

Non-native English Speaking Teachers: Uncovering Thai EFL Teachers' Instructional Practices in an International Program of Thai University

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Abstract

Non-native English speaking teachers can serve as good models for students because they are good in different aspects from their native colleagues (Medgyes, 1994). With a few studies concerning foreign students' perceptions of language teaching in Thai EFL contexts, Thai EFL teachers have less deep information to reflect upon their instructional practices. This paper, therefore, tries to discuss Chinese students' perceptions of Thai EFL teachers' instructional practices concerning their pedagogical strengths and weaknesses in English language teaching. The study was conducted with 38 Chinese students from a university in Yunnan Province, China through a set of questionnaires and open-response items. The findings showed that native English speaking teachers are the most preferable over Thai EFL teachers. This preference is related to students' learning experience of English as a foreign language in China and the need for native teachers in order to acquire language competence. Interestingly, they viewed Thai EFL teachers positively. Findings also indicated that Thai EFL teachers are knowledgeable, qualified, and have good characteristics in English language teaching. These factors have a positive

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impact on Chinese students' learning in class, yet they also have some pedagogical weaknesses and language limitations in English language teaching.

Keywords: Thai EFL teachers, instructional practice, Non-native English speaker teachers

Introduction

Chiang Rai Rajabhat University has signed MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) agreements with universities in Yunnan Province, China. The objectives of those MOU agreements are to create student and academic staff exchange programs in language learning and teaching in Thai, English and Chinese. Those MOU agreements aim to establish researcher exchange programs, to create international conferences between institutes, to have cultural exchanges programs, to join in research training and research collaboration, as well as to build understanding and networks between universities (International Academic Collaboration Center, International Affairs, Chiang Rai Rajabhat University, 1993 – 2013). With those MOU agreements the university is considered to be one of the top ten universities in Thailand that has foreign students, especially Chinese students.

Chinese students study English in an international program at Chiang Rai Rajabhat University with both Thai and native English speaking teachers. The differences of language competence and teaching methods between Thai and native English speaking teachers can have a strong impact on Chinese students' perceptions of English language learning. According to Medgyes' (1994) four hypotheses, native English speaker teachers (NESTs) and non-native English speaker teachers (non-NESTs) are two different "species" (p. 27) and they are different in terms of language proficiency and teaching behavior. Discrepancy in language proficiency accounts for most of the differences found in their teaching behavior, but they can be equally good on their own terms. Medgyes (1994, 2004) conducted many studies concerning NESTs and non-NESTs in various aspects. He then advanced the bright sides of being a non-NEST that they can provide a good learning model, teach language learning strategies effectively, supply learners with more information about the English language, anticipate and be sensitive to students' learning difficulties and needs, and use the same native language as students.

Moreover, Medgyes' (1994) hypotheses have been tested in many studies and the results show that most students prefer NESTs over non-NESTs (Butler, 2007 ; Meadows and Muramatsu, 2007 ; Madrid and Cañado, 2004). They prefer

NESTs because they have various interesting teaching methods (Alseweed, 2012 ; Sung, 2010), are superior language competence (Árva and Medgyes, 2000), friendly, provide students a relaxed classroom atmosphere (Wu, 2009 ; Park, 2009), and have better English accent and speak English naturally (Braine, 2010 ; Sung, 2010). Furthermore, NESTs are better at teaching pronunciation, reading, listening and speaking (Grubbs et al., 2010), vocabulary (Lasagabaster and Sierra, 2002), and culture of English-speaking countries (Ma, 2012). In contrast, non-NESTs are better at teaching grammar, writing skills, and language learning strategies. They also are more accurate with formal language, share the same native language and cultural background as their students, and show empathy and sensitivity to students' learning needs (Braine, 2010 ; Xiaoru, 2008 ; Park, 2009 ; Ma, 2012 ; Medgyes, 2001 ; Reves and Medgyes, 1994). Since Chinese students' perceptions of Thai EFL teachers are important and have been overlooked for a decade after MOU agreements have been signed. Also, the issues of NESTs and non-NESTs are the current trends in World Englishes and new in the context of the present study. Therefore, this study aims to investigate Chinese students' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of Thai EFL teachers' instructional practices. Results of the study are expected to provide insightful information for Thai EFL teachers to reflect upon and improve their instructional practices to better meet the needs of their students.

Methodology

Participants

The research participants were 38 Chinese undergraduates from an international program at Chiang Rai Rajabhat University. They were students from a university in Yunnan Province, China. They volunteered to participate in the study, ranged between 18 – 23 years old and had already studied English in China for two years at the tertiary level with both NESTs and Chinese teachers. Now, the students are studying for two more years at Chiang Rai Rajabhat University with both Thai EFL teachers and NESTs. In the program, there are twenty- three English teachers and three of them are native English speakers who come from the United States of America. They have over five years of teaching experience in Thailand.

Data collection

This study employed mixed-method approaches. Research data were collected by a set of questionnaires which consisted of closed-response and open-response items. The closed- response items had two main parts. The first part

was designed to collect demographical data of participants. The second part had 37 items. They were used to elicit the participants' opinions of Thai EFL teachers in terms of their preference, communication, and learning and teaching English language. The closed-response items used a five-point Likert scale to rate the degree of students' perceptions of their teachers which ranged from strongly agree (5), agree (4), undecided (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1). The students were asked to complete the questionnaire in approximately 20 – 30 minutes.

The open-response items were used to gather richer data for the study. The open-response items composed of six questions which corresponded to the closed-response items. Thus, data from both open-response and closed-response items were interwoven to report and strengthen the quality of the research results.

Data Analysis

The data from the closed-response items were analyzed by using descriptive statistics such as Arithmetic Mean, Standard Deviation and Percentage. However, this study used only the percentage values as the main source for data analysis and data interpretation. Since this kind of value can demonstrate the proportion scores of each statement in the questionnaire clearly. For the qualitative data analysis, open and axial coding techniques (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) were utilized. The open coding technique was used at the first step in order to identify the phenomenon found in the texts and themed them. Later, axial coding technique was employed to categorize and group each theme into dimensions to answer research question.

Results

The majority of Chinese students prefer native English speaking teachers over Thai EFL teachers in the international program (Table 1). However, they still need and have positive attitudes towards Thai EFL teachers and prefer to have both Thai EFL teachers and native English speaking teachers (Items 1, 2, and 3).

Table 1: Students’ Preference of Teachers

No.	Statements	Percentage				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	I prefer Thai EFL teachers as my teachers.	2.60	5.30	26.30	47.40	18.40
2	I prefer native English speaking teachers as my teachers.	0.00	2.60	13.20	47.40	36.80
3	If I could choose, I would prefer to have both native English speaking teachers and Thai EFL teachers to teach me.	2.60	5.30	7.90	44.70	39.50

Note: 1 = strongly disagreed 2 = disagreed 3 = undecided 4 = agreed 5 = strongly agreed

Interwoven with the qualitative data, findings showed the same results that most Chinese students prefer native English speaking teachers because they have better English pronunciation, provide more opportunities for students to practice the language and better improve their listening and speaking skills, and knowledge of culture of English-speaking countries.

However, Chinese students perceived that Thai EFL teachers adhered to traditional teaching methods and based their teaching mostly on textbooks. For example, student A22 claimed that “LS teacher [pseudonym] explain all details in the book ...”. Alongside with traditional teaching method, they have pedagogical strengths in planning the lessons and preparing their teachings. They used textbooks as the main source for activities planning and language practice. They also used computer and power point presentations in class and created worksheets for students. Not only this, Thai EFL teachers created interesting cooperative learning activities to increase students’ participation in class. They had students work in groups, gave time for them to practice, provided details and examples, helped answer questions, and tried to provide more explanations when students did not understand. This made students engage in their learning and gain more knowledge. For instance, students illustrated these views.

Thai [EFL] teachers are kind, humorous... in the classroom. They always [provide opportunities for] us [to] do activity, have [discussions] discussed with friend and do same [some] homework in group. They always make us happy and make us understand the knowledge. (Student A33)

Active [in] teaching us how to study by ourselves. And we have many practice [s]. It’s better than our Chinese teachers. Some teachers always taught us his lesson plan, and then he will give us enough time to practice and remember. It is convenient to ask questions and solve problems. (Student A23)

They are very kind and interesting. For examples [example], when we dis[mis]understanding words or sentences, they can use [many different] kinds of ways [to explain] explanation for us or patient explanate [explain] for us. I like them very much. (Student A11)

In addition, Thai EFL teachers can support students' learning and be more aware of and predict Chinese students' thinking, learning difficulties and language weaknesses over many English teachers from the west. For example, Student A22 stated:

Strengths: they [Thai EFL teachers] can complain [explain] some different ways like some complex Phases and words, sentences because they may had some situation when they were learning English. They know our weakness [es] more than native English speaking teachers.

Moreover, another student echoed the Student A22's statements that:

I prefer Thai [EFL] teachers because English [is] as a second language for both Chinese students and Thai teachers. In some ways, we learn English together, so we may have some trouble or problem about learning English. So in this case, we can discuss, communicate more easier than talk with native English speaking teacher. (Student A22)

Regarding teaching language skills, Table 2 shows that Thai EFL teachers have pedagogical strengths at teaching grammar, reading, writing skills and language learning strategies for students (Items 1, 4, 7 and 10). They also can give good feedback to improve students' reading and writing skills (Item 6, and 9). In addition, some students agreed and strongly agreed that grammar and feedback to improve their grammar, and writing should be taught by Thai EFL teachers, although most of them were undecided (Items 2, 3 and 8).

Table 2: Thai EFL Teachers' Teaching of English Language Skills

No. Statements	Statements	Percentage				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	Thai EFL teachers are good at explaining grammar.	2.60	18.40	23.70	42.10	13.20
2	Grammar should be taught by Thai EFL teachers	2.60	18.40	42.10	31.60	5.30
3	Thai EFL teachers could give good feedback for me to improve my grammar.	0.00	10.50	47.40	39.50	2.60
4	Thai EFL teachers could teach reading well.	0.00	13.20	23.70	63.20	0.00
5	Reading should be taught by Thai EFL teachers	0.00	15.80	34.20	47.40	2.60
6	Thai EFL teachers could give good feedback for me to improve my reading skills.	0.00	13.20	31.60	50.00	5.30
7	Thai EFL teachers could teach writing well.	0.00	7.90	31.60	50.00	10.50
8	Writing should be taught by Thai EFL teachers	0.00	13.20	47.40	34.20	5.30
9	Thai EFL teachers could give good feedback for me to improve my writing skills.	0.00	7.90	28.90	50.00	13.20
10	Thai EFL teachers also teach language learning strategies to help students learn better.	0.00	10.50	15.80	63.20	10.50

Note: 1 = strongly disagreed 2 = disagreed 3 = undecided 4 = agreed 5 = strongly agreed

However, the qualitative findings showed that Thai EFL teachers are perceived to be effective in teaching writing skills and grammar. They have adequate grammar knowledge and are able to improve students' knowledge of grammar. Importantly, Thai EFL teachers are patient to explain grammar points and writing for students. They have students practice language items in class. Also, Thai EFL teachers are effective at teaching language learning strategies for their students (See also Table 2: Item 10). For instance, they said:

Writing, grammar, and reading because Thai [EFL] teachers [teach] patiently. And in my mind, Thai [EFL] teacher is good at grammar and writing. Their grammar is very well. (Student A25)

Thai [EFL] teachers are good at explaining grammar and teach language learning strategies to help students learn better. (Student A1)

In terms of teaching listening and speaking skills, Table 2 illustrates that Thai EFL teachers could teach (63.10%) and give good feedback (57.90%) to improve students' listening and speaking skills (Items 11 and 13). In contrast, most student participants disagreed and strongly disagreed that Thai EFL teachers should teach pronunciation (Items 14 and 15) although some perceived that Thai EFL teachers could give good feedback to improve their pronunciation (Item 16).

Table 2: Thai EFL Teachers' Teaching of Listening and Speaking Skills (Cont.)

No. Statements	Statements	Percentage				
		1	2	3	4	5
11	Thai EFL teachers could teach listening and speaking skills well.	5.30	10.50	21.10	60.50	2.60
12	Listening and speaking skills should be taught by Thai EFL teachers	2.60	26.30	31.60	34.20	5.30
13	Thai EFL teachers would give good feedback for me to improve my listening and speaking skills.	2.60	10.50	28.90	50.00	7.90
14	Thai EFL teachers could teach pronunciation well.	7.90	34.20	28.90	23.70	5.30
15	Pronunciation should be taught by Thai EFL teachers.	7.90	42.10	28.90	18.40	2.60
16	Thai EFL teachers could give good feedback for me to improve my pronunciation.	2.60	28.90	26.30	39.50	2.60

Note: 1 = strongly disagreed 2 = disagreed 3 = undecided 4 = agreed 5 = strongly agreed

According to the qualitative findings, Thai EFL teachers have linguistic weaknesses in terms of English accents and pronunciation. Their pronunciation is inferior when compared to their native colleagues. Generally, the participants perceived that Thai EFL teachers have unclear English accents and sometimes difficult for students to understand. Moreover, they speak and read fast in class and those lead incorrect pronunciation and hinder understanding. For example, Students A10 and A33 mentioned that some Thai EFL teachers pronounce some English words unclear in class. They said:

If Thai teacher teach our [us] English. We would know [more] much things about the Thai. Not only Thai culture, but also somewhere that they have been to. But if Thai teacher teach our [us] English, sometimes we can't understand the [their] pronunciation. For example, umbrella. (Student A10)

I want to [have] the native English speaking teachers [to] teach me English most. Because the native English speaking teachers have a good pronunciation clearly than Thai teachers. Some Thai teachers pronounce some words not clearly [clear]. For example ; culture, computer, very, sorry and so on. So, I think [having] have a native English speaking teachers is good for us. (Student A33)

Therefore, Chinese students prefer to learn English with native English speaking teachers over Thai EFL teachers in order to acquire more proficient pronunciation and improve their listening and speaking skills. These results are contradicted to the quantitative findings (Items 11 and 13) showing positively that Thai EFL teachers could teach and give good feedback to improve students' listening and speaking skills. For example, the participants stated:

I want to [have] native English speaking teachers [to teach us] teaching our English the most. Because the Thai [EFL] teachers [English pronunciation] pronounce is strange. I can't listen clearly. Sometimes [it] is difficult to understand. (Student A9)

I want native English speaking teacher more because they are native speaker. We can learn pronunciation more efficiently and it also can improve our listening [skills]. On the other hand, I think [that] not all of the Thai [EFL] teachers' pronunciation is well. Sometimes they may mislead us from the right pronunciation to wrong pronunciation. I think one or two Thai [EFL] teachers are ok. (Student A16)

Moreover, one of the participants expressed that she felt disappointed when she found that she had only a native English speaking teacher to teach her in the international program. This was because she expected to have more native English speaking teachers in order to practice pronunciation and speaking skills. She claimed:

To be honest, I hope we can have many native English speaking teachers. [All] Our teacher [who] told [taught] us came from Europe, and I was looking forward to studying here. While the fact is opposite, I feel disappointed at the beginning because we just have only one American teacher. I think we can practice our pronunciation and speaking [skills] very well if we study with a native English speaking teacher. Practice makes perfect, and we can get a better improvement if we learn the knowledge with a teacher whose native language is English. I like their pronunciation and we usually imitate through watching American programs. (Student A36)

However, Chinese students believed that they can learn more knowledge and vocabulary from Thai EFL teachers. Learning with Thai EFL teachers provide opportunities for them to experience different accents and pronunciation and learnt how to adapt and accepted them.

In terms of teaching culture, Thai EFL teachers have insufficient knowledge of western countries. They could not supply sufficient cultural information and share cultural experience from the west to students. In contrast, Thai EFL teachers have direct insights into their culture. They have bilingual competence. This ability benefits and maximizes their potential to teach Chinese students English and Thai language and culture with effective results. For example, they have learnt Buddhist stories, Thai food and dance from Thai EFL teachers. They remarked:

Thai teacher taught us mass media, pronunciation, grammar. Sometime they taught us the culture about Thai. They told us interesting and thinking stories in class. For example, a buddist's [Buddhist] story was taught and then we knowed [knew] about it. (Student A14)

1. Thai language class. Thai teachers are better than English speaking teachers. They have good pronunciation.

2. Thai culture class. They are more familiar to Thai culture. We can get more knowledge from them. 3. Thai dance and food. We can learn more Thai food and dance. (Student 30)

Moreover, Thai EFL teachers are not only found to be knowledgeable teachers, but they also have good characteristics in teaching. The findings illustrated that Thai EFL teachers are kind and patient to students. They always smile, friendly, and have warm-hearted and humorous emotions while teaching in class. Chinese students consider these as good qualities and effective characteristics of a language teacher. These are the most important factors effectively motivating and encouraging Chinese students to learn and engage in their learning, and creating friendly learning atmospheres in class.

Discussion

Both quantitative and qualitative findings clearly indicated that most Chinese students prefer NESTs over Thai EFL teachers. They perceived that NESTs have better English pronunciation and language competence, and know more about western culture. Similar findings also have been reported in the literature (Braine, 2010 ; Ma, 2012 ; Árvá and Medgyes, 2000). For these reasons,

NESTs are suitable at teaching listening, speaking and pronunciation, capable at correcting students' pronunciation and could potentially develop and improve students' overall skills.

However, overall results of the study indicated that most Chinese students strongly prefer to have both Thai EFL teachers and NESTs to teach them in the international program. This is because their different pedagogical and linguistic strengths could fulfill each other and beneficial for students. These findings are in line with Medgyes' (1994) notion. Medgyes notes that NESTs and non-NESTs were two different "species" (p. 27). They were different in terms of language proficiency and teaching behavior. Differences in their teaching behavior were caused by the discrepancy of the language proficiency, and both of them could be equally good teachers in their own way. The findings of this study pointed out that Thai EFL teachers have better knowledge of language structure and grammar. They have previous learning experience of grammar in Thai contexts and are able to facilitate and support students to achieve higher levels of language learning.

On knowledge of instructional practices, Thai EFL teachers employ traditional teaching approaches and mostly base their teaching on textbooks. This kind of teaching approach was called "traditional and textbook-bound teaching styles" (Ma, 2012: 297) which provided less opportunity for students to participate. According to Medgyes (2001), textbook-bound teaching made non-NESTs feel secure and enabled them to control their teaching approaches and activities in the classroom. Using textbooks is not the weakness of traditional teaching approaches although it sometimes is uninteresting to students. Although Thai EFL teachers employ traditional teaching approaches in class, they have pedagogical strengths. They pay more attention to knowledge, supply more information, give examples, provide detailed explanations, and create interesting cooperative learning and problem-solving tasks for students. These are considered to be the positive aspects of language teaching of Thai EFL teachers.

Regarding pronunciation, the present study strongly pointed out that Thai EFL teachers' English pronunciation and accents are a big problem which heavily impact students' learning. Findings showed that Thai EFL teachers have unclear English pronunciation and that considerably affect students' understanding in class. According to Braine (2010), non-NESTs' accent is considered as "not good", "wrong", "incorrect", "not real", "fake", "deficient", and "strong" (p. 17). With these results, Thai EFL teachers are considered to have less effective and inappropriate to develop and improve students' listening and speaking skills adequately. In addition, the students feel demotivated to study with Thai EFL teachers because they cannot fully practice their language skills, especially in listening and speaking.

Dissimilar to other studies, Chinese students emphasize that Thai EFL teachers' teaching characteristics are important factors affecting their motivation and emotion while learning. They perceived that Thai EFL teachers are always friendly, smile a lot and have warm-hearted and humorous emotions and patience. Those teaching characteristics are good qualities of Thai EFL teachers which effectively motivate students, build good rapport, create a positive learning atmosphere and reduce classroom tension. According to Walls et al., (2002), those teaching characteristics are the factors of effective language teachers. Effective teachers are always warm, friendly, and caring. In contrast, ineffective teachers often make a tense classroom. Importantly, with those teaching characteristics, Chinese students tend to approach, interact, and consult problems with Thai EFL teachers more than NESTs.

Conclusion

Although most students prefer NESTs over Thai EFL teachers, they also realize the importance of having Thai EFL teachers to take part in language teaching with their native colleagues in the international program. The students believe that Thai EFL teachers are qualified and have adequate knowledge of language teaching. They also perceived that the difference of language competence and pedagogical strengths between Thai EFL teachers and NESTs are able to support their learning needs and maximize their learning improvement. Importantly, Thai EFL teachers showed good characteristics in language teaching, understand and can predict students' learning difficulties. However, findings of the study suggest that teachers' pronunciations are important for students' understanding of the lessons. Also, teachers should employ communicative teaching approach rather than traditional approach in class in order to provide more opportunity for students to practice and use the target language.

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