices are highlighted, along with this, students' preferences with respect to each variable are presented in a hierarchical order (whether in favor of NETs, NNETs, or neutrality).

**Table 1**  
**Comparing students' attitudes towards NETs and NNETs in various fields of ELT: Skills, knowledge, and supporting themes**

Areas/Aspects of ELT	Supporting Themes	NEUTRAL	NETs	NNETs	<b>Hierarchical Order of Students' Attitudes</b>
		Percentage (%)	Percentage (%)	Percentage (%)	
Grammar Knowledge	Against NS and NNS Status	38.8%	25.9%	35.4%	NEUTRAL>NNETs>NETs
Cultural Knowledge	Knowledge and Understanding	38.1%	45.6%	16.3%	NETs>NEUTRAL>NNETs
Fluency	Pedagogical Skills	36.1%	53.7%	10.2%	NETs>NEUTRAL>NNETs
Learning Materials	Personal Skills	64.0%	19.1%	17.0%	NEUTRAL>NETs>NNETs
Classroom Interactions and Relationships	Personal Skills	59.2%	21.8%	19.1%	NEUTRAL>NETs>NNETs
Source of Motivation	Personal Skills	45.6%	40.8%	13.6%	NEUTRAL>NETs>NNETs
Empathy, Awareness, and Understanding	Personal Skills	61.9%	13.6%	24.5%	NEUTRAL>NNETs>NETs

Results reveal that the participants voted in favor of NETs only in relation to the variables of fluency (53.7%) and cultural knowledge (45.6%). In all other areas/aspects, the students voted in favor of neutrality with their choices briefly presented as follows: empathy, awareness, and understanding (NEUTRAL = 61.9%), grammar knowledge (NEUTRAL = 38.8%), learning materials (NEUTRAL = 64.0%), classroom interactions and relationships (NEUTRAL = 59.2%), and source of motivation (NEUTRAL = 45.6%).

Regarding research question 1, the findings indicate that the participants remain neutral in most areas of language instruction and their choices are not influenced by the types of English courses and/or skills taught. As to the students' supporting answers in favor of neutrality, the students almost always listed and referred to teachers' personal characteristics or personality as the predominant category/theme. Thus, about research question 2, the findings highlight that teachers' contributions to the students' L2 learning progress have been evaluated by the students based on the teachers' personal pedagogical knowledge and skills rather than their L1 backgrounds and/or nationalities.

On this basis, the findings obtained in this study present a striking contrast with the roles of both NETs and NNETs as prescribed by the mainstream literature. As such, they provide a series of pedagogical insights concerning the contributions that both groups of teachers could make to the field of ELT in both theoretical and practical terms. This study, therefore, provides a series of implications relevant to educational policymakers, scholars, researchers, and other stakeholders involved in planning courses and curricula, as well as investigating and assigning potential roles to both NETs and NNETs in the future educational field.

### **Fluency**

With respect to the area of oral proficiency or fluency, the students' answers clearly reveal strongly pronounced preferences in favor of NETs over NNETs. As seen in Table 1, the majority of the participants (53.7%) favored NETs, 36.1% were neutral, and 10.2% favored NNETs. The predominant theme in this particular area was concerned with NETs' better roles in terms of pedagogical instruction, aimed at promoting fluency in English.

In this regard, the students shared that NETs' wider use of examples, references, and contextual clues helped expose them to various instances of colloquial speech. They also shared that NETs produced more authentic, natural, and fluent speech, possessed a wider range of vocabulary and a more extensive linguistic repertoire, and employed a greater capacity of linguistic resources while negotiating meaning with their students. In terms of pronunciation teaching alone, most students reported that the accents of NETs were the desirable models for them to copy, imitate, and acquire for their future English communication. Some of the students' original quotes in support of these points have been provided below:

*Because a native teacher can act, perform, and give some voice to students to be closer to English. (TP 46)*

*I think NETs are more appropriate model for fluency and oral skills at university... (TP 45)*

This present study thus supports previous research conducted in Thailand which, in line with Medgyes' (1992) finding, established that NETs were found more appropriate to teach oral classes in the Thai EFL context since they represented the ideal source and target model as far as fluency was concerned (Ayudhya, 2021; Phothongsunan, 2017a, 2017b; Songsirisak, 2017; Suwanarak, 2010; Waelateh et al., 2019a). This study also provides support in favor of the belief that with regard to desired accents, NS accents were the preferred models to be learnt and used within a local context (Ayudhya, 2021; Kalra & Thanavisuth, 2018; Songsirisak, 2017).

### **Cultural knowledge**

In terms of providing knowledge about the target culture, most students found NETs to be quite convincing, also making them more appropriate for teaching the cultural aspects of the L2 at the university level. As Table 1 illustrates, many of the participants (45.6%) expressed a preference for NETs, while 38.1% remained neutral and 16.3% favored NNETs. Above all, NETs' better knowledge and understanding of the L2 culture distinguished them from their non-native counterparts, with this theme emerging as the dominant one among the students' responses in this area.

Considering this, NETs' better knowledge and understanding of the culture of the English-speaking world was largely due to their familiarity and exposure to the culture(s) in which they had grown up. As a result, they were found to be more experienced in providing teaching methods and strategies, especially those aimed at introducing students to intercultural differences. In this regard, the students notably shared that NETs provided more relevant and in-depth explanations, comparisons, and examples, illuminating the differences between L1 and L2 from a cultural perspective. Some of the most relevant quotes in support of this point are:

*NET can share their experiences better than NNET about the cultures. (TP 116)*

*A foreign teacher is a representative of a culture different from that in which the students live. They can share information on traditions, holidays, and the habits of*

*their compatriots, as well as their opinions on certain events. This insight into the culture where the language is spoken will help me understand it and its peculiarities better. (TP 106)*

This present study thus supports previous research conducted in Thailand, which suggests that NETs are considered more knowledgeable and competent in integrating cultural content into pedagogical instruction (Ayudhya, 2021; Songsirisak, 2017).

The students' answers suggest that NNETS could learn in several ways in the cultural realm to enhance their teaching practice better. To start with, they could engage more deeply in the study of L1 and L2 differences from a cultural perspective. For example, they could conduct further cultural studies research and examine the dialectical relationship between culture and language in pedagogical instruction more closely. They could also participate in seminars and conferences devoted to the debate on the role of culture in language education, and consult with like-minded teachers, especially NETs, who could then share their expertise on how best to approach the teaching of cultural content.

#### **Empathy, awareness, and understanding; Grammar knowledge**

As illustrated in Table 1, with regard to the following two areas, the majority of the participants voted in favor of neutrality when comparing NETs with NNETs at the university level: the better group in view of having more empathy and addressing the learning difficulties of the students more appropriately (NEUTRAL = 61.9%), and the ideal group in terms of having more knowledge of grammar (NEUTRAL = 38.8%). Regarding the area of empathy and understanding, one's personal characteristics or personality emerged as the predominant category amongst the students' answers in support of neutrality. Regarding the area of knowledge of grammar, the students rejected the notion of both NS and NNS status as the leading category.

The students' responses, thus, reveal that the teacher-student relationship should not be analyzed primarily through the prism of the teacher's levels of familiarity with the socio-cultural features characterizing the local EFL context, as has often been the case in Thailand, favoring NNETs. Moreover, according to the students, the national origin of a teacher should not be used as an indicator of their potential to teach grammar; instead, one's competence in grammar is a result of one's own levels of preparation and determination to engage in both grammar learning and teaching. Hence, it is worth considering some of the students' relevant quotes in relation to these issues:

*Empathy is cultivated by family. consequently, it cannot be determined whether NET or NNET can do better. (TP 79)*

*I think both NET and NNET have good knowledge of grammar because grammar is basically a rule of English language. If you work hard, are able to remember the rules, constantly use or teach them, anyone can become a master of it. Doesn't matter if they are native or non-native. (TP 113)*

In light of this, rather than being an innate or given ability (often in favor of NNETs), grammar teaching should be viewed as a skill that any teacher could build and improve upon as they continue to strive towards self-improvement and professional development throughout their teaching careers. Furthermore, each teacher's contribution to the learning process should be evaluated on an individual basis, with the teacher's personality being a crucial indicator of their pedagogical success, both professionally and interpersonally, as manifested in the existing degrees of empathy, understanding, and teacher support for students.

Moreover, the students' insights here reveal that teacher-training and professional development programs in the future should aim to equip all teachers, both NETs and NNETs, with an integrated set of skills, including grammar teaching. This would help teachers address and cover the wide spectrum of learning needs, along with the skills and knowledge that their Thai learners would need, ranging from accuracy to fluency, or from grammar competence/awareness to the communicative aspects of language use.

On this note, depending on the teachers' nationalities and language backgrounds, they were usually assigned different teaching roles, foci, and courses to teach within a Thai university EFL environment, such as listening and speaking, or reading and writing. Thus, regarding grammar teaching, previous studies conducted in Thailand suggest that NNETs were found to be more competent. Moreover, in line with Medgyes' (1994) hypothesis, NNETs were found to be quite capable in addressing students' learning problems. Furthermore, they were also found more familiar, understanding, and empathetic of students' learning experiences often due to shared socio-cultural and/or educational backgrounds (Ayudhya, 2021; Songsirisak, 2017; Waelateh et al., 2019a).

Despite the existence of these phenomena, comments made by most of the students above present a striking contrast with these educational trends and institutional policies. The students' comments, thus, further point out that both groups of teachers, including NETs, if seeking the right opportunities for professional development, and if eager enough to familiarize themselves more with the local EFL context as well as improve their knowledge of grammar, could become successful teachers in that particular field.

#### **Learning materials; Classroom interactions and relationships; Source of motivation**

With respect to the following three areas, most of the participants again expressed neutrality when comparing NETs with NNETs at the university level: the distribution of more relevant learning materials (NEUTRAL = 64.0%); the provision of more positive classroom interactions and relationships with students and among students (NEUTRAL = 59.2%), and the more motivating teacher for students to learn English (NEUTRAL = 45.6%). In all three areas, each teacher's individual characteristics or personality emerged as the dominant theme among the students' answers in support of neutrality.

Regarding the issue of status as a factor in determining the choice and integration of learning materials, the students decided against considering one's status or nationality as a factor, opting instead for one's personality. The students also shared that teachers' personal characteristics

intertwine with their classroom management skills. As such, the students perceive these characteristics as affecting the classroom atmosphere, as well as the nature and course of teacher-student and student-student relationships. Regarding the issue of a more motivating teacher, the students again shared that the choice would be quite subjective in nature and context-dependent, as they evaluate teachers based on the teacher's persona, rather than their NET/NNET status. Several relevant quotes have been provided below:

*From my experience, the relevance of learning materials provided are independent of whether the provider is a NET or a NNET. (TP 96)*

*From my experience, how positive classroom interaction and relationships with students and among students are independent of whether the instructor is a NET or NNET. (TP 96)*

*Being NNET or NET don't have any effect on my motivation but what does affect is their skill, attitude and pronunciation. (TP 53)*

The students' views, therefore, once again provide support for the idea that both NETs and NNETs can develop competencies and skills in various areas of language teaching, and as a result, they should be assigned various courses to teach, regardless of their status and nationality. Often, NETs in Thailand are preferred to teach oral classes, while NNETs are preferred to teach academic classes (Ayudhya, 2021; Songsirisak, 2017; Waelateh et al., 2019a), which subsequently affects the format and content of learning resources provided to support such classes. Yet, the students' opinions here reaffirm that both NETs and NNETs could widen their expertise in various areas of language instruction, which in turn would help reduce the NS/NNS divide as a theoretical construct and approach to courses' allocation and distribution, lesson planning, as well as the design and integration of learning supplements as tools of language pedagogy.

Furthermore, the students' insights reveal that the comparative means of constructing teachers' professional identities through the lenses of their L1 backgrounds might also lead to myths or misconceptions about how they approach classroom management. In this regard, previous studies conducted in Thailand have suggested that NETs tend to promote a more communicative, participatory, and student-driven learning environment by encouraging classroom discussions and focusing on fluency and output throughout their teaching practices (Ayudhya, 2021; Phothongsunan, 2017a, 2017b; Waelateh et al., 2019a).

Yet, the findings here suggest that teachers' individual characteristics are reflected in the type of relationship they establish with their students. The teacher-student relationship is ever-evolving, fluid, dynamic, and context-dependent. Consequently, it is a relationship that is subject to ongoing classroom dynamics (including nationality, often in favor of NETs), rather than one prescribed solely by academic or professional standards:

*Both groups of teachers have different teaching strategies, but they all have a way of making the classroom more relaxed, which is what keeps students more motivated and inspired to learn a language. (TP 106)*

In addition, the students' answers reveal that the extent of a teacher's contribution in terms of motivating the learner to engage in language learning is a highly personalized experience, and again it varies from teacher to teacher, from context to context and, furthermore, from student to student. On this note, the students added that often their levels of motivation were quite personal or intrinsic, and centered around the learner's own (self-) interest, desire, and determination to engage with language learning and succeed in English:

*It depends more on my interests. (TP 25)*

*If you want to learn anybody can be your motivation. (TP 61)*

As such, the students' views here challenge previous studies conducted in the Thai EFL context, which suggest that often due to NETs' higher levels of fluency in English, students would feel more motivated to learn English and, as a result, they would choose to study with NETs if given the choice (Phothongsunan, 2017a, 2017b).

### **Overall impact**

Despite some contrasting differences between NETs and NNETs regarding several variables, this study established that the students did not strongly favor one group over the other most of the time. On all these grounds, the students' views, therefore, challenge the native speakerist versus the non-native speakerist ideology. Language practitioners should therefore be evaluated based on informed opinions developed about them and about their roles as educators, quite often resulting from students' own interactions with them in the learning environment, rather than driven by prevailing notions and stereotypes about who the ideal teacher is, as often prescribed by mainstream literature.

The students' insights also challenge the NET/NNET dichotomy regarding the distribution of courses and curricula. This currently holds, due to motivational aspects, that academic (reading and writing) classes incorporating grammar teaching should be assigned to NNETs. In contrast, oral (listening and speaking) classes should be assigned to NETs in Thailand. On the contrary, the teacher's role in the classroom should be assessed in view of their own dedication and engagement with the teaching profession, their epistemological beliefs about their roles as educators, their eagerness or readiness to teach, as well as their knowledge, experience, and prior training as educators.

Having said that, the findings of this study essentially challenge Medgyes' (1994) claims concerning the roles and contributions of NETs and NNETs to the field. This study derived the premises of its conceptual inquiry mainly based on Medgyes' (1994) model as a point of departure, outlining and prescribing the teaching behavior of both teachers depending on their nationalities and L1 backgrounds. Thus, this study compared the relationship between teachers' prescribed behavior with their teaching behavior and so examined the progression of teachers' teaching performances against the background of two conflicting sides of the continuum: innate abilities versus pedagogical abilities. Árva and Medgyes (2000) describe this phenomenon as the relationship between teachers stated behavior and their actual

behavior, and so examine whether certain levels of discrepancy exist between teachers' perceived behavior and the ongoing realities in the classroom.

As this study established, the enhancement of teaching skills and expertise is a continuous, dynamic, fluid, and evolving process that is dependent on a multiplicity of factors, issues, and trends in the educational context and system. Teachers, therefore, should be judged from the perspective of their own educational competencies and newly built sets of skills rather than from the perspective of their given status as, for example, language competence attributed in favor of NETs (Medgyes, 1992), or empathy levels attributed in favor of NNETs (Medgyes, 1994). Having said that, the findings of this study corroborate some previous findings, which suggest that rather than being based solely on their linguistic backgrounds, teachers' roles are determined by socio-cultural factors that include the teachers' language learning beliefs, learning experiences, educational philosophy, and professional preparation (Ma, 2016).

On these grounds, this study also challenges the future use of the two terms native and non-native in academic scholarship and research when theorizing about teachers' multiple identities. Selvi et al. (2024) argue that future research needs to first take into account teachers' lived experiences in various educational settings, and second, teachers' understanding and practice against the background of the evolving status of English, as envisaged by the ELF and GE paradigms, while also taking into account the potential for further reforms at institutional levels that would support teacher-development and remove those structural inequalities that exist in the profession. Only then can academic scholarship move away from the essentialized, historicized, deterministic, unidirectional, and decontextualized conceptual tradition of (non) nativeness that has for so long depicted teachers' roles and identities in ELT.

Likewise, Cheng et al. (2021) suggest that the term NS is altogether a harmful and inapplicable theoretical and social construct. One that also carries with it racialized, exclusive, and dehumanizing assumptions about language and linguistic attainment, all of which are inconsistent with the current globalization of the language, users' multilingual identities, language contact situations, and the context in which acquisition and learning take place. The authors, therefore, argue that Chomsky's (1965) definitions of an NS and native language as inextricably linked to the concepts of proficiency and competence, arguably acquired in monolingual and homogenous settings, end up being irrelevant to contemporary language research. Irrelevant, as these two terms exclude the multi-faceted nature and complexity of linguistic behavior, as well as the experience and identity shaping the lives of current language users in multiple and different ways (as cited in Cheng et al., 2021, pp. 4–5).

In addition, this study also places both the teacher and the learner as active agents in the learning process, whose roles are often multilayered, and relationships are intertwined and interdependent. They are not mutually exclusive but rather influence one another and determine the course of the teacher-student relationship. Similarly, to teachers' evolving identities, students' learning identities are also context-dependent and subject to change, situated and mediated through interactions with teachers and fellow learners in the classroom setting. As a result, students' perceptions are not static but subject to attitudinal variations over time. They are constructed based on students' learning experiences, particularly their exposure to both NETs and NNETs during the learning process.

This study, therefore, established that teacher-student relationships are influenced by several affective, socio-cultural and cognitive associations that students build in the learning process, which explain the non-linear trajectory of learning as opposed to the old, bi-polar paradigm, which prescribes it as a fixed and structured developmental state. In this respect, the findings of this study are consistent with those of Moussu (2010), who argues that students' attitudes toward NETs and NNETs develop because of their experiences with both groups and are therefore likely to change due to the variables of time and exposure.

## CONCLUSION

This study was built on the premise of comparing NETs with NNETs through students' eyes and provided insights into the students' opinions as expressed in their own words. Regarding research question 1, the findings revealed that the participants generally voted in favor of neutrality in most areas of language education, and their choices were not influenced by the types of English courses and/or skills being taught. Regarding research question 2, the findings illustrated that teachers' contributions to the students' L2 learning progress were measured based on their personal pedagogical skills and knowledge, rather than their L1 backgrounds and/or nationalities. Considering these findings, this study offers a series of implications regarding the respective roles of both groups in the field of ELT, both theoretically and practically.

On the one hand, it provides new insights into a prospective model of academic and professional development for both groups of teachers, which would help them enhance and further expand their teaching practices. On the other hand, this study proposes new theoretical lenses through which policymakers, school administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders involved in the teaching industry can evaluate the roles of both groups. This should eventually help raise more awareness of the multifaceted roles of NET/NNETs and drive an agenda towards reducing the currently perceived differences between such practitioners.

Regarding NNETs, the study suggests that, according to Thai students' perceptions, NNETs should strive to promote a more authentic, learner-centered teaching environment by engaging learners in more communicative activities that involve the real use of English as it occurs in natural settings. NNETs could also engage in more initiatives to explore the relationship between language and culture, which would help them integrate cultural content more in-depth into their teaching practices.

Overall, the students' insights reveal that both NETs and NNETs should be assessed based on the merit of their individual academic and professional strengths and skills, rather than from the perspectives of their L1 and/or national background. This underlying recurring trend has been heavily pronounced in this study. Thus, teachers should be evaluated based on the students' informed and justified opinions, which are often the result of the students' personal interactions with them in the learning environment. After all, students remain the ultimate judges as to the relevance and appropriateness of one's teaching behavior and pedagogical knowledge.

On that note, the students' opinions, moreover, reveal that both NETs and NNETs could enhance their academic knowledge and professional skills to teach a wide variety of courses and follow different curricula, which in turn could enable these practitioners to build and negotiate new professional identities in the process of language instruction. Therefore, they should be given a series of new opportunities to engage in various prospects for professional and academic development, further enhancing their expertise in different settings and environments that adhere to the principles of equity, empowerment, tolerance, and justice, as echoed in the promotion and support of fair and transparent hiring practices.

Last but not least, potentially the long-term impact of the students' informed judgements, as they have been portrayed and described here, would be to add more value to the field by re-shifting the focus from the teacher to the learner, and by re-examining the teacher-student relationship as an interactionist process that is fluid, dynamic, evolving and subject to the ongoing changes in the classroom environment and beyond. This new conceptual paradigm would hopefully help to distance academic research and scholarship from the NET/NNET dichotomy prevalent in the field.

## LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This research has some limitations that could be subsequently addressed in future studies. This investigation relied solely on a questionnaire as the means for both gathering and analyzing the data. As such, replication studies could incorporate semi-structured interviews as an additional research tool. In this way, more elaborate and insightful answers regarding students' choices for NETs, NNETs, or neutrality could be explored. Moreover, future analysis could investigate how the findings potentially interact with other factors, such as age and gender, and how these factors influence the different variables considered in this study.

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