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TEACHERS

Perceptions of Graduate Students in a TESOL and Foreign Language Education Master's
Program Towards their Native and Non-native Language Teachers.

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Introduction

This article discusses the findings of a qualitative study that explored the perceptions of graduate students in a foreign language education program toward native and non-native teachers. Analysis of interviews with 5 graduate students from various countries and backgrounds showed that native and non-native language teachers have different strengths and weaknesses, most of them linked to their condition of native and non-native speaker.

Overall students gave special importance to foreign language teachers' teaching skills but they also explained that a competent language level would be necessary to be an effective professional. Hiring native speakers without qualifications was not found as popular as expected. Suggestions for further research and practice are made.

The paper is divided in several sections in order to get a better understanding of the different topics associated with the perceptions of graduate students towards their language teachers. These sections include the following themes: General preference of language teachers, importance of academic certification, discrimination on the job search, preferred skills of a language teacher, and foreign language teacher abilities (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, listening, learning strategies, methodology, culture, attitude, and assessment).

Research questions

The present study investigated graduate students in the field of foreign language education in order to understand their perceptions of language teacher's abilities and their influence on the job search based on whether or not the teachers are native speakers or non-native speakers. Callahan (2006) defines a native speaker as

“an individual who is a proficient user of the language which for him or her was or has been the language of instruction from elementary school onward and /or the language consistently used at home by the speaker with at least one family member” (p.26)

and a non-native speaker as

“an individual who is a proficient user of a language which for him or her was not or has not been the language of instruction from elementary school onward nor the language consistently used at home by the speaker with at least one family member” (p.26)

Four research questions that will be addressed in this study include:

1. What are the attitudes of graduate students in an education program towards their native and non-native language teachers?
2. What do the participants think about the skills that a language teacher should have in order to be an effective teacher?
3. Do the participants think that native language teachers are better qualified than non-native teachers to teach a foreign language?
4. Does the language proficiency of the participants seem to have an influence on their perceptions towards native and non-native language teachers?

Significance of the research

The significance of the problem lies in the necessity to learn about where the students' perceptions towards their language teachers come from, in order to understand their attitudes toward these professionals. Discovering teachers' weaknesses and strengths on the teaching of a language will be the first step to reach this purpose. Through the identification of these features, it would be easier to improve the quality of the teaching of foreign languages and to move towards the equity between these groups of teachers on the search of a job.

Literature Review

It is apparent that learning a foreign language has become more and more important in our global society. Both native and non-native language teachers seem qualified to teach these languages. Canagarajah (1999) reported that only 20% of the world's English language teachers are native English-speaking teachers (NESTs). The number of English language teachers is constantly increasing due to the high demand associated with learning a new language. In the last few years, universities in the United States have welcomed a large number of non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) into their graduate TESOL programs (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), giving opportunities for native and nonnative English speakers to learn from one another (Kamhi-Stein, Lee & Lee, 1999).

However, it is a popular belief that native speakers are better qualified to teach languages than non-native teachers. In fact, some students believe that being a native speaker is necessary in order to be an effective teacher (Mullock, 2003). Also, NNEST teachers in Hong Kong seem to believe that NESTs teachers are superior to NNESTs (Tang, 1997). Patek (2005) argued that it is common for students, parents and language professionals alike to have a pre-conceived idea that native speakers are the best in terms of teaching languages.

Maum (2002) claimed how professionals in foreign language teaching are divided into native and non-native English speaking teachers. Therefore, the native speaker appears more dominant, which in turn, contributes to job discrimination. Most language schools, universities or institutions tend to hire native speakers; therefore it is uncommon for universities to obscure the recruitment of native speakers but rather, exhibit them as the best in teaching foreign languages. Callahan (2006) said, "While public institutions may be reluctant or unable to restrict employment to native speakers, private institutions often insist on native speakers only"

(Callahan, 2006, p.23). Grubbs et al., (2010) mentioned a major job website for foreign teachers in Thailand that claims to have around 500 job vacancies for foreign teachers. Unfortunately, there are a number of occasions where a preference for NESTs is established due to racial issues. Todd and Pojanapunya (2009) described, “in fact, a lot of ads [for hiring teachers] that ask for a native really mean ‘Asians need not apply’. If you look like a Westerner (i.e. you’re white) you’ll often be accepted as a native speaker even if you’re German, Dutch etc” (Todd, & Pojanapunya, 2009, p.25).

Butler (2007) talked of the concern that parents, students, and their teachers share in Korea. This concern seems to stem from the belief that teachers who do not speak “proper English” such as *general American* and *received pronunciation*, will have a detrimental effect on the students’ ability to acquire the language. Brain (1999) argued that a native English speaker without any type of teaching qualifications often has a higher possibility of being hired than a non-native teacher who does have qualifications. Unfortunately, this scenario often works on a number of levels regardless of how much experience or training a non-native may possess. Medgyes (1994) criticized this discriminatory process by mentioning that teachers should be hired solely on the basis of their professional skills, regardless of their origins. “In defiance of NS superiority, numerous papers and research accounts in professional journals demand equal job opportunities” (Benke & Medgyes, 2005, p.197).

Society falls into what it is called “native speaker fallacy”. Phillipson (1992) defined this term as the belief that NES teachers are the ideal language teachers. The question is: who is considered a native speaker? The definition of this concept is unclear and controversial. Some elements that may be included in this definition are the age of first exposure to a language and language proficiency or identity among others (Davies, 2003). Medgyes (1994) described a

native speaker as “someone who was brought up in an English speaking environment, understands correct English, and who can produce fluent spontaneous discourse in English” (p.10.) This term is usually related to the linguistic field and language environment of the individual. However, this focus does not account for the individual who meets the linguistic criteria, meaning that he or she has a high proficiency language level, but this skill was acquired in a different environment. One has to ask, is this person going to miss the chance of getting a job just because he or she was not brought up in an “English environment”? Is the origin of a teacher more important than his or her current skills? Callahan (2006) identified a native speaker as “an individual who is a proficient user of a language, which for him or her was or has been the language of instruction from elementary school onward and/or the language consistently used at home by the speaker with at least one family member” (p. 26). But again, the origin plays an important role in the definition of a native speaker. Institutions look for professionals based on their origins more than on their languages abilities, qualifications or experience.

However, researchers have found that both native and non-native language teachers have strengths that are beneficial for the teaching of a particular language, but also both groups have some weaknesses that can be regarded as disadvantages to this profession.

This literature review has been organized in different sections according to the strengths and weaknesses of both native and non-native speaking teachers of English and other languages. These sections will help gain a better understanding of the perceptions that teachers and students have towards native and non-native teachers.

Perceptions of NNSTs’ strengths. Beckett and Stiefvater (2009), in a study that took place in a Midwestern US university reported that the students enjoyed having a non-native

speaker as their ESL teacher. Students at this university also described their ESL teacher as beneficial for them because the teacher was able to share both experience and knowledge. Similar findings were reported by Samimy & Brutt-Griffler (1999); Cheung (2002); Liang (2002); and Mahboob (2004), when they found out that “students perceived NNESTs as empathetic and resourceful in sharing their learning experience and strategies” (Beckett & Stiefvater, 2009, p.37). Árvai and Medgyes, (2000) in a study conducted in Hungary, reported that NNESTs claim to have “in depth knowledge of the structure of English as well as a metacognitive awareness of how it worked” (p.362). The results in this study show that non-natives use multiple teaching resources, correct more mistakes made by the students, follow the students’ work more consistently and give more homework than their fellow natives. Ustunluoglu (2007) added that NNESTs motivate students at the beginning of the lesson, make connections between the previous knowledge and the new one, adapt the lesson to the students’ levels, have appropriate class management skills and implement methods and activities efficiently to consolidate the students’ learning as much as possible. In this study, results also demonstrate that NNESTs’ speaking abilities facilitate the students’ understanding of the lesson, develop topics better and get students involved in the classroom in a more active way than NESTs. Medgyes (1992) and Pacek (2005) suggested that non-native teachers of English have the advantage of sharing the student’s mother tongue and are more able to predict difficulties related to the use of language than native teachers.

Perceptions of NNESTs’ weaknesses. Beckett and Stiefvater (2009) in a study, whose participants were ESL graduate students, found out that these students did not approve NNESTs for the teaching of pronunciation courses. They thought that only NESTs are able to help them

achieve the best pronunciation. In Beckett and Stiefvater (2009), one Chinese male states the following:

In China, all of my teachers were non-native speakers. I learned English for 13 years and I still can't speak fluent English. So I think it's not good method. Mm. The best way to know English is to practice, to talk to a native speaker (p.38)

Árva and Medgyes, (2000) reported that NNESTs admitted having difficulties with pronunciation, vocabulary and the use of colloquial expressions. Besides, their use of the language was not updated and it was rooted in textbook language making what many of them said seem unnatural. A native speaker said that because of it, "NNESTs would pass their mistakes and improprieties to their students" (p.361). Moreover, NNESTs are usually discriminated against because of their accent. Nelson (1991) and Salomon (1991) revealed that teachers without a foreign accent were seen as more intelligent individuals whereas teachers with a foreign accent were seen as less bright (Nelson, 1991; Solomon, 1991). Lasagabaster and Sierra (2005) in a study taken place through an open questionnaire, shared some concerns about the students' worries regarding the NNESTs' pronunciation. Students claimed "they won't have the original English accent"; "pronunciation and their sentences sometimes sound artificial" and "if the teacher has pronunciation mistakes, the students may learn them" (p. 232). According to the teaching style, they agreed that "you need more effort to pass the subject" and "you learn less and you do not practice much English" (p.232). Finally, their use of colloquial expressions, their limited cultural knowledge and lack of general knowledge were also found to be NNESTs' weaknesses.

Perceptions of NSTs' strengths. Unsurprisingly, the major difference between native and nonnative teachers is the language proficiency. Students find native speakers more familiar with colloquialisms, slang, and use of language (Callahan, 2006). Callahan also reports that students think that native speakers have better pronunciation than non-native teachers. "I do think that sometimes native Spanish speakers have better pronunciation" (p. 33). Often, students believe that native teachers are the best instructors because they are familiar with the culture that surrounds a language. In the same study, one student claims, "I do feel that it is more likely that a native speaker would be able to portray the Spanish culture and the ways of their people, as they have been exposed their whole lives to the language" (p. 31). Many consider that the use of the target language is important. One of the students in this study stated the advantages he gained with the use of the target language in the classroom, "I like my teacher can speak English to me instead of my native language because I don't rely on my native language. I will learn English faster" (p.36).

Classes of NTEs tend to be more fun, and they use more body language than in the classes of NNESTs (Ustunluoglu, 2007). In the same study, Turkish students found foreign teachers "more cheerful, trustworthy, energetic, respectful, consistent, tolerant, sensitive and easygoing than their Turkish teachers are" (p.72).

Perceptions of NSTs weaknesses. On the opposite side, students think that NSTs' lack experience and knowledge of the culture where they teach (Grubbs, Jantarach & Kettem, 2010). Árvá and Medgyes (2000) added that teachers feel handicapped because of this reason; "I can't explain fully especially with beginners, and it can be frustrating" (p.362). Another NEST in this study felt that not speaking the native language of your students makes you feel lost in the classroom, and you do not know if your students are making fun of you or are being rude.

In Lasagabaster and Sierra (2005), some students found some disadvantages of listening to authentic pronunciation, such as difficulties in understanding native speakers that do not have a standard accent. What's more, the fact that some NSTs are monolingual does not allow teachers to translate words when necessary. Surprisingly, students are aware that some native teachers do not have degrees in English. For this reason, sometimes they do not know how to explain a particular concept or rule in grammar. Teaching styles are different for NNESTs. They usually do not correct pronunciation, but they want more improvement. Students in this study also mentioned that NSTs do not have the experience of learning a foreign language and for this reason they cannot understand the difficulties that their students encounter (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005). One of the greatest gaps found in NESTs is the grammatical knowledge. "This is wrong and this is the correct way you should say it, I know, but I can't explain why it's wrong or right" (Árva & Medgyes, 2000, p.361). Students also criticized NSTs because of a casual attitude that makes students see them as a "young chap messing about in sneakers" (p.362) more than as a teacher. Benke and Medgyes (2005) mentioned that native teachers tend to leave problems without correcting or explaining them.

While a combination of NESTs and NNESTs is often the most preferred, when students have to choose between the two, they usually express a preference for NESTs (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2002, 2005). Most students prefer non-native teachers to teach them grammar and writing, while most students prefer NSTs to teach them pronunciation, reading, speaking, and listening (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2002; Benke, & Mdyes, 2005). In addition, students are aware of the advantages of learning with each type of teacher (Callahan, 2006).

Attitudes towards teachers change according to the time of exposure. Pacek (2005) reported that "many vocabulary students' initial negative attitude to a NNST changed into

mixed/positive by the end of the course” (Pacek, 2005, p.260). In Moussu (2002), students were positive toward NNSTs at the beginning of the semester, and by the end of the semester, student opinions were even more positive.

Callahan (2006) shared how both ESL and Spanish students agreed that academic qualifications to teach are more important than the native speaker status. In fact, students are aware of the lack of knowledge that some native teachers have because they do not hold any teaching degree. However, in Rao (2010), the only qualification necessary and expected to teach is to be a native speaker, falling again into the “native speaker fallacy” (Phillipson, 1992).

The literature review suggests a need for further studies on this topic. Moussu (2010) supports this statement, “only few studies have directly investigated students’ opinions and attitudes regarding their teachers” (Moussu, 2010, p. 749). Differences in native and non-native teachers have been observed. More data on the topic is necessary in order to understand the reasons for these attitudes and perceptions.

Method

Setting and participants

Setting

The participants in the following research paper were five current graduate students at a major university in the state of Georgia. The university is situated about 60 miles Northeast of downtown Atlanta. During the Fall 2009, around 34,000 students were enrolled at this university. According to U.S. News & World Report’s 2010, the institution is ranked on the top 25 among national public research universities.

Participants

The sample selection criteria for the study are as follows: (1) graduate student, (2) currently enrolled in the TESOL or Foreign Language Education master's program, (3) experience learning a foreign language with native and non-native language teachers.

Although both males and females qualified as participants, my sample turned out to be all female. The fact that there are more female students than male in this program limited the recruitment. While my initial intent was to interview both native and non-native speakers, most of the research participants available to me are Americans interested in teaching a foreign language or international students interested in TESOL.

The following is a brief description of the participants:

Mary has always lived in the state of Georgia, mostly in the suburbs. It is her second year in the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) French program at the College of Education. She has a B.A in French and a minor in TESOL. The only experience studying abroad she has had is a study abroad program in Morocco during Maymester. She does not have experience working in a classroom as a language teacher but she has worked as a tutor. She is a native speaker of English but she can also speak French. She has studied this language for 12 years. Most of her French teachers were native speakers from Canada and Africa. Her non-native teachers were from United States.

Karen is from Georgia. It is her second year in the MAT Spanish program at the College of Education. She has a B.A in Spanish from The University of Georgia. Two years ago, she studied abroad in Valencia, Spain during the Maymester. She does not have experience teaching in a classroom as a language teacher but she has worked as a tutor. She is a

native speaker of English but she can also speak Spanish. She has been exposure to the Spanish language since she was in second grade. Her teachers were from Spain, Colombia and United States.

Emily is from Georgia. It is her second year in the MAT Spanish program at the College of Education. She also has a B.A in Spanish. She does not have experience studying abroad or as a language teacher She is a native speaker of English but she can also speak Spanish, Portuguese and French. She has studied Spanish for seven years and Portuguese and French for a couple of years. She has had both native and non-native teachers.

Wendy is from Taiwan. It is her second year in the Master's of Education, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). She pursued her undergraduate degree in Translation in Taiwan. Her specialization is in Chinese-English; English-Chinese. It is her second year studying abroad in United States. She has worked as an English teacher in a middle school in Taiwan for 6 years. She is a native speaker of Taiwanese and Mandarin Chinese. She has learned English as a second language since she was twelve. She has had both native and non-native teachers. They were from Taiwan, Great Britain, United States, Norway, and India.

Lucy is originally from Northwest Georgia. She is in the MAT in Spanish program. She obtained a B.A in Animal Science. She does not have experience studying abroad but she has traveled to other countries. She has not worked as a language teacher yet. She is a native speaker of English but she can also speak Spanish. She started learning Spanish as a foreign language during her sophomore year in high school. She has experience learning from both native and non-native language teachers.

Below is a table of the basic information of the participants:

Participant	Origen	Current major	Experience abroad	Languages	Teaching experience
Mary	Georgia	MAT French	Yes, 1 month in Morocco	English and French	No
Karen	Georgia	MAT Spanish	Yes, 1 month in Spain	English and Spanish	No
Emily	Georgia	MAT Spanish	No	English, Spanish, French, Portuguese	No
Wendy	Taiwan	M.Ed TESOL	Yes, 2 years in USA	Taiwanese, Chinese, and English	Yes, 6 years in a Middle School
Lucy	Georgia	MAT Spanish	No	English and Spanish	No

Data collection and analysis

Interviewing was the primary my form of data collection. An interview is an “interaction between at least two persons” (Glesne, 2011, p.102). Glesne (2001) describes three types of interviews: structured interviews, which include questions that will not be modified during the interview; semi-structured interviews, which will allow modifications throughout the interview, and conversational interviews, which do not have pre-established questions. I carried out semi-structured interview because new and interesting questions came up during the course of the interview. After each interview, I listened to the tapes and transcribed the data right after or in the following days in order to learn as much as possible and not miss any important point that was said and how it was said. I also wrote down any comment that came up during this process. When transcribing the data I used a computer program that slowed down the recording. It allowed me to transcribe and listen to the conversations at the same time. Reading the data after the interview helped me think about how the interview went, how to improve it, and how to learn more from the process. I read it at the same time as I listen to the tape. In case I misunderstood something or any new idea came up during the reading, I changed or wrote down the

modification. After the third interview, I had to rewrite one of the interview questions because it was unclear and confusing for the participants. Since I did not get the information I expected in the previous interaction, I carried out a follow-up interview with one of the participants to discuss that particular question. I also had a follow-up interview with another participant because the quality of part of the recording was not good and I could not understand it.

In general, the interviews lasted between 24 and 50 minutes. The follow-up interviews were around 20 minutes long. All the interviews were conducted in English since it was the language the participants were more comfortable with or because English was the only language we shared.

The collected data were coded in the computer. I used Microsoft Word to create tables and organize the information according to the participants and the interview questions. By this way I could see at a glance the answers of each participant to the same question. This procedure helped me to be aware of the data I was missing and needed to be collected. After analyzing the table and having in mind the research questions I selected the themes I was going to use to develop the analysis.

Personal background

Nowadays, learning a foreign language during the childhood or adolescence is becoming more and more popular. As a student of English as a second language during practically my whole life, I have had both native and non-native language teachers. Some of them were better than others but depending on where they came from, I could notice differences between both types of teachers. These differences were either positive or negative depending on the aspect being analyzed. Native teachers were designated to teach pronunciation and vocabulary because

they supposedly had a better understanding of this aspect of the language than non-native teachers. Non-native teachers were responsible for teaching grammar or English theory because they had studied it in depth during their training. The separation between these teachers made me think about the strengths and weaknesses of this group of professionals and about how students perceive and behave towards them. From the point of view of a non-native English teacher, I wanted to understand what my peers in a master's program in education think about this topic. I wished to learn about the perceptions and attitudes of these students who dream of becoming specialists in the teaching of a foreign language. Besides, it is a fact that native language teachers have greater probabilities of being hired than non-native language teacher because students, parents and institutions regard them as being more efficient and competent teachers. But is this true? Are native speakers the best qualified to teach their own language? I was interested in what this group of Master's students thinks about this particular topic.

Results/Findings

General preference of language teachers

The first question that participants were asked was related to the preference towards language teachers that people would have if they could choose between native and non-native speakers when learning a foreign language. This question was asked to understand the opinion of students who were currently learning a language. Responses to this question differed. Three of the participants affirmed that in general, people prefer to learn with a native speaker.

- (1) I think initially people would say they want a native teacher just because they can speak correctly and they can kind of tell you, "this is said and done this way in this country" (Karen).

- (2) [...] It is really good for us to interact with native speakers so we can learn the correct or right terms to use in... to be used in conversations (Wendy).

From these answers it seems like people would choose native language teachers because they think that non-native language teachers' oral proficiency and general familiarity with the language is not as good as native speakers' one.

The two participants that responded that most people would prefer a non-native speaker as their language teacher explained that people think that they are easier and there is not as much pressure as with native teachers. These participants also thought that people would choose a non-native speaker because they are aware of the problems that students may encounter when learning the language. Since they went through the same process, they know how to deal with them.

- (3) I think non-native, just because they think it is easier... Also non-native speakers can sympathy with the problems that we have learning Spanish or learning another foreign language (Emily).

However, the same student added that if the non-native teacher does not share the same first language as the students, people would pick the native speaker instead.

- (4) In that case, I would say a native would be better, or would be preferable for most people (Emily).

Mary also talked about the significance of sharing the same language and her preference. She never had the chance to think about the possibility of having as a teacher a non-native speaker who did not share the same language as her, so she spent more time than usual considering that option.

- (5) That would be difficult. I never had that experience. I think that I would prefer a non-native teacher that would speak my language (Mary).

According to these responses, we can conclude that the general preference towards a native or non-native speaker is not clear. However, it seems like people make special importance to the sharing of the first language, proper use of the language in conversations, and on the learning process experience.

Importance of academic certifications

In general, participants thought that school principals understand academic certifications as important in order to qualify as a language teacher.

- (6) Yeah, I think so. They prefer to hire somebody that already has teacher certification (Wendy).

However, one of the participants commented that sometimes being certified doesn't always mean being qualified.

- (7) [...] I think that they are important but sometimes they are not strong enough. [...] I think that what we call "qualify" is just having that degree and the GACE. That's all it takes to qualify. In reality, you go to a lot of High Schools classrooms and it is kind of obvious that teachers have studied Spanish in college but they don't have a lot of extra knowledge about it. [...] There should be a change of what we consider qualify (Emily).

The same participant added that the problem is that education is very standardized. For this reason, principals in public schools, usually look for a certification before anything else just for the fact that the government requires it and not because they think that it is important.

(8) We are concerned with standardization; government regulations, and... we don't want to get in trouble for having someone that is not qualified (Emily).

However, one of the participants did not believe in the importance of having qualifications, especially when you are native speaker applying for private schools. Karen made reference to the 'native speaker fallacy' (Phillipson, 1992) when she said:

(9) I think that some places would hire native speakers, just like that, just because they are native. 'Oh, he is going to be perfect, kids are going to hear Spanish all the time...' (Karen).

Nonetheless, Karen added that if you were a non-native speaker, principals would definitely look for qualifications.

(10) Unless you are a non-native, who in that case they wanna see that you have learned how to teach it (Karen).

In order to see the importance of qualifications in comparison with language proficiency in a language teacher, participants were asked the following question: If principals had a non-native speaker with qualifications and a native speaker without qualifications, which one do you think they would choose? In general, they thought that it was a hard question and they spent more time thinking in a response for these questions more than any other. Three participants thought that principals would choose the non-native speaker with qualifications.

(11) They would probably choose the non-native with qualifications because they are very concern with standardization. [...] It is easy for them to just put that person, whether or not he or she has experience of the language, they are technically more qualified. (Emily).

(12) I think they would choose the non-native with qualifications. Uhm, again, I don't, I think maybe twenty years ago it wouldn't have been the case (Lucy).

However, two participants believed that principals would be more interested in native speakers even if they do not have qualifications, just because they are more difficult to find. In fact, Wendy, the Taiwanese girl, explained that although most native teachers in Taiwan do not have teaching certification, principals give more importance to the language proficiency than to the qualifications and therefore, native speakers tend to be hired.

(13) In Taiwan is common to get hired if you are a native speaker even if you don't have qualifications (Wendy).

When they were asked about what they would do in that situation if they were principals, all of them agreed on the importance of the teaching qualifications and, therefore they would choose the non- native speaker with qualifications.

(14) I think I would still choose the non-native. [...] Just because you can speak a language doesn't mean you know how to teach it. I mean, it is great that you can speak it but, can you tell people why you are saying this that way and so on and so forth? (Lucy).

However, a couple of them added that they would test their language level in order to check their language abilities to teach a class in a foreign language. Surprisingly, the participant originally from Taiwan said that she would consider a native speaker without qualifications if she could see him or her teaching a lesson. If on that demonstration the native speaker showed adequate teaching skills, he or she would be hired, and therefore, he or she would be considered more qualified for the position than a non- native speaker with qualifications:

(15) I think that I will test their proficiency first. If non native speakers' English proficiency is really good plus teaching certification, of course I would hire that person but if like... native speakers, if he or she doesn't have teacher certification, maybe I would give the person the chance to teach one time to see how she or he can manage the classroom and organize the curriculum. I would evaluate it first. [...] If they were equal I would choose the native speaker (Wendy).

Participants were also asked the following question: Do you think that a non-native speaker's level of training and education can compensate for not being a native speaker? Most of them affirmed that it could definitely compensate. Mary provided an example of it that proved that training and education could compensate for not being a native speaker.

(16) Mrs. Martin, she is a phenomenal French teacher and she is a native speaker of English but she has studied the language so in depth, and speaks it all the time, and she is a really good teacher, she is very patient, she is very organized, she comes with very good strategies for learning (Mary).

However, Emily explained that the amount of training does not matter if you have not immersed in the culture.

(17) No... no... because I don't have all the cultural knowledge... or that background information. [...] No matter how many degrees I get or certifications I get, I am never going to have the same amount of information or Spanish as a native speaker (Emily).

In general, it seems like people think that principals in schools consider academic qualifications an important aspect to look when hiring a teacher. Yet, they might consider this certification important because it is required by the government and not because it actually prepares teachers to teach. For this reason, among others, some of the students thought that principals would hire non-native teachers with qualifications instead of native speakers without qualifications. This answer was common when talking about public schools in United States. However, a participant mentioned that since in private schools you are not required to have certification, native speakers have more possibilities of being hired just because the language they want to teach is their mother tongue. In Taiwan, native speakers were preferred because they have the best language proficiency, a skill they considered absolutely important for this job. Although most of the participants thought that the amount of teacher training could compensate the fact of being a non-native speaker, one of the participants stated that a non-native speaker would never have the cultural knowledge that a native has and therefore, immersion in the culture cannot be compensated with any type of training.

Discrimination on the job search

In order to be familiar with the situation of the job search among language teachers, I asked them if they knew about any situation in which a teacher was discriminated or not hired because he or she was not a native speaker. Since some of them had not had experience working

at a school, they were not familiar with current discrimination on the job search. However, some particular cases came up during the interviews.

Emily knew about a bilingual private school that hired exclusively native speakers. The administrators would not look at any type of training if you were not a native speaker.

(18) No matter how qualified they are and how much they want you, they say that native teachers are better and they would hire them for that position (Emily).

Wendy talked about her cousin, a native speaker of Taiwanese with a Master's Degree in Education with emphasis in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) from an American university. She had applied to numerous public universities but she did not get a job because she was not a native speaker.

(19) She hasn't had a chance, like, to teach in a better college. She can just teach in community colleges. It is because some of the famous public universities prefer to hire native speakers, even when my cousin speaks English very well (Wendy).

Wendy also talked about an After School Program in Taiwan where they hired native speakers.

(20) [...] They hire them because they are native speakers. The parents just wanna see that, 'oh! We got native speakers teachers in our school!' They ensure that children can interact with native speakers but sometimes maybe, they are maybe graduates from High School, sometimes they do not have college degree (Wendy).

Lucy heard about a job offer where the administrators were only looking for native speakers. But she also heard about the opposite situation. She heard about a school that was

looking for non-native speakers. They had had a bad experience with the previous language teachers. All of them were native speakers. Students could not understand them and they were failing.

(21) I have also personally witnessed a school that said that they wanted to hire a non-native speaker because they had not had success with the previous three native speaking teachers. And so they were looking to hire non-native because they thought that that would help students (Lucy).

According to this data, discrimination in hiring seems to occur in bilingual schools and universities, which are especially looking for native speakers. Also in Taiwan, native speakers are seen better by parents than non-native speakers, so principals tend to consider native speakers as the preferred professionals in the field of foreign language education. Although it does not seem very common, one of the participants mentioned one school that was specifically looking for non-native language teachers because its previous experience with native speakers was not as successful as the school expected.

Preferred skills of a language teacher

Participants were asked about the skills they would look for in a language teacher if they were the principals of a school that was looking for applicants for a foreign language position. The skills that they would require included teaching certification in the language requested, undergraduate degree either in that language or education in that language and, language proficiency. Although it would not be required to be a native speaker, a high proficiency level of the language and commitment to stay on the language while teaching would be necessary to qualify for that position.

(22) Not required, just a high level of proficiency (Karen).

(23) You can be an effective non-native teacher as long as you push yourself and your students to stay on that language (Emily).

Study of the language and effective learning strategies were considered important, as well as teaching methods.

(24) I think that teaching methods are very important (Wendy).

Participants would also look at other aspects such as study abroad programs, extracurricular activities and, travel experience.

(25) Study abroad is a nice addition, just because you can bring that culture into your classroom. But it is not required. But if there would be two people and they would be equal and one of them had studied abroad, I would pick the one that studied abroad (Karen).

They would also like to work with people that are passionate about the teaching of children and know how to manage a classroom.

(26) The first skill that I would look for is passion. [...] How effective they are going to be in behavioral management. Because if they can't manage their classroom, then they're not going to get anything conveyed to the students (Lucy).

Creativity and outgoing personality would also influence the final decision.

(27) [...] So I think in someone that has a lot of new ideas, a lot of different activities, games, movies, you know, somebody that can use all aspects of culture and apply them to their teaching (Karen).

Foreign language teacher abilities

Grammar

According to the knowledge of grammar, native speakers were thought to know more grammar. Some participants noted that native speakers use more correct grammar when they speak. It can be deduced that non-native speakers might know the correct grammar but when they talk they tend to make more mistakes.

(28) Well, they know more about their grammar but they don't know the reasons why... like a non-native speaker would, does it make sense? (Emily).

However, one of the participants mentioned that not all native speakers have correct grammar and sometimes they have bad habits when they speak.

(29) People that I know and even myself sometimes might not have perfect grammar; I might not always use perfect grammar. So I think there are also an aspect there for non-native teachers because they learn the language in a more strict form. [...] And they really haven't had their lifetime speaking that language to develop bad habits (Lucy).

Although in general the participants thought that native speakers have a better knowledge of grammar, all of them agreed that non-native speakers are the best teachers when it comes to

teach grammar because they have studied it more in depth and they can make connections with the students' first language.

(30) I think that a non-native is better because they have studied it more directly; whereas the native speaker more intuitive... (Mary).

(31) If my teacher is a native speaker, we can't really understand very well. But if non-native teachers teach grammar, sometimes they can make a connection to my language, my native language. So sometimes it is easier to understand and learn grammar with non-native speakers (Wendy).

Vocabulary

Students perceived that native speakers have a better knowledge of vocabulary. They are able to include new and more appropriate words in their everyday use of language because they have been exposure to English their whole life.

(32) Since they are young they have been exposure to lots of English literature, so I think for more difficult vocabulary or high-level vocabulary, they have more knowledge about that. (Wendy).

(33) They were surrounded by it the whole time: in the news, they read the newspaper; they hear people saying new words all the time. So they do have like a bigger vocabulary in that language. Whereas someone here maybe doesn't know... Maybe we only know one word for chair, whereas a native could say three words for chair (Emily).

When a native speaker teaches vocabulary, his or her classes are more attractive than non-native's classes because they do engaging activities. Besides, they know which vocabulary

is the most important and useful to learn. However, non-native speakers use techniques that are not considered fun by the students.

(34) I think that native speakers, when they teach, they can make vocabulary more interesting and fun because we would do some fun activities. But non-native teachers in Taiwan use the book to teach vocabulary, so sometimes it is mechanical, memory. It is not really fun for students to memorize vocabulary (Wendy).

Pronunciation

As stated by the participants, native language teachers have better pronunciation than non-native teachers. The fact that they have been pronouncing English words their whole life is an important factor they had in mind when they said it. A couple of them also mentioned that they have a native accent that non-native language teachers don't have.

(35) We have problems with accents, we don't know where accents go in words, not written, but if we just see the word written, sometimes we don't know, we don't say it correctly. Native speaker have the advantage with pronunciation. [...] There are certain challenges that non-natives have in pronunciation (Emily).

Also native language teachers seem to be able to identify students' problems in pronunciation better than non-native speakers.

(36) If we pronounce words not very well they can recognize it immediately. For example in college, we just say 'make a coffee' (monotonous intonation). I can understand it, you can understand it, but they think that we should say 'Ma↑ke a ca↑ke' (English intonation). [...] They can sense where we should improve our pronunciation... That's why I think that they are better (Wendy).

However, one of the participants pointed out that non-native speakers might be more qualified to teach pronunciation because they have learned the phonology more in detail.

(37) Native teachers have never really learned, well maybe some have, but for the most part they didn't learn exactly how with the mouth, how to make certain sounds; whereas a non native teacher would have been taught that, especially with phonemes that are different in the language like the trill or R, you know that. [...] It is something that they learned so they can kind of explain the students the process of making the sounds (Lucy).

Listening

Participants did not doubt when they were asked about the listening skills of language teachers. They believe that native speakers have better listening comprehension skills than non-native speakers. They are more familiar to listening to the particular language because they have been listening to it since they were born. Besides, they are able to distinguish accents and particularities of the language without difficulties.

(38) I think that native speakers have better listening understanding (Wendy).

However, non-native teachers were thought to teach 'listening' better than native speakers. Non-native teachers are able to point out difficult words that they might encounter during classroom practices. Since they have been through the same learning process, they are aware of the difficulties of the particular language, and they are able to facilitate students' understanding by having in mind their own learning experience.

- (39) Believe it or not, I think that I would say the non-native because they would probably be able to predict better which parts the students would have trouble with (Lucy).

Culture

In general, all the participants agreed with the fact that since native speakers have been immersed in the target language culture, they have a better knowledge about it than non-native speakers. They know more detailed information, especially about the particular cultural they were surrounded by and therefore, they have more authority to talk or teach about it.

- (40) I think this is one of the biggest differences between native and non-native teachers. Native teachers can bring an entire cultural aspect to the classroom (Lucy).
- (41) Say you have someone from Argentina and someone from the United States, and they are giving a culture lesson on dance, or on Latin dance. Obviously someone from Argentina, probably has experience with that or has been around more than an American teacher has. So I feel like they have more authority to talk about that or teach about that (Emily).

However, Mary spent some more time to think about an answer to this question and eventually decided that non-native teachers have a better cultural knowledge.

- (42) [...] Obviously the native speaker is gonna have that from their own background. [...] I would say maybe the non-native speaker because they don't have any of the assumptions that the native would have... they just studied it on a more broad level (Mary).

Attitudes

Responses to the question about their own attitudes towards their language teachers were diverse. One of the participants said that she did not have any preference as long as they had a similar language level. Their creativity would make her prefer one teacher or another.

(43) Honestly, I don't have any special preference as long as they both have similar English level. It is based in their teaching style. I like creative teachers. It doesn't matter if they are native or non-native (Wendy).

Each participant had a different experience with language teachers and therefore, their answers were motivated by their former experiences. Mary said that she had a better attitude towards non-native speakers because they are more engaging.

(44) I think that they engage me more than a native speaker. The native speaker I had from Africa, I couldn't understand him. He didn't have a lot of learning strategies for his English speakers and he didn't know how to break things down and so, I would tune out in class because I couldn't understand his accent. [...] I just slept (Mary).

However, Karen had the opposite opinion. She mentioned that native speakers usually call out in the classroom and for this reason; she has to pay more attention.

(45) I guess for the teachers that I had that were native teachers, I felt like I had to pay a lot of attention because they can call you out and say something that you were not expecting, and then you are like... "oh I don't know what you said!" Whereas the non-native teacher, they are not the ones that call the people out because they know, I guess, how embarrassing is to call people out (Karen).

Lucy talked about frustration towards her native teachers when they were not able to understand what she was saying or writing.

(46) I think that I take both of them seriously. If something would have to change, it would be frustration towards native teachers because of them not understanding (Lucy).

Emily expressed her admiration towards her language teachers independently if they were native or non-native speakers.

(47) I feel like... if I have a non-native teacher I am going to respect them because they have put so much time and effort to be... in the kind of same range of a native. [...] They have so much passion for it. [...] I am fascinated by native speakers. I am kind of jealous. [...] I wish I had that ease at learning Spanish without realizing, without having put forth that effort so I just kind of love to sit there and listen to them. I kind of appreciate that they bring forth so much more knowledge or some much culture knowledge than a non- native speaker can give. I respect them but in different ways (Emily).

Assessment

In general, participant agreed when they said that non-native teachers are stricter than native teachers. They supported this statement saying that non-native teachers also went through the same learning process and they know the students' learning possibilities.

(48) A non-native teacher, "I learned this, so you can learn it correctly too"(Karen).

Native teachers give better grades and they usually do not care about small mistakes because they realize that students are learning a second language. In fact they give more opportunities and extra points. They are in general more flexible.

(49) It is funny. I think that the native speaker probably gives better grades because of my experience...they were like, “oh, an accent... that’s ok” or “oh, a misspelling... but it looks like the word” (Karen).

(50) I personally think that native speakers are not as strict as non-native speaker. They realize that it is our second language. They give extra points (Ashley).

(51) Taiwanese teachers are more strict and rigorous. They give you grades step by step. They focus on quizzes a lot. So if you don’t do well on a quiz you can fail. But I think that native speakers... I don’t know if it is a cultural thing, but they are more flexible. [...] The native speaker focus on participation (Wendy).

However, non-native speakers are thought to give more feedback and they are able to explain the why’s of the mistakes better than native speakers.

(52) I think that a non-native speaker is better at correcting because they cannot only correct but they can correct the root of the problem. So they correct and then they say, “this is why you got this wrong and this is how you need to change the way you are thinking about the language” versus, “that is wrong” (Mary).

Learning strategies / methodology

Participants thought that non-native speakers know more effective leaning strategies and therefore, they liked the methodology they used more than the one used by native teachers. Since they have been learners of that language, they know what it means and takes to learn a foreign language. Non-native teachers can empathy with students. They are able to recognize and focus on the areas that they think students would have more difficulties with.

(53) Non-native teachers are able to approach the language in a way that someone who is a native speaker of English is going really to understand, and be able to point out those things they know that are going to be extra difficult because of the differences of the language and be able to compare it to English. I think that it is so helpful when a teacher gives you something in French and says, “this is how is in English, this is how is the same and different”, and then, I can put it somewhere in my brain (Mary).

Discussion and Implications

In this qualitative study, five graduate students who were studying to be foreign language teachers at a major university in United States were interviewed to learn about their perceptions towards their native and non-native language teachers. All of the students were non-native speakers of the language they were planning to teach. The fact that all of the participants were non-native speakers might have influenced their responses. The first research question regarding the attitudes that students had toward their foreign language teachers, showed that students were able to point out the strengths and weaknesses of their former teachers and express their attitudes toward them. For some participants, the fact of being a native or a non-native speaker did not change the perception of the teacher. However, being creative was an important factor to catch the attention of the students. Also, as Ustunluoglu (2007) stated, non-native language teachers are more engaging in the classroom. One of the participants added that she felt very respectful toward non-native teachers. Being aware of how much time and effort were required to be a successful teacher was admired by this future Spanish teacher. Frustration was also an attitude that one of the students had when the native teacher was not able to understand what she was

saying or writing. However, all the cultural and rich language that native speakers could bring to the classroom fascinated one of the participants.

According to the skills that language teachers should have in order to be an effective language teacher included teaching certification in the language requested, undergraduate degree either in that language or education in that language and, language proficiency. Although it would not be required to be a native speaker, a competent level of the language would be necessary to be considered a valuable foreign language teacher. Study of the language and effective learning strategies were considered important, as well as teaching methods. They would also look at other aspects such as study abroad programs, extracurricular activities and, travel experience. They would also be interested in working with people that were passionate about the teaching of children and know how to manage a classroom. Creativity and outgoing personality would also influence the final decision.

The third research question regarding who was the best-qualified teacher was discussed throughout the study. In general terms, native speaker instructors were considered better at vocabulary, pronunciation, listening, assessment and, cultural knowledge. Non-native speakers were considered to be better at teaching, especially grammar, learning strategies, and methodology (Callahan, 2006). It seems like the biggest differences between native and non-native speakers are that non-native speakers have gone through the process of learning on the same ways as their students and therefore, they are aware of the difficult aspects of the language, and the best approach to teach it (Beckett & Stiefvater, 2009) However, native speakers have the advantage of having been immersed in the culture and are able to speak the language without making mistakes or having an accent that can hinder the students' understanding.

All the participants believed that teaching certification was very important, although one of them pointed out that being certified do not always mean being qualified. In general, when comparing native and non- native speakers, participants had the misconception that native teachers had not received as much teaching training as non-native teachers. This perception influenced many of students' answers, when in reality, native and non-native teachers who are certified receive the same teacher training regardless their origin. Therefore, the general misconception that native speakers do not receive teacher training is not necessarily true. What is true is that there are some institutions that look more at native language proficiency than teaching skills (Brain,1999). This supposes a clear example of job discrimination because non-native speakers do not even have the chance to apply for a job even when they have native or near native proficiency level. However, participants did not know as many cases of discrimination as it was expected. These practices seem to be more common in bilingual and private schools where teaching certification is not required, and also in universities in United States. What is more, in Taiwan, parents encourage hiring native speakers even without qualifications. However, participants mentioned that although being a native speaker is not required to be an efficient teacher, a high level of language proficiency, among other skills, is necessary to be considered a successful language teacher.

This qualitative study helped to identify and understand the deficiencies and needs in the teaching of foreign languages so that some suggestions can be proposed. Some of these suggestions include a review of certification programs that qualify to teach foreign languages. Students in foreign language education programs should achieve an advanced level in the study of the language. Teacher certification programs should require completing an extensive period of study abroad. Students will benefit from total immersion in the culture and improvement of

language skills. In addition, a deeper study of learning strategies and methodologies is encouraged. Also, teachers should be able to speak a second language in order to be aware of the process of learning a second language and therefore, be able to empathy with the students. I also call for further research on this current research study, including interviews with native graduate students in order to evaluate if the responses are influenced by the condition of the participants.

This study will help foreign language teachers to understand how students may see them, and to be aware of one's strengths and weaknesses. Being aware of possible weaknesses is the first step to deal with them.

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