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Who Is a Better Speaker of English? Native
vs. Non-native Perspectives
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ABSTRACT

This research project focuses on the ideology that students have of native teachers of English and non-native teachers of English. There are stereotypes that present native speakers as the ideal language teachers because of their native proficiency. Non-native teachers are underrated and have to face unequal opportunities when looking for jobs as teachers of English. Research about native and non-native English teachers defends that both groups have different qualities that are beneficial for the learning process of students. Furthermore, there is a phenomenon called foreign language speaking anxiety that many students of foreign languages seem to experience. Therefore, the aims of this project are to see if the stereotypes about native and non-native teachers are present among young learners of English and to see if students of English suffer from foreign language speaking anxiety.

Keywords: native English-speaking teacher (NEST), non-native English-speaking teacher (non-NEST), foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA), L1, LX

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1. Introduction

English is commonly considered by many parents the most important extracurricular activity their children need to take in order to have more opportunities in the future. Although in school children are taught English from a very young age, a high percentage of students go to English schools to improve their language competence.

Within this context, this project aims at answering the following research questions: 1) do students prefer a native English-speaking teacher or a non-native English speaking teacher?; and 2) do students suffer from foreign language speaking anxiety?

Medgyes (2001), explains that “non-native speakers of English find it hard to compete with native speakers on equal terms” (Medgyes, 2001). People tend to think that a person who is from an English-speaking country will be a better teacher than someone who was born in a non-English-speaking country, only because English is not their first language. Researchers have found that there are skills in English Language Teaching (ELT) that only non-native speakers can have and that can benefit their students’ learning process of the language. In order to be a good English teacher, you need to have a good level of language competence, but you also need to have skills to teach it properly.

Another thing that we need to consider is that the dichotomy “native speaker - non-native speaker” is very controversial. Several experts such as Jean-Marc Dewaele believe that it is difficult to define the native speaker, since there are many factors that play a role in the language background of a person. That is why for some years now, linguist experts have been trying to find new terms that are more inclusive so that the dichotomy does not undervalue one of the parts.

It is important to know how students feel about having a native teacher or having a non-native teacher. Nowadays, there are different methodologies used for ELT and we cannot say that one methodology is better than another. However, depending on the student, they probably prefer one over the others. It is commonly believed that if you have a native teacher you can achieve a better pronunciation and you have to make an effort to communicate in English the whole time. Nevertheless, non-native teachers can switch to the common L1 if necessary, which can make the students feel more comfortable in the classroom. Feeling comfortable should be an essential factor for students in the classroom. Nowadays it is common for students of foreign languages to feel anxious when communicating in an LX. This phenomenon is known as foreign language speaking anxiety and it is quite present in the classrooms.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Native / non-native speaker dichotomy

We are used to refer to speakers of languages as “natives” or “non-natives”, depending on their place of birth; in this case, whether it was in an English-speaking country or not. This dichotomy is not suitable for our way of living nowadays in the age of globalization. We live in a constantly changing world in which people travel from place to place. There are millions of cases of children born in English-speaking countries with parents from non-English-speaking countries who speak to their children using their first languages, which are not English. Are these children considered native speakers of English?

Even experts on the matter like Jean-Marc Dewaele consider it difficult to define the term “native”. Dewaele (2017) considers this terminology “potentially racist” since “it excludes speakers of certain varieties of a language or highly proficient non-native

speakers” (Dewaele, 2017: 1). Plus, it defines non-native speakers as something that they are not, by emphasizing the fact that they were not born in an English-speaking country. Researchers want to qualify English users by their language competence and not depending on their place of birth. Being born in an English-speaking country usually means having a good level of language competence. Despite this, some native speakers make a lot of grammar mistakes and may not have a wide range of vocabulary. In addition, nowadays there are a lot of non-native speakers who have proficient English levels, since it has been for many years now the most important foreign language taught in most countries. Therefore, the dichotomy should be based on the language competence of every person and not exclude them for their country of origin.

2.2 English as an international language

These days there are more non-native speakers of English than native ones (Crystal, 2003), and this phenomenon has created what can be considered a new variety of English: English as an International Language (EIL). Its creation was due to English being the language used by people whose first language is not English to communicate internationally. Therefore, it is used by non-native speakers from many different countries, as English is the foreign language that they all have in common. That is why this variety is spoken slightly differently from the other varieties of English.

A very positive aspect about the creation of this new variety is that non-native speakers should not feel less than native speakers when speaking EIL because it is a variety created by themselves. This should make them feel entitled to use it without the insecurity that non-native speakers of a language usually experience. Nonetheless, according to Llurda

(2004), most EIL speakers are not aware of using this variety and think they are users of one of the native varieties.

Other researchers, such as Péter Medgyes, also comment on the phenomenon of EIL. Medgyes (2001) talks about English being the “unrivaled lingua franca of the world” (Medgyes, 2001:1). Because of globalization, the need for an international variety of English arose in order to make communication among people all over the world more effective and personal. “The English language is no longer the privilege of native speakers”. (Medgyes, 2001:1).

Jenkins (2006) believes that speakers of ELF should be the ones to determine the pronunciation of it, and not native speakers of English, since they do not use this variety and what matters the most is intelligibility among ELF users (non-native speakers). She insists that pronunciation of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has to be intelligible to native speakers (who are the target speaking community). However, in EIL the target speaking community shifts to non-native speakers. Another important point to consider is that the responsibility of being intelligible lies on the speaker but also on the listener. Both have to make an effort in order to make communication effective. This effort is connected to being tolerant with the different varieties of English. Not only for native speakers, who must be aware that their variety is not the only one which is valid, but also non-native speakers need to realize that there are different varieties that can be taught concerning English as a Foreign Language. Therefore, native speakers are not the “norm-setters” (Berns, 2008: 329), but the partners of non-native speakers and they need to agree on “meaning for either intelligibility, comprehensibility, or interpretability” (Berns, 2008: 329).

By analyzing conversation among non-native speakers, Jenkins found in 2002 that pronunciation was the most common cause and the most difficult to solve, of communication breakdowns. Jenkins established the “Lingua Franca Core”, which consisted of the set of most important pronunciation features to achieve intelligibility. These were: most consonant sounds, vowel quantity, initial and medial consonant clusters and tonic stress (Jenkins 2004: 114–115).

Kachru stated in 1997 that “world Englishes” was more adequate than “lingua franca” to refer to the global functions that English had in that moment (and it still has nowadays), he added that it “serves more adequately to take into account the multiplicity of identities, canons, and voices that represent the relevance and the power of the sociolinguistic context and the extent of bilinguals’ linguistic creativity” (Kachru, 1996).

2.3 New terms proposed

Having agreed on the need to find an alternative to the dichotomy of “native - non-native speakers”, several authors have proposed new terms to refer to speakers of a language. Dewaele (2017) talks about the different possibilities to substitute the dichotomy. He comments on the proposal made by Cook in 1999 which consisted of eliminating “non-native speaker” and using “L2 user”, which he defined as “people who know more than one language without the overtones that cloud the words bilingual and learner and who use the L2 minimally to maximally” (Cook and Singleton 2014: 4). This new term was considered much more inclusive since it takes into consideration language signers. Nevertheless, the number “2” can be confusing. It can refer to all languages that a person learnt after their first language. Therefore, for instance, the fourth language that a person learnt, can be referred to as “L4”. That is why saying “L2” when the language in question

is not necessarily the second language that a person learnt chronologically, is considered to be confusing by several experts.

Another suggestion made by O'Rourke and Pujolar (2013) was the term "new speaker", which they defined as "speakers which exist outside of the traditional native-speaker communities" (O'Rourke and Pujolar, 2013: 56). However, in this case we also have a problem of accuracy, the same that happened with the concept of "native speaker", since it is difficult to decide in what moment a "new speaker" is not new anymore.

After considering these different possibilities and its limitations, Dewaele presented his suggestion: the term "LX", which he defined as "any foreign language acquired after the age at which the first language(s) was acquired, that is after the age of 3 years, to any level of proficiency" (Dewaele, 2017: 238). He prefers this term because he considers it "value-neutral" (Dewaele, 2017: 238). Regarding the "native" part of the dichotomy, Dewaele (2017) suggests the use of the term "L1", which is the first language that a person learns in their life.

Dewaele's (2017) suggestion of "L1 - LX" has been used by a number of authors. In addition, other researchers have also built on his terminology. It is the case of Nathan Thomas and Christopher Osment (2020). The two authors consider it important to take into account the level of proficiency, the level of usage and the level of identification with the language since in the term "LX" there are millions of different uses of a language, different levels of knowledge and different purposes. With their proposal, we can get more information about the language user. The 3 aspects that they consider are divided into 3 levels. The first level refers to proficiency, the second level refers to the degree of usage, and the third level refers to identification with the language. These considerations can help us understand and realize that not all LX users are proficient, feel comfortable

using the language or use it most of the time. Usually, when someone says they can speak a language, we imply that they have a very good level, but it does not have to be that way, as according to Dewaele, Thomas and Osment, LX can also stand for people who have a “basic working knowledge” (Thomas & Osment, 2020: 3) of a language. They believe the consideration of identity is important since our world is constantly changing and people are constantly moving. Language identity changes together with the users. Another consideration made by the authors is that there is no such thing as language ownership, although many people feel it. “No one owns any language but is simply a user of language.” (Thomas & Osment, 2020: 5).

2.4 NESTs and non-NESTs

NESTs and non-NESTs stand at a very different level although they do the same job. People tend to undervalue the capacities and knowledge of non-NESTs and to overvalue NESTs only because they are L1 speakers of the language they teach.

Davies (2004) presented the characteristics that NESTs have, which are: “childhood acquisition of the language, comprehension and production of idiomatic forms of the language, understanding regional and social variations within the language and competent production and comprehension of fluent, spontaneous discourse” (Davies, 2004). Regarding the items of this list, the only characteristic that a non-NEST cannot possess is childhood acquisition, as the other elements listed can be acquired by LX learners.

The barrier that is always placed between NESTs and non-NESTs results in an inequality that is very difficult to overcome. This results in consequences that non-NESTs must face, such as job opportunities. Clark and Paran’s (2007) carried out a survey involving 90 higher education centers all over the UK, the results of which showed that 72.3% of

employers hired their employees considering native-speakerness. Another important consequence is the self-esteem of non-NESTs as professionals. This was surveyed by Seidlhofer in 1996, who found that 57% out of 100 non-NESTs that participated felt insecure inside the classroom.

In the opinion of Birdsong (1992) and Felix (1987), it is almost impossible for non-NESTs to acquire a proficient level of English after they have gone through childhood. Other experts feel that the belief of NESTs being masters of correctness in the English language is a “convenient fiction, or a shibboleth” (Paikeday, 1985). Kramsch (1997) believes that it is very difficult to establish a “standard” English since many factors influence the way of speaking: “geography, occupation, age and social status” (Kramsch, 1997).

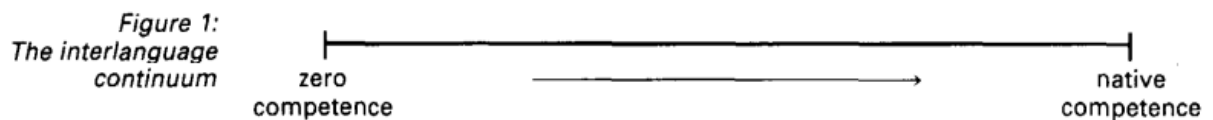
More current points of view state that the “idealized native speaker is becoming less relevant as a model for L2” (Kirkpatrick, 2010) because of the increasing importance of multilingual contexts, brought by the English as a lingua franca phenomenon.

2.4.1 Are NESTs “better” than non-NESTs?

Medgyes (1992) discusses the differences between NESTs and Non-NESTs by stating that the dichotomy “native - non-native speaker” must be eliminated and substituted by terms such as: “more or less accomplished users of English” (Edge, 1988), “more or less proficient users of English” (Paikeday, 1985), “expert speakers” (Rampton, 1990), “affiliation” (Rampton, 1990), “English-using speech fellowships” (Kachru, 1985) and “educated English speaker”. These terms define the speakers by their language competence rather than the place they were born in. However, they can be a bit problematic when deciding at what point a speaker is “educated” or “expert”. Nevertheless, they are more inclusive than the dichotomy.

Medgyes (1992) states that non-native speakers are unable to achieve native proficiency. He also considers that NESTs and non-NESTs have different ways of teaching the language. However, the author declares that “it does not follow from this [...] that non-native-speaking teachers are by definition less efficient.” (Medgyes, 1992: 340). Despite thinking that it is almost impossible for non-native speakers to achieve the language competence of a native speaker, this fact does not make non-native teachers of English worse than native teachers of English, since in ELT there are several factors that a good teacher needs to possess.

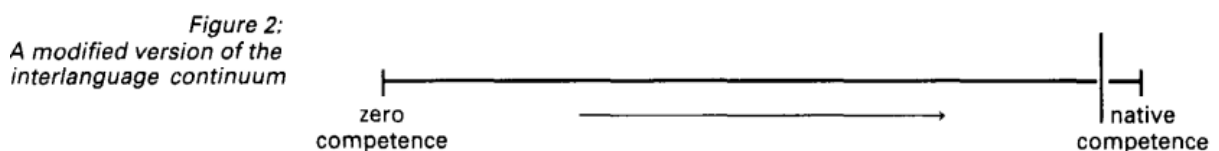
Medgyes uses a system called “interlanguage continuum” to classify the speakers according to their level of English. The continuum for a native speaker would be the one expressed in the following figure from Medgyes’s (1992) article:



Source: Medgyes, 1992: 341

Figure 1: The interlanguage continuum by Medgyes

The continuum for a non-native speaker would differ. Since the author considers they cannot achieve near-native proficiency, he places a barrier before achieving it. Their continuum would be the following:



Source: Medgyes, 1992: 342

Figure 2: A modified version of the interlanguage continuum by Medgyes

He defends that a very small number of LX speakers can achieve native proficiency. He calls these few cases “near-native speakers” (Medgyes, 1992: 342). An example is Joseph Conrad, who was born in Ukraine and wrote novels in English.

The reason that the author gives for this impossibility for non-natives to achieve native competence is that LX speakers imitate how natives use language; they are “norm-dependent” (Medgyes, 1992: 343). The language competence of non-natives cannot be creative because they are used to imitate what they hear. As the author puts it, “we are more capable in our first language [...]. We are capable of reaching our communicative goals more directly and with less effort.” (Medgyes, 1990)

In his research, Medgyes (1992) presented a hypothetical situation regarding NESTs and non-NESTs to a group of approximately 60 important ELT specialists in the ELT Journal 45th Anniversary Symposium (London, October 1991). The situation was the following:

‘Suppose you were the principal of a commercial ELT school in Britain. Who would you employ?’

- a. I would employ only native speakers, even if they were not qualified EFL teachers.
- b. I would prefer to employ native-speaking EFL teachers, but if hard pressed I would choose a qualified non-native rather than a native without EFL qualifications.
- c. The native/non-native issue would not be a selection criterion (provided the non-native-speaking EFL teacher was a highly proficient speaker of English).

Source: Medgyes, 1992: 343

Figure 3: Hypothetical hiring situation by Medgyes

While option A received 0 votes, about 2 thirds of the participants voted option B and the other third voted option C. These results show that while all the participants agreed that native speakers without ELT qualifications would never be better than NESTs and non-NESTs, most of them believed that NESTs are better for ELT, to the extent that they

would have to be pressed in order to hire non-NESTs. Thus, in the year 1991 non-NESTs were in an unequal situation when looking for a job as teachers.

He continued his survey by asking them if they perceived differences between NESTs and non-NESTs in their way of teaching English. The results showed that 68% of the participants saw differences in language between the 2 groups.

Medgyes (1992) believes that language competence is the only area where non-NESTs are at a disadvantage regarding NESTs. He presents a list that shows the advantages that non-NESTs have. The main ones have to do with being students of English before becoming teachers, that is why they can serve as role models to their students; they can teach and explain the language successfully; they can predict problems that the students may have with aspects of the language; and they can empathize with their learning process. In addition, having the same L1 can benefit both students and teachers in that the former may feel more comfortable because they know they can switch to it if necessary. By seeing these advantages he determines that NESTs and non-NESTs have different qualities that balance their teaching abilities. Therefore, he concludes that the statement “The more proficient in English, the more efficient in the classroom” (Medgyes, 1992: 347) is not true and that the question presented in the title: “Who’s worth more: a native or a non-native?”, as he puts it, “does not make sense” (Medgyes, 1992: 347).

Medgyes (1992) advises NESTs to learn foreign languages, especially from the countries they are teaching in, so they can achieve some of the skills that only non-NESTs have.

The conclusion that the author comes to is that the different ways of teaching of NESTs and non-NESTs are due to their different language backgrounds. Also, being a native speaker does not determine teaching effectiveness. Schools should hire both NESTs and non-NESTs at an equal level.

According to the author: “The ideal NEST is the one who has achieved a high degree of proficiency in the learners’ mother tongue” (Medgyes, 1992: 348)

“The ideal non-NEST is the one who has achieved near-native proficiency” (Medgyes, 1992: 349)

2.4.2 Perceptions of NESTs and non-NESTs by students

Turning to a more current study about NESTs and non-NESTs, we focus on the article by Ian Walkinshaw and Duongthi Hoang Oanh: *Native and Non-Native English Language Teachers: Student Perceptions in Vietnam and Japan* (2014), to see how students perceive both groups of teachers.

Generally, NESTs are perceived to be the ideal teachers of English. This is emphasized in East Asia, where they believe that “their speech is held up as the gold standard of grammatical correctness and perfect pronunciation” (cf. Wang, 2012). On the other hand, non-NESTs are considered to be “deficient speakers of the language” (Walkinshaw and Hoang Oanh, 2014: 1) with low speaking skills and limitations. That is why the authors intended to find out if those beliefs were present in the classroom by asking the participants about the advantages and disadvantages of NESTs and non-NESTs.

In other studies such as the one carried out by Mahboob’s (2003), surveying 32 students in an English program in a college from the US, students believed that NESTs had: “good oral skills”, “a wide vocabulary” and “knowledge about their own culture” (Walkinshaw & Hoang Oanh, 2014: 2). However, they were believed to not be able to explain grammatical items successfully and students also thought that they had “little language learning experience and lacked knowledge about language teaching methodology.” (Walkinshaw & Hoang Oanh, 2014: 2-3). Regarding the non-NESTs counterpart, students admired them for “their own experience as language learners, their strict

adherence to methodology and their hard work” (Walkinshaw & Hoang Oanh, 2014: 3). Nevertheless, they also reported that non-NESTs had lower speaking skills and lacked knowledge of the “Western cultures” (Walkinshaw & Hoang Oanh, 2014: 3).

A study carried out in Hungary by Benke and Medgyes (2005), surveying 422 learners of English, showed that they thought NESTs were “friendly, good models for imitation and skilled at encouraging learners to speak.” (Walkinshaw & Hoang Oanh, 2014: 3). Despite this, they stated that it was difficult for them to understand NESTs and that the divergences between the teacher and students’ culture and language made the learning process more difficult. Regarding non-NESTs, the students explained that they assigned “a lot of homework, planned their lessons thoroughly, prepared students well for exams, and consistently checked for errors”. (Walkinshaw & Hoang Oanh, 2014: 3). They added that non-NESTs can code-switch to their common L1 to explain difficult grammatical items and they tend to have a wider knowledge of grammar in comparison with NESTs. In addition, Lasagabaster and Sierra’s (2005) research carried out in a University from the Basque Country showed that students preferred NESTs when learning pronunciation, speaking and listening, and they preferred non-NESTs for lexis and grammar.

Going back to Walkinshaw and Hoang Oanh’s (2014) study, they surveyed 2 different groups of English learners aged less than 24 years old. The first group was formed by 38 women and 12 men, all of them “Vietnamese Learners of English (VLEs)” (Walkinshaw & Hoang Oanh, 2014: 4). VLEs had NESTs and non-NESTs as teachers. The second group was formed by 50 female Japanese Learners of English (JLEs) taking intermediate and advanced courses. Their teachers were 6 NESTs and 4 Japanese non-NESTs.

The questions that the researchers presented asked them about the advantages and disadvantages of having NESTs and non-NESTs. The results showed that the main

advantage attributed to NESTs was the contact with native pronunciation. Concurrently, they viewed the pronunciation of non-NESTs as a disadvantage. However, the 2 groups believed that it was easier to communicate with non-NESTs, because they have the same cultural background. Both groups also favored non-NESTs in being able to explain linguistic aspects more clearly. A student explained that:

- “Sometimes they can’t answer my questions about grammar because these kinds of things are too natural for them, and they don’t know why.” (JLE 44) [referring to NESTs] (Walkinshaw & Hoang Oanh, 2014: 7)

The 34% of VLEs and the 14% of JLEs felt comforted that their non-NESTs could code-switch to their common L1 if needed. The 42% of VLEs and the 22% of JLEs expressed that NESTs were unaware of socio-cultural and socio-linguistic aspects of the place they were living in. Students expressed their thoughts on this matter:

- “They have different values and communication styles. I sometimes feel that there are some misunderstandings and miscommunications between students and teachers.” (JLE 1) (Walkinshaw & Hoang Oanh, 2014: 6)

Several respondents believed that NESTs and non-NESTs complemented each other because of the different advantages that they can offer. Some of them expressed that:

- “[T]he learner in low level should learn with non-native speaker in order to understand well[.] [W]hen they are in advanced level, learning with native-speaker teacher is the best choice.” (VLE 46) (Walkinshaw & Hoang Oanh, 2014: 7)

The conclusion that the authors came to was that there is still a lot of inequality between NESTs and non-NESTs, which is contradictory with the fact that there are more non-NESTs than NESTs. The former have unequal chances to obtain job opportunities if they

have to compete with NESTs. According to Young & Walsh (2010), Asia is one of the countries where the native speaker is still idealized, especially the American English speaker.

2.5 Foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA)

Foreign language speaking anxiety is a common phenomenon that learners of English as a second language (ESL) may experience. We are going to focus on the article written by HAN, Tanriöver and Şahan in 2016, named *EFL Students' and Teachers' Attitudes toward Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety: A look at NESTs and Non-NESTs*. The term FLSA was first used in 1978 by Scovel. It is thought that foreign language speaking can cause anxiety because it involves several cognitive tasks that are carried out at the same time. Also, several factors such as class environment, the teacher(s), personal traits, classmates, etc. can influence the appearance of FLSA.

According to Young (1991) there are 6 factors that can trigger foreign language speaking anxiety: “personal and interpersonal anxieties, instructor beliefs about language teaching, learner beliefs about language learning, classroom procedures, instructor-learner interactions and testing” (Young, 1991).

Aida (1994), Ngidi & Siberya (2003) and Sarıgül (2000), observed that female EFL students tend to be more anxious than male students because of culture and society.

The authors presented 4 research questions, asking if the L1 of teachers can influence FLSA, if gender influences FLSA, and how students and teachers feel about FLSA.

These questions were asked to 48 engineering students (33 males and 15 females) of a university in Turkey, whose English levels were A1, A2, B1 and B2. They were divided

into 4 different classes. 2 classes were taught by NESTs (a male and a female) and the remaining 2 were taught by non-NESTs (a male and a female).

The results showed that both in the classes taught by NESTs and the ones taught by non-NESTs, male and female students had similar attitudes towards FLSA. These findings do not agree with what Aida (1994), Ngidi & Siberya (2003) and Sarigül (2000) found about females being more prone to suffer from FLSA. Overall, the results demonstrated that the L1 of the teachers does not trigger the appearance of FLSA on their students.

On the interviews to 12 participants, to the question “When do the students experience FLSA?” (HAN, Tanriöver & Şahan, 2016: 6), they explained that it mainly depends on the “difficulty of English, the fear of making mistakes and teacher attitudes” (HAN, Tanriöver & Şahan, 2016: 6). A number of 6 out of 12 students believed English was easy to speak if “they were motivated instrumentally”, if “teachers created positive learning environments and had constructive attitudes” and if they had “opportunities to participate in speaking practice at school” (HAN, Tanriöver & Şahan, 2016: 6). The other 6 students believed English was difficult because of the “limited exposure to the language’s culture”, the “unsuccessful foreign language teaching policies” at school, the “fear of making mistakes” and “self-confidence problems” (HAN, Tanriöver & Şahan, 2016: 6).

To the question “What do the students identify as the sources of FLSA?” (HAN, Tanriöver & Şahan, 2016: 6), several students explained that:

- **Student A:** “I feel anxious and worried while speaking English [...] with the fear of making mistakes, and I feel extra stressed when my friends correct me [...].” (Researcher’s translation) (HAN, Tanriöver & Şahan, 2016: 6)

- **Student C:** “I feel pretty comfortable in my speaking classroom and I am not afraid of making mistakes, and I think I learn from my mistakes and the feedback [...]” (Researcher’s translation) (HAN, Tanriöver & Şahan, 2016: 6)

When students were asked about the significance of the teacher’s language background affecting their FLSA, 5 of them stated that they preferred a Turkish teacher, while the other 5 stated that they preferred an American teacher. They explained:

- **Student E:** “I would like to see an American teacher in the speaking course. When speaking with the teacher, I have to force myself to keep the conversation in English even if I feel stuck and anxious.” (Researcher’s translation) (HAN, Tanriöver & Şahan, 2016: 7)
- **Student F:** “I enjoy being lectured by a Turkish teacher in the speaking class because I can get better and more comprehensible [...] and shift to L1 whenever we need.” (Researcher’s translation) (HAN, Tanriöver & Şahan, 2016: 7)

In the interviews with teachers, they all agreed that being afraid of making mistakes was an important factor to cause FLSA. They also agreed on the importance of motivating the students. In addition, American teachers noticed that most students felt anxious when meeting a native speaker and speaking to them for the first time. They believed that the little exposure that students had to English made it difficult to construct sentences.

The authors concluded that the students perceived the classes of non-NESTs and NESTs in a similar way. They also determined that gender was not a triggering factor for FLSA. The main causes for FLSA were “peer pressure” and “fear of making mistakes” (HAN, Tanriöver & Şahan, 2016: 8). Most participants agreed on the necessity to create an adequate class environment, the normalization of making mistakes and the avoidance of peer-correction.

3. Methodology

In order to approach the ideology that students have of NESTs and non-NESTs, the practical part was carried out by means of a survey to students of an English school from a small city near Tarragona. Their age rank is between 10 and 16 years, considering that they have different levels of the language. This project was authorized by the URV ethics committee with the code: CEIPSA-2022-TFG-0087.

The teaching methodology that this English school follows consists of speaking English 100% of the time. The three teachers working in the school are non-NESTs, but they always speak English with their students. Therefore, the youngest students tend to believe that they are NESTs. In contrast, the older students are aware that the teachers are not native speakers. Nevertheless, they are used to speaking English in the classroom.

The survey contained 10 questions regarding the students' opinions of NESTs and non-NESTs. It was created via Google Forms and printed, as some students did not have a mobile phone or a computer to complete the survey. I attended the different groups of students and handed the form so they could answer and I could explain to them the difference between NESTs and non-NESTs, since some of the participants did not know these concepts. The questions were in Catalan because some students do not have the proficiency to answer in English due to their young age. After collecting all the data, I transferred the answers to Google Forms in order to see the statistics of the results.

The questions presented in the form were the following:

1. Do you think that a native teacher is better than a non-native teacher?
2. What are the benefits of having a native teacher?
3. Do you think it is more difficult to understand a native teacher of English than a non-native one?

4. Being native makes a person a good teacher?
5. Would you like to speak English like a native person?
6. Speaking English in front of my classmates makes me anxious.
7. I feel ashamed of my English accent because it sounds Catalan.
8. I feel more comfortable writing in English than speaking in English.
9. Do you feel more comfortable with a non-native teacher?
10. Why?

The survey was anonymous to respect both the students' and the school's privacy. The students were asked to mention their gender, as it was a relevant variable in the studies mentioned in the theoretical framework. They were also asked to mention their age, which, although the researchers did not give it much importance to, I considered it could be interesting to observe what they think depending on their age.

4. Analysis

The data for the practical part was obtained from Google Forms and it was analyzed quantitatively, by using the percentages generated automatically on each question. A total number of 29 students took part in the survey, 17 of which were girls (58.6%), and the remaining 12 were boys (41.4%). The predominating age rank was 13 years old, with 9 participants; followed by 10 and 11 years old with 6 participants, respectively. There were 3 participants who were 12 years old, 1 participant who was 14 years old, 2 participants who were 15 years old and 2 participants who were 16 years old.

1. Do you think that a native teacher is better than a non-native teacher?

On the first question asked in the survey, 72.4% of the students answered that native teachers are not better than non-native teachers, while the other 27.6% believed they are.

The results suggest that most students consider that the L1 of teachers does not mean superiority in teaching the language.

Do you think that a native teacher is better than a non-native teacher?
29 answers

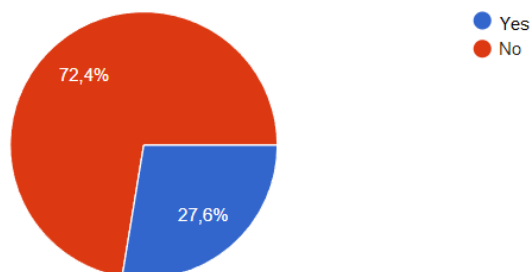


Figure 4: Native teachers vs. non-native teachers

2. What are the benefits of having a native teacher?

In the second question, the students were asked about the advantages of having a NEST. They could choose more than one answer. The options given had to do with the aspects of pronunciation, vocabulary, culture and forcing oneself to speak English all the time. Also, they could add another aspect that they considered important about having a NEST, but none of the students mentioned any other aspects apart from the options of the question. The most voted option was “their pronunciation is perfect”, 20 out of 29 students (69%) voted for it. The option of forcing oneself to speak English all the time also got many votes: 19 (65.5%). The option of learning more things about the culture of English-speaking countries was the least voted one, with 13 votes out of 29 students (44.8%), which suggests that students may give more importance to language and pronunciation than to culture when learning an LX.

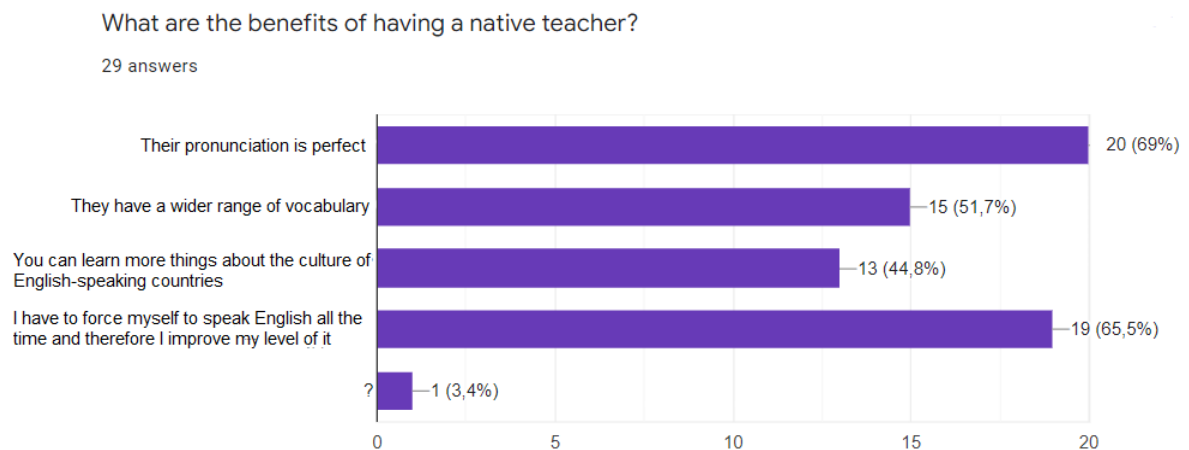


Figure 5: Benefits of having a NEST

3. Do you think it is more difficult to understand a native teacher of English than a non-native one?

A percentage of 37.9% of participants believed that it is more difficult to understand a NEST than a non-NEST. However, many of them (44.8%) expressed that it depended on the person. Also, 17.2% of students answered that it is not more difficult to understand NESTs. These results show that a high number of students do not generalize and are aware that all English people do not speak in the same way, there are many things to take into account (accent, diction, speaking speed, etc.). Teachers of foreign languages tend to speak slowly and to exaggerate some sounds to be more easily understood by students.

Do you think it is more difficult to understand a native English teacher than a non-native English teacher?

29 answers

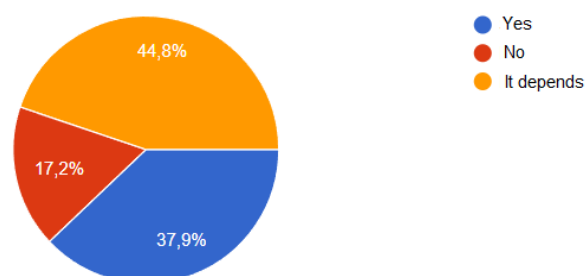


Figure 6: Difficulty of understanding a NEST

4. Being native makes a person a good teacher?

The answers to this question showed that almost all the students participating on the survey believe that language competence is not enough to be a good teacher. Only 1 student out of 29 answered that having English proficiency means being a good teacher. Regarding the other students, 14 of them (48.3%) voted for the option “it has nothing to do with it” and the remaining 14 (48.3%) voted for the option “apart from English proficiency there are other skills needed in order to be a good teacher”. It is very positive that they value other things apart from English proficiency from their teachers.

Being native makes a person a good teacher?

29 answers

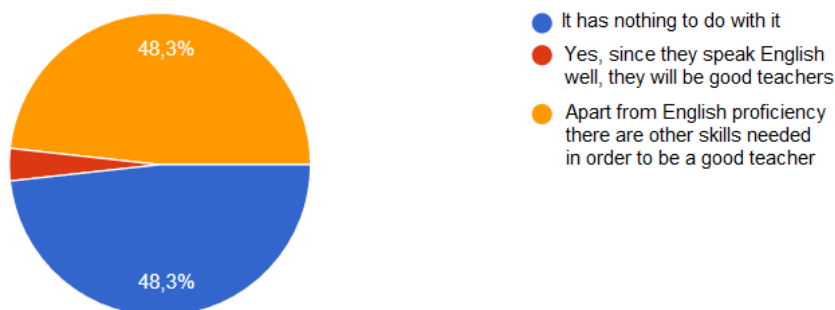


Figure 7: The condition of being native equals successful teaching?

5. Would you like to speak English like a native person?

On this question, a percentage of 69% of students (20 out of 29) answered that they would like to sound like a native person when speaking English. Only 13.8% (4 students out of 29) answered that they did not want to sound like a native speaker of English, and the remaining 17.2% (5 students out of 29) answered that they did not mind. These responses suggest that most students may want to achieve a very high level of English, maybe even near-native fluency.

Would you like to speak English like a native person?
29 answers

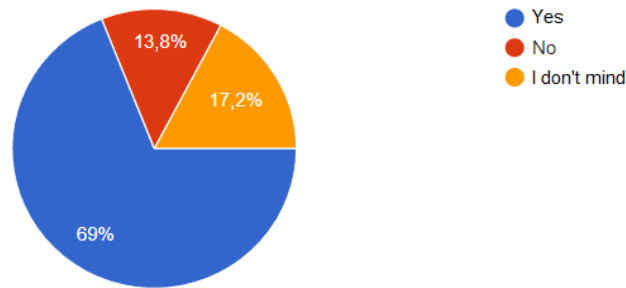


Figure 8: Near-native accent

6. Speaking English in front of my classmates makes me anxious.

This question focuses on foreign language speaking anxiety (FLSA) to see how this phenomenon affects the students of this English School. Although the answers are quite distributed, they show that the majority of students experience some degree of FLSA. The most voted options are “sometimes” (31%) and “often” (27.6%). Only 5 students out of 29 (17.2%) claim that they do not experience FLSA at all; 4 students (13.8%) stated that they usually experience it, and 3 students (10.3%) answered that they experience it a lot. These results are understandable since quite a lot of people struggle when speaking in an LX in front of others, especially if their level of the language is not proficient.

Speaking English in front of my classmates makes me anxious.
29 answers

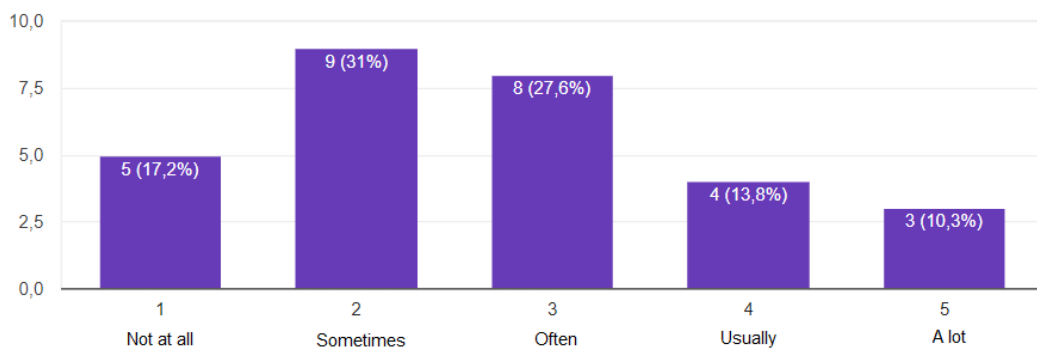


Figure 9: Foreign language speaking anxiety in the classroom

7. I feel ashamed of my English accent because it sounds Catalan.

This question also has to do with FLSA. It is a good sign that the majority of students (20 out of 29) do not feel ashamed or usually do not feel ashamed of their English accent. It is interesting to compare it with question 5 (“Would you like to speak English like a native person?”), since the big majority of them would like to sound native. However, although their accent sounds Catalan they do not feel ashamed of it. It also implies that they believe they can achieve near-native pronunciation with a non-NEST, which suggests that they consider them good language models. It is also interesting to compare it with question 6 (“Speaking English in front of my classmates makes me anxious.”), since most of the students answered that they experience some level of FLSA. They feel anxious when speaking English in front of others but, as expressed in this question, the majority of them do not feel ashamed of their accent. One reason could be that students have very similar accents, and they sound Catalan because it is the sound system they are used to.

8. I feel more comfortable writing in English than speaking in English.

This question also asks them about FLSA indirectly, since if they prefer to write in English rather than to speak it, it may be due to the anxiety or the nervousness that speaking an LX in front of others can cause to some students. The answers are quite varied. They show that 55.2% of the participants sometimes prefer to write in English than to speak it. A percentage of 27.6% said that they do prefer to write it rather than to speak it, and the remaining 17.2% (only 5 students out of 29) stated that they do not prefer to write in English than to speak it.

I feel more comfortable writing in English than speaking in English.

29 answers

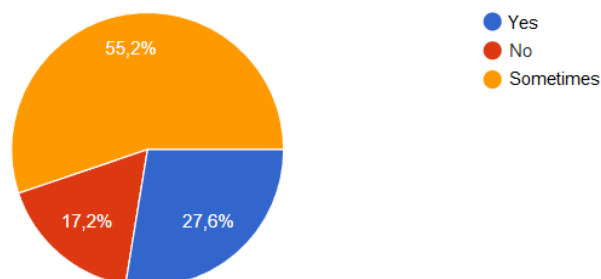


Figure 10: Confidence in writing and speaking

9. Do you feel more comfortable with a non-native teacher?

Most participants (58.6%) answered that they do feel more comfortable with a non-NEST. Only 1 student out of 29 (3.4%) answered that they do not feel more comfortable with a non-NEST, and the remaining 37.9% answered that they do not mind. On the next question they were asked why they had chosen the previous answer.

Do you feel more comfortable with a non-native teacher?

29 answers

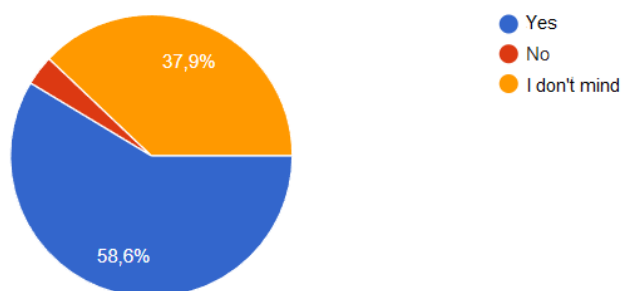


Figure 11: Who do students feel more comfortable with?

10. Why?

As reasons to what they responded the previous question, some students stated the following ones. They answered in Catalan and I translated their answers to English since, as it has been mentioned before, some students do not have the proficiency to express themselves in English due to their young age.

- “I don’t care, as long as I learn English it’s okay.” (Student)
- “I believe that even if they are natives or non-natives I should be able to understand them and they should be able to understand me equally.” (Student)
- “Because feeling comfortable depends on the way they are and how they explain the lesson.” (Student)
- “Because both (NEST and non-NEST) speak the same language (English).” (Student)
- “If I have a doubt, a native teacher can’t explain it to me in Catalan.” (Student)
- “Because if I don’t know how to say something in English I can say it in Catalan and the teacher will understand me.” (Student)
- “Because if I speak my language (Catalan) they can talk to me, help me and maybe explain it better if I don’t understand something.” (Student)
- “Because with a native teacher I feel a little bit shy, while with a non-native one I feel more comfortable because they can explain everything to me in Catalan.” (Student)

It is curious to observe that quite a lot of responses say that if they do not understand something a non-NEST can explain it to them in Catalan, when their current teacher of English is a non-NEST that speaks 100% of the time in English. They may think of it in general terms, but the methodology they are used to is monolingual.

What the answers suggest is that having the same language background as the teacher makes them comfortable and reassured. However, other students explain that they do not mind what nationality the teacher has as long as they learn English. They also mention that feeling comfortable depends on the person and not on the place their teacher was born in.

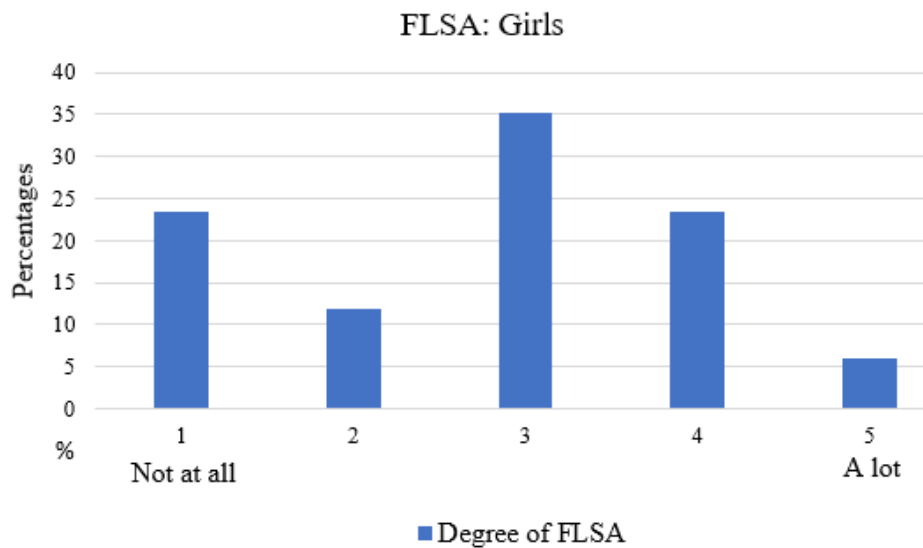


Figure 12: Speaking English in front of classmates: girls

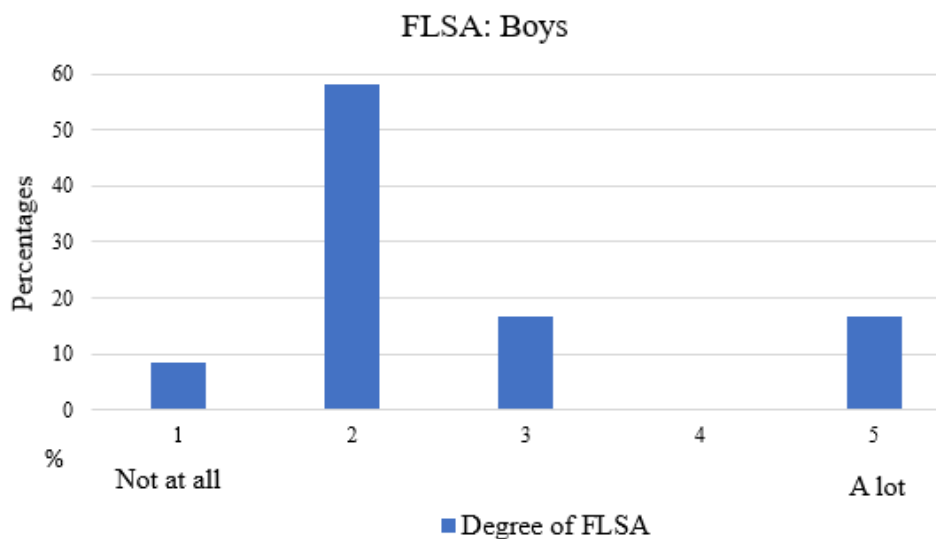


Figure 13: Speaking English in front of classmates: boys

In the studies related to FLSA of the theoretical framework, gender was an important variable to consider as Aida (1994), Ngidi & Siberya (2003) and Sarıgül (2000) found that girls tend to experience more FLSA than boys. Therefore, gender was observed to determine if the results from the authors mentioned were similar. To the statement “Speaking English in front of my classmates makes me anxious”, the most voted answer by girls was “often” (35.5% of votes) while the most voted one by boys was “sometimes”

(58.3%). The answers of the girls are quite varied: 23.5% voted that they did not feel anxiety at all, another 23.5% voted that they usually felt it and 5.9% voted that they experienced it a lot. Regarding the answers of the boys, they are not so varied: the most voted one is “sometimes” (58.3%). A percentage of 8.3% answered that they never experienced anxiety, 16.7% answered that they often felt FLSA, and another 16.7% answered that they experienced it a lot. Overall, although the responses are varied, the graphics show that girls do tend to experience a higher degree of FLSA as their answers are predominant between neutral and high levels of anxiety, while the answers of boys are predominant on low levels. The results agree with what Aida (1994), Ngidi & Siberya (2003) and Sarigül (2000) found in their research. Nevertheless, it must be considered that there was a higher number of girls participating in the study (17) than boys (12).

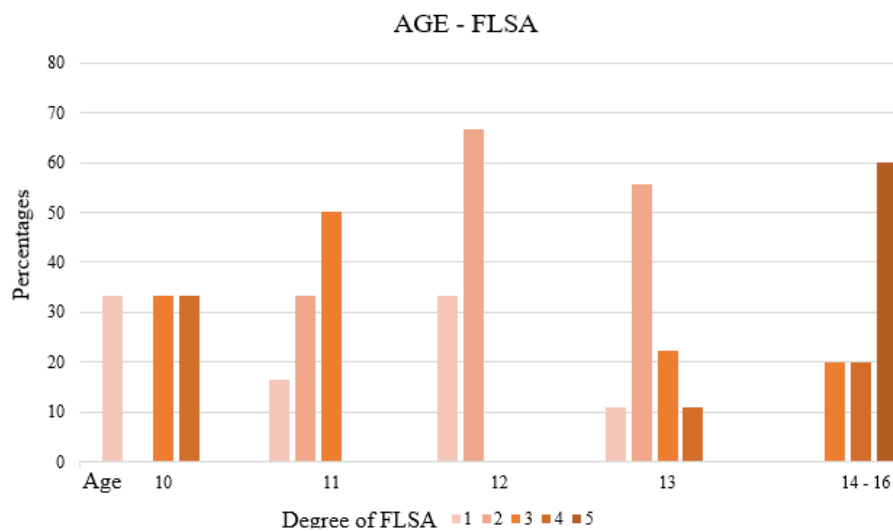


Figure 14: Speaking English in front of classmates: age

Although age was not a variable mentioned in the studies from the theoretical framework, in this project it was interesting to observe if during the transition from 10 years old to 16 years old there was a change in how students experienced FLSA. Since there was only 1 student who was 14 years old, 2 who were 15 years old and 1 who was 16, they were grouped together to represent the oldest participants of the survey. It can be observed that

in the ages of 10, 11, 12 and 13 years old the participants did not experience high levels of anxiety, according to their responses to the statement “Speaking English in front of my classmates makes me anxious”. The younger students are between low and neutral levels of FLSA. However, in the group of 14-16 years old: 20% of them voted “often”, 20% voted “usually” and 60% voted “a lot”. This shows that the older they are, the more FLSA they experience.

One of the research questions that this project meant to approach was “do students prefer a NEST or a non-NEST?”. According to the results presented, the big majority of participants (72.4%) do not believe that NESTs are better than non-NESTs. In addition, more than a half of the participants (58.6%) stated that they feel more comfortable with non-NESTs.

When we look into the open-ended question number 10 (“Why?”, or “Why not?”, they feel more comfortable with non-NESTs), in general, students worry about not understanding the accent of a NEST and that if they are unable to follow the class, they cannot switch to their L1. However, some students expressed that they should be able to understand both NESTs and non-NESTs equally since their classes are 100% in English. It could be argued that most young students are critical thinkers who believe that teachers need to have other qualities apart from a good level of English in order to do a good job, such as the ability to encourage them to speak in English and being able to explain grammar successfully (since researchers Ian Walkinshaw and Duongthi Hoang Oanh (2014) state that the most common “fault” of NESTs is that they do not have enough grammar knowledge).

Results also show that 69% of students would like to sound native-like, and it is implied that they believe that with a non-NEST they can learn to pronounce like a native person

because of what some of the students say in question 10: they think both NESTs and non-NESTs can be good teachers and teach them English in a similar way. Therefore, this survey shows that the stereotype that NESTs are better teachers only because they are L1 speakers of English is not present among these young students of ESL. To the question “Being native makes a person a good teacher?”, 28 out of 29 students chose the answers “it has nothing to do with it” or “apart from language proficiency, there are other skills that teachers need to possess”.

5. Discussion

Before starting to answer the question with each group of students, I explained to them the difference between NEST and non-NEST. In order for them to understand, I used myself as an example of a non-NEST. Therefore, this fact may have influenced their answers if they thought of me particularly when they thought of a non-NEST.

In all the studies mentioned in the theoretical framework about NESTs and non-NESTs, researchers found that people consider NESTs beneficial for the learning process of students because of their pronunciation. Most participants in the studies also believed that pronunciation was a strength of NESTs. In Walkinshaw and Hoang Oanh’s (2014) article, participants even considered a disadvantage to have a non-NEST due to their pronunciation.

In the survey carried out for this project, 20 out of 29 students believed pronunciation was an advantage of having a NEST. However, 37.9% of participants considered it more difficult to understand NESTs than non-NESTs, which coincides with what the participants in the study by Benke and Medgyes (2005) said. Nevertheless, 44.8% of the students in the survey for this project believed that the difficulty of understanding a NEST depends on the person rather than on their place of birth.

Half of the participants in the survey considered that teachers need to have more qualities than only language proficiency. This agrees with what Mahboob (2003) found in his research: students valued non-NESTs because they were experienced language learners and knew and followed the methodology. Also, Benke and Medgyes's (2005) respondents valued non-NESTs for their organization, for preparing students successfully, for their expertise in grammar and for being able to code-switch. Walkinshaw and Hoang Oanh (2014) found that they were valued for being easier to communicate with (because of the common cultural background) and for their knowledge of grammar. The students taking part in this survey mainly valued having the same language background as the teacher. Therefore, these responses, together with the ones from the studies mentioned in the theoretical framework, show that students value other things in teachers apart from English proficiency, such as their personality and being able to encourage students to speak English.

More than a half of the students (58.6%) stated that they feel more comfortable with non-NESTs. The main reason was that if they did not understand something in English they could switch to Catalan. Also, they seemed to be afraid of having a doubt with a NEST and they not being able to understand and help them. A student from the survey explained on the last question that she would be shier if she had a NEST. This coincides with Benke and Medgyes (2005), and Walkinshaw and Hoang Oanh's (2014) findings: their participants also considered that they were more comfortable with non-NESTs since they could code-switch if they needed to. The fact of knowing that they have the option to code-switch, even if they do not have to use it, seems to make them feel secure and comfortable with their teachers.

Regarding the questions about FLSA, the students were asked if they felt anxious when speaking English in front of their classmates. The most voted responses were “sometimes” (31%) and “often” (27.6%). A percentage of 17.2% of students voted “not at all”, 13.8% voted “usually” and 10.3% voted “a lot”. The factors that the researchers described as triggering for FLSA that can be attributed to these students are mainly “personal anxieties” and “instructor-learner interactions” (Young, 1991) since these are the main worries that they express on the last question of the survey: they talked about having the same L1 as an advantage to make communication between student and teacher easier and feeling shier if they were with a NEST.

To the statement “I feel ashamed of my English accent because it sounds Catalan.”, the most voted answers were “not at all” (31%) and “sometimes” (37.9%). The answers “usually” and “a lot” only received 6.9% of votes each. This shows that students are not insecure of their accent and are aware that as learners of the language their accent cannot be perfect (yet). In fact, 69% of them would like to sound like a native speaker, which implies that they would like to achieve near-native proficiency.

In the studies mentioned in the theoretical framework, gender was a variable that the authors considered important when doing research on FLSA. According to Aida (1994), Ngidi & Siberya (2003) and Sarıgül (2000), girls tend to suffer more from FLSA than boys. However, HAN, Tanriöver & Şahan (2016) found that both girls and boys had similar attitudes towards FLSA and concluded that gender was not a variable that caused this condition. Concerning the question about anxiety when speaking in front of the classmates in this survey, the most voted answer by girls was “often” (35.5% of votes), while the most voted one by boys was “sometimes” (58.3% of votes). Even though the answers of girls were varied, figure 12 showed that girls suffered higher levels of FLSA

in comparison to boys. Aida (1994), Ngidi & Siberya (2003) and Sarigül (2000) explain that this difference was probably because of “cultural and societal characteristics” (Aida (1994), Ngidi & Siberya (2003) and Sarigül (2000)). It is true that girls are usually more exposed to criticism only because of their condition of being girls. Therefore, this could make them feel more anxious than boys when speaking in front of their classmates.

In the question about being ashamed because of the Catalan accent when speaking English, the answer most voted by girls was “sometimes” (47.1% of votes), while the most voted one by boys was “not at all” (41.7% of votes). According to these results, it is also shown that girls are slightly more prone to suffer from FLSA.

Age was another variable that although the researchers of the theoretical framework did not give special importance to, I believed it might be of interest to consider. Since there was an age rank from 10 years old to 16 years old, it could be observed if FLSA was present at an early age, or if it grew as students entered the adolescent years.

Although the oldest participants were numerically inferior, in the ages of 14, 15 and 16 all the participants voted high degrees of FLSA, while the younger ones voted low and neutral levels. Adolescence could be the reason why they experience more FLSA at these ages. It is a phase known for the insecurities that arise; teenagers tend to worry about what others think about them, and speaking in a language that is not their L1 can make them feel insecure and afraid of not doing it properly.

On question 9 of the survey, which asked the students if they felt more comfortable with a non-NEST than with a NEST and asked them to explain why (question 10), only 1 student voted the option “no”. A percentage of 58.6% of the participants voted “yes” and the remaining 37.9% voted “I don’t mind”. This shows that most of them prefer to have a non-native teacher. However, quite a lot of students do not have a preference in having

a non-NEST or a NEST. They do not generalize on stereotypes about the whole group of teachers; they consider that it depends on how every person is.

6. Conclusions

The research questions that this project meant to approach were: 1) do students prefer a NEST or a non-NEST as a teacher?; and 2) do students suffer from foreign language speaking anxiety? The data obtained in the survey for the practical part showed similar results to the studies mentioned in the theoretical framework. Students tend to be more comfortable with non-NESTs due to their common linguistic background. The survey also showed that some participants are not conditioned by the L1 of their teachers but by how they are and how they teach.

The theoretical framework covered the problematic of the dichotomy of native / non-native speaker, which excluded many people. The terms most accepted and used nowadays are L1 - LX, which stand for first language acquired and the language(s) acquired after the first language, respectively. English as an International Language was also covered to explain the globalization of English. It showed that LX speakers of English should feel entitled to use this variety of English since it was created by them.

In connection to my first research question, it has been seen that NESTs and non-NESTs have different qualities that are beneficial for students: NESTs have native English proficiency and non-NESTs are able to explain grammar thoroughly. This project has found that the vast majority of the participants do not consider NESTs to be better than non-NESTs. Most of them also stated that they are more comfortable with non-NESTs because of their common L1. Some students seemed to value how the teacher is rather than their place of birth.

In connection to my second research question, foreign language speaking anxiety was also an important issue to comment on as it affects at some level most students of ESL. Teachers should be aware of it and try to prevent students from experiencing it to the extent possible. Girls were observed to have a higher degree of FLSA. In addition, teenagers seem to suffer more from it than younger students. Therefore, gender and adolescence are factors that trigger the appearance or the increase of FLSA. Future research should look at the reasons why female students suffer more from FLSA and what happens around adolescence that makes students more anxious when it comes to speaking English.

There are certain limitations to this study. First, the age of the students that participated in the survey since they are very young and probably do not have a strong opinion yet. Second, the number of participants is rather limited, but they represent most of the students of the English school that was investigated.

In conclusion, NESTs and non-NESTs are equally capable of teaching English properly since native English proficiency does not assure successful teaching of the language. There are other aspects that characterize a good teacher, such as their attitude with students and their intelligibility.

This project offers food for thought: why do we still have natives as models when in the world there are many contexts where English is spoken without native presence? Should we teach English as an International Language instead of focusing on only one variety of English? To what degree are schools and teachers responsible to cause students FLSA? Should schools and teachers reconsider their methods to prevent FLSA? Do girls suffer more from FLSA because of society, or are there other factors involved?

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