
Teacher Origin and Its Influence on Thai Students' English Proficiency and Cross-Cultural Competence

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ABSTRACT: This study addresses the underexplored dynamics among local Thai teachers, native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), and foreign non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) in Thai English education. Conducted with 30 English majors at a southern Thai university, this phenomenological qualitative study used reflective essays and thematic analysis. Four themes emerged: Thai and NNESTs were preferred for grammar and accuracy and fostered student confidence, while NESTs were preferred for pronunciation and speaking skills. Additionally, exposure to diverse teachers enhanced cultural and communicative competence. Findings revealed the complexity of language learning experiences and unique contributions of each teacher type to student proficiency and satisfaction.

KEYWORDS: EFL students, English learning, NESTs, NNESTs, Thai teachers

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The influence of teacher origin on English language education has garnered significant scholarly attention, particularly in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), with research exploring the nuanced interplay between

native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs). Empirical evidence suggests that students often perceive both groups as equally effective, with no marked disparities in attitudes or motivational impact (Aslan & Thompson, 2017; Rasyid et al., 2023). However, certain studies indicated a marginal preference for NESTs, contingent upon variables such as class format and supplementary exposure to English outside formal instruction (Pae, 2017). Each group brings distinct strengths to the educational landscape, which shape their professional well-being and enhance pedagogical outcomes (Deng et al., 2023), as evidenced by the positive correlation between students' language learning strategies and their perceptions of both NESTs and NNESTs (Deng, 2024). Furthermore, the discourse surrounding native-speakerism has been increasingly contested, with emerging scholarship advocating for a paradigm shift that prioritizes teaching expertise and competencies over the dichotomy of native versus non-native speaker status (Farrell, 2015; Wang & Fang, 2020), thereby challenging entrenched biases and fostering a more inclusive and meritocratic approach to English language instruction.

In the Thai EFL context, the significance of teacher origin extends deeply into academic and professional spheres, necessitating a robust and adaptable educational framework. The Thai English education system is characterized by a heterogeneous teaching workforce, comprising local Thai teachers, NESTs, and foreign NNESTs, each contributing distinct strengths to the pedagogical landscape (Comprendio & Savski, 2019). Local Thai teachers, who constitute most of the teaching force, predominantly emphasize grammatical accuracy and exam-oriented instruction, reflecting a traditional approach that aligns with national educational priorities (Hayes, 2010). Conversely, foreign teachers, particularly NESTs, are often recruited to address gaps in oral communication skills, such as speaking and listening, thereby enriching students' practical language proficiency (Ulla, 2018). However, recent scholarly discourse has increasingly advocated for the adoption of Global Englishes as a conceptual framework, underscoring the necessity of exposing learners to a multiplicity of accents, dialects, and cultural perspectives to prepare them for real-world interactions in an interconnected global society (Ambele & Boonsuk, 2021). Such an approach not only challenges the hegemony of standardized native-speaker norms but also fosters inclusivity and linguistic diversity, equipping students with the adaptive competencies required to navigate the complexities of modern communication.

The existing body of literature, nevertheless, has predominantly centered on binary comparisons between NESTs and NNESTs (e.g., Colmenero & Lasagabaster, 2023; Watson Todd & Pojanapunya, 2022), thereby neglecting the intricate interplay among local Thai teachers, NESTs, and foreign NNESTs in influencing students' English language acquisition and overall learning outcomes. To address this significant gap, the present study explores Thai students' perceptions regarding the impact of instruction from all three teacher groups on their English language proficiency while also investigating the factors that shape their preferences for specific teaching profiles in enhancing their English competencies. The research questions include:

1. How do Thai students perceive the influence of local Thai teachers, NESTs, and foreign NNESTs on their English proficiency?
2. What factors shape their preferences for specific teacher groups in enhancing English language development?

Theoretical Framework

This study expands upon Garrett's (2010) fundamental model, emphasizing the socially constructed nature of language evaluation within broader sociocultural, historical, and institutional contexts (Hernández-Campoy, 2005). Rather than treating students' attitudes and preferences as individual choices alone, this approach situates them as products of collective beliefs, cultural narratives, and educational practices. It provides a foundational lens for exploring language attitudes, but contemporary research insists that these attitudes are inseparable from broader issues of power, race, and linguistic imperialism within global English language teaching (ELT). In particular, the ideology of "nativeness" has long privileged whiteness and so-called standardized English varieties (e.g., American, British), marginalizing racialized and non-white speakers even when they possess high proficiency and pedagogical expertise (Phillipson, 1992). These raciolinguistic ideologies equate native speaker status with particular racial and phenotypic markers, rendering "whiteness" synonymous with linguistic authority in many EFL contexts—including Thailand—while positioning teachers of color, regardless of origin, as less legitimate (Comprendio & Savski, 2019; Watson Todd & Pojanapunya, 2022).

Pennycook (2017) and Canagarajah (2021) highlight how ELT is implicated in global flows of linguistic imperialism, reinforcing the dominance of Euro-American standards and undermining local varieties and multilingual expertise. Additionally, Kubota (2020) and Ruecker (2017) both critique the persistent exclusion of NNESTs—especially those from the Global South or non-white backgrounds—from full professional legitimacy, calling for a decolonization of ELT and a shift toward valuing diverse forms of linguistic and pedagogical competence. Flores and Rosa's (2015) raciolinguistic perspective underlines that perceptions of linguistic "correctness" and nativeness are always racialized and shaped by power relations. Such insights necessitate a critical re-examination of how "nativeness" is constructed in classroom discourse and hiring practices and how these constructions shape students' attitudes.

Recent investigations into language attitudes and ideologies across diverse ELT contexts reveal the enduring influence of native speaker ideology, which frequently privileges NESTs over NNESTs (Chang, 2016; Ren, 2018). Nevertheless, emerging research has documented positive perceptions of NNESTs, particularly within EFL settings, where their bilingual and bicultural competencies are increasingly valued (Viáfara González, 2020). Language ideologies not only shape the career trajectories and pedagogical approaches of "returnee teachers"—educators who have lived, studied, or worked abroad and

subsequently return to teach in their home countries (Christiansen et al., 2018)—but also inform accent preferences and classroom practices among educators (Mısır & Gürbüz, 2022). Furthermore, students' perceptions of English varieties are mediated by variables such as educational attainment, age, and cultural identity, reflecting the intricate relationship between sociocultural factors and linguistic evaluation (Chan, 2017; McKenzie & Gilmore, 2017). Although English as an international language has become an acknowledged concept, resistance to local varieties persists, often driven by concerns about communicative efficacy and the stigma associated with non-native forms (Wang & Gao, 2015).

Building on Garrett's (2010) theoretical lens, the present study investigates how students' attitudes toward local Thai teachers, NESTs, and foreign NNESTs are informed by wider discourses of race, language, and educational legitimacy. By doing so, it aims to contribute to the ongoing project of decolonizing English language teaching and promoting a more equitable and contextually relevant framework for teacher evaluation and language education. It examines how broader structures and ideologies inform the ways students navigate diverse teacher profiles in their English learning experiences.

Literature Review

The debate surrounding NESTs and NNESTs has been a central issue in ELT research, foregrounding questions of teacher effectiveness, learner attitudes, and the sociocultural dynamics that underpin language instruction. Students' preferences for different teacher types are shaped by factors such as class format, teaching style, teacher personality, and exposure to English outside the classroom (Bing et al., 2023; Colmenero & Lasagabaster, 2023). While NESTs are frequently perceived as ideal models for pronunciation and oral communication due to their linguistic fluency and cultural insight, NNESTs are valued for their pedagogical flexibility and their capacity to use learners' first language to enhance understanding—especially for students with limited proficiency (Anggoro & Nguyen, 2021; Sung, 2014; Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2014). The empathetic and supportive classroom environments fostered by NNESTs, grounded in shared linguistic and cultural experiences, have been shown to address learners' specific needs more effectively in certain contexts (Lemana et al., 2025). These preferences are dynamic and evolve as students' progress, highlighting the importance of a diverse teaching workforce.

Recent research has increasingly questioned the validity of maintaining a rigid NEST versus NNEST binary. Rather than privileging native-speaker status as an indicator of quality, scholars now advocate for an inclusive paradigm that recognizes the diverse competencies of teachers, regardless of linguistic background (Deng, 2024; Wang & Fang, 2020). Importantly, teacher adaptability, effective classroom management, and the creation of an inclusive environment are consistently cited as crucial to student engagement and learning outcomes, regardless of teacher origin (Chun, 2014). By prioritizing practical teaching

expertise, adaptability, and learner-centered methods, this shift challenges native-speakerism and promotes a more equitable and balanced framework for language education—one that leverages the complementary strengths of both NESTs and NNESTs to enrich student learning.

The Thai context, with its mix of local teachers, NESTs, and foreign NNESTs, offers a unique lens on these dynamics. Some studies reported a slight preference for NESTs in oral skills, while others identified no significant difference in student perceptions (Aslan & Thompson, 2017; Punyaporn, 2024; Rasyid et al., 2023). Recent scholarship in Thailand increasingly advocates the adoption of a Global Englishes framework, which promotes exposure to diverse accents, dialects, and cultural perspectives to foster adaptability and prepare students for global communication (Boonsuk et al., 2023). Studies reveal that teacher effectiveness in EFL settings cannot be reduced to the binary of native versus non-native status. Rather, it is the interplay of pedagogical expertise, cultural empathy, language proficiency, and contextual factors that shape students' preferences and learning trajectories. Thailand's multilingual classrooms, enriched by local teachers, NESTs, and foreign NNESTs, offer a compelling context for examining these dynamics and for rethinking what constitutes effective and equitable English language teaching.

Methodology

This study employed a phenomenological qualitative approach to explore and interpret the lived experiences of Thai university students regarding their interactions with local Thai teachers, NESTs, and NNESTs. Phenomenology was selected because it prioritizes participants' subjective experiences and seeks to uncover the meaning individuals ascribe to those experiences (Sohn et al., 2017). This approach is particularly suitable for educational research contexts where personal insights, perceptions, and emotions play a critical role in shaping learning outcomes and personal growth (Dodgson, 2023). Data are typically collected through rich, descriptive accounts—such as reflective essays or in-depth interviews—that invite participants to recount their experiences in their own words. A key feature of phenomenological research is “bracketing,” in which the researcher consciously sets aside preconceptions and prior knowledge to focus deeply on the participants' perspectives. In this study, bracketing was implemented through a process of reflective journaling and regular peer debriefing. Before and during data collection and analysis, the researchers maintained a reflexive journal to document and critically examine their assumptions, beliefs, and potential biases. Additionally, the researchers engaged in periodic discussions to further challenge and clarify their perspectives, thereby strengthening the trustworthiness of the findings.

By focusing on students' reflections, this study aims to provide nuanced insights into how different teacher profiles influence English language learning and the underlying factors that shape students' preferences. Unlike other qualitative

approaches, such as case studies or ethnography, which may examine broader systems, institutional practices, or cultural phenomena, phenomenology delves into the meaning-making processes of individuals as they encounter specific phenomena—in this case, learning with diverse English teacher groups. Through this lens, the research bridges individual experiences and broader pedagogical practices, offering a student-centered perspective on English language education in the Thai context.

Context and Participants

Thirty first-year English major students (male: 33.3%, female: 66.7%) from a university in southern Thailand agreed to participate in this study by completing a consent form. The use of pseudonyms was approved by each participant, with their full consent and understanding that their participation would not impact their academic grades or performance. They were selected using a purposive sampling technique to ensure that participants possess relevant experience with the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015). In addition, the study was able to capture various perspectives across different teaching profiles, thereby enhancing the diversity and richness of the data. These students had taken multiple English courses taught by a diverse range of instructors, including Thai teachers, NESTs from the UK and the USA, and NNESTs from non-English-speaking countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, China, India, and Bhutan.

The diversity in teacher backgrounds was essential for achieving the study's objective of exploring how distinct teacher profiles contribute to students' language development. Participants' prolonged exposure to all three teacher groups was ensured by the university's curriculum design, which required English majors to complete multiple courses 4-5 hours a week taught by local Thai teachers, NESTs, and foreign NNESTs throughout their first year. This systematic rotation allowed students to interact extensively with each teacher type, enabling them to form well-informed and reflective opinions about the strengths, limitations, and overall impact of each group on their language learning journey.

Data Collection

Data were collected through reflective essays, a method chosen for its capacity to elicit rich, introspective responses from participants. Reflective writing encourages individuals to analyze and articulate their thoughts more deeply than in traditional interviews, allowing for a more candid exploration of personal experiences (Avarzamani & Farahian, 2019). This method aligns with the phenomenological approach, which seeks to capture the essence of participants' lived experiences in their words. Participants were asked to write a reflective essay using a Google Form, in either Thai or English, according to their comfort and

preference. This linguistic flexibility ensured that students could express their thoughts comprehensively, without being constrained by language proficiency. The essay addressed two central themes: (1) the perceived impact of each teacher group on students' English language development and (2) the factors influencing their preferences for specific teacher profiles. The prompt provided to participants was as follows:

Reflect on your experiences studying English with local Thai teachers, native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), and foreign non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs). Please discuss how each teacher group has influenced your English language development. Additionally, explain the reasons behind your preferences for particular teacher profiles in improving your English skills.

The reflective essays were written within a one-hour time frame in a convenient room at the university, agreed upon by all participants. This duration was sufficient for participants to reflect deeply on their experiences while preventing cognitive fatigue. The focus on reflective writing was also intended to empower participants as active contributors to the research process, enabling them to critically assess their learning experiences and articulate their insights in a structured, open-ended format.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, which offers a systematic yet flexible approach to identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. This method was particularly suitable for the study because it allowed for both inductive and deductive coding, ensuring that anticipated themes related to teacher impact were captured while remaining open to emerging patterns that had not been previously considered.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process, the analysis was conducted as follows. First, all data were transcribed and thoroughly familiarized; this entailed repeated readings of the transcripts to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences. Second, initial codes were systematically generated, capturing both explicit statements—such as “NESTs helped improve my pronunciation”—and more implicit meanings, such as feelings of comfort when learning with local Thai teachers and foreign NNESTs due to shared language-learning backgrounds. Third, these codes were compiled into potential themes that represented broader patterns in the data. Fourth, the themes were reviewed and refined, ensuring that they accurately reflected the dataset as a whole and that each theme was internally coherent and distinct from others. Fifth, themes were defined and named, with subthemes developed to capture more nuanced aspects of students' attitudes and experiences. Finally, a comprehensive report was

produced, synthesizing the findings into a coherent narrative that moved beyond surface description to explore the deeper significance of the patterns identified.

Importantly, the analysis was guided by Garrett's (2010) model of language attitudes and ideologies, which provided a critical lens for interpreting the data. This framework enabled the study to move beyond merely cataloguing preferences for local Thai teachers, NESTs, or foreign NNESTs by examining how students' attitudes were shaped by broader social, cultural, and ideological influences. During coding and theme development, attention was paid to not only what students expressed about teacher impact but also how these attitudes reflected underlying ideologies about language ownership, authority, and cultural identity. For example, references to NESTs as "real English speakers" or to local teachers and NNESTs as "understanding our struggles" were analyzed in light of Garrett's framework, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation of how language attitudes and ideologies intersect in shaping students' perceptions and preferences.

Ensuring Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings, this study adopted several established strategies in qualitative research. First, triangulation was employed by cross-checking data with relevant literature, thereby enhancing the consistency and validity of the interpretations (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021; Shenton, 2004). To further reduce personal bias and increase the reliability of the analysis, a process of peer debriefing was implemented in which preliminary findings were reviewed and discussed among researchers (Ahmed, 2024). Additionally, member checking was carried out by inviting participants to review and confirm the accuracy of their transcribed essays and the researchers' interpretations, thus ensuring that the findings authentically represented their perspectives (McKim, 2023). Collectively, these strategies contributed to the overall credibility and rigor of the study.

Results

Thematic analysis examined how Thai students perceived the impact of studying with local Thai teachers, NESTs, and foreign NNESTs on their English proficiency, along with the factors that influenced their preferences. As summarized in Figure 1, the findings revealed four overarching themes: (1) linguistic accuracy and grammar instruction, (2) pronunciation and speaking proficiency, (3) student confidence and learning comfort, and (4) cultural and communicative competence.

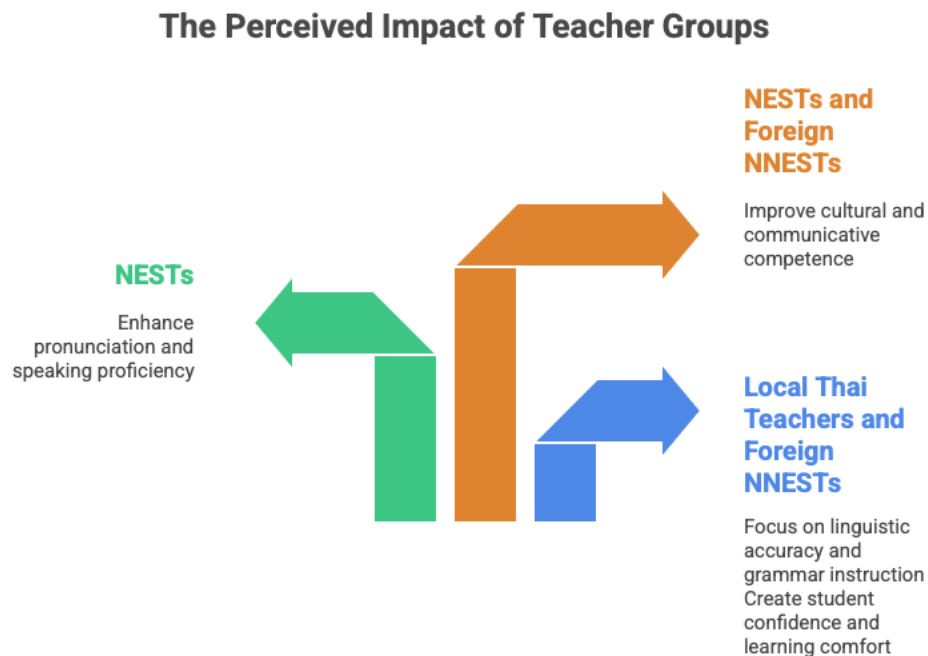


Figure 1
Summary of the Emergent Themes

Linguistic Accuracy and Grammar Instruction: The Strength of Local Thai Teachers and Foreign NNESTs

Students perceived local Thai teachers and foreign NNESTs as more effective in teaching grammar and language structure compared to NESTs. This perception stemmed from the belief that these two teacher groups possessed a heightened metalinguistic awareness, developed through their experiences of learning English as a foreign or second language. Such awareness enabled them to empathize with the specific linguistic challenges faced by Thai students and to employ targeted instructional strategies. As Student 3 observed, “Some non-native speakers have better knowledge of grammar because they study hard to understand it, so they can teach grammar better than native speakers.” Local Thai teachers were valued for their ability to explain grammar rules in the students’ first language (L1), which facilitated comprehension, especially for learners with limited English proficiency. Student 6 highlighted this advantage, noting, “When Thai students study English with Thai teachers, they understand all the grammar and structure, but they struggle with vocabulary and pronunciation.” Such comments underlined the effectiveness of local Thai teachers and foreign NNESTs in delivering explicit, form-focused instruction, a teaching approach deeply rooted in Thailand’s educational priorities.

Nevertheless, the emphasis on linguistic accuracy and structural understanding came at the expense of communicative fluency. Student 10 expressed concern that grammar-focused instruction might hinder the development of spontaneous language use, noting, "We learn grammar well, but sometimes we can't speak fluently in real situations." This reflects a broader educational ideology in Thailand that prioritizes correctness over fluency, a perspective shaped by traditional grammar-translation methods and high-stakes testing environments. Garrett's (2010) framework on language attitudes suggests that such views are indicative of deeply ingrained educational norms, where precision and rule-based knowledge are perceived as indicators of language mastery. Although this approach provides students with a solid foundation in grammar, it can limit opportunities for authentic language use, potentially leaving learners less prepared for real-world communication. Addressing this imbalance requires integrating communicative language teaching into traditional frameworks, leveraging the strengths of local Thai teachers and NNESTs in grammar instruction while fostering greater fluency through dynamic, interactive classroom practices.

Pronunciation and Speaking Proficiency: The Perceived Superiority of NESTs

Students associated speaking fluency and accurate pronunciation with NESTs, reflecting the deeply rooted native-speaker ideology that positioned native English varieties as the gold standard. This perception arose from the belief that NESTs offered an "authentic" English experience, especially in pronunciation and spoken communication. Student 6, for example, remarked, "We will improve our accent more effectively with foreign teachers, especially native speakers. A sentence structure or grammar can be taught by any teacher, but not the accent." Such comments illustrated the widespread belief that accent and pronunciation could only be properly modeled by native speakers, as pronunciation errors were thought to go unnoticed when studying with local Thai teachers or NNESTs. As Student 16 explained, "Studying with Thai teachers or foreign non-native speakers may cause pronunciation errors. We only realize these mistakes when we communicate with native speakers, and we must correct them all over again." This concern highlighted the value placed on pronunciation accuracy, which many students felt was best achieved through direct exposure to NESTs.

Despite this preference for NESTs, some students recognized the advantages of learning from NNESTs with different accents, particularly in developing listening comprehension and communication adaptability. Student 8, for example, reflected, "When I learned with a foreign teacher from the Philippines, at first, I couldn't understand his accent, but after a while, I started to adjust. This helped me improve my listening and speaking skills." Such experiences revealed a growing awareness that exposure to multiple English varieties enhanced linguistic flexibility, an essential skill for real-world communication in multilingual and multicultural settings. Garrett's (2010) framework on language attitudes

highlights that language prestige is socially constructed, explaining why students tend to view certain English varieties as more legitimate than others. While NESTs are often considered ideal models for pronunciation, NNESTs play a critical role in developing students' listening skills and helping them adapt to a variety of English accents, thereby preparing them for the linguistic diversity encountered in global communication.

Student Confidence and Learning Comfort: The Psychological Factor in Teacher Preferences

Student confidence and emotional comfort are key variables that influence perceptions of teacher effectiveness in English language learning. Data indicated that local Thai teachers and foreign NNESTs were often perceived as creating more supportive and anxiety-free learning environments compared to NESTs, whom students often felt pushed them beyond their comfort zones. Many students praised these two teacher groups for their empathetic teaching styles, which reflected a deeper understanding of the challenges learners face. As Student 12 noted, "Non-native speaker teachers can understand our mistakes better, and this makes us feel less nervous when speaking." The ability to explain complex concepts in the students' L1 also played a crucial role in reducing anxiety. As Student 6 observed, "Thai teachers understand us well, so we don't feel shy when asking questions." Such feedback suggested that the shared language and cultural background between students and teachers fostered a non-threatening environment where students felt more at ease, thereby promoting participation and reducing foreign language anxiety.

Nevertheless, some students acknowledged that excessive comfort could hinder language development by limiting exposure to challenging communicative situations. Student 3, for example, remarked, "Sometimes we need to study with native speakers to improve our speaking skills and pronunciation. Otherwise, we won't be fully prepared for real conversations." While NESTs could initially appear intimidating, they also offered valuable opportunities for students to confront psychological barriers, build resilience, and enhance their speaking confidence. The nervousness described by students when interacting with NESTs reflected not only linguistic insecurity but also the cultural tendency toward shyness and fear of making mistakes (Chun, 2014; Copland & Yonetsugi, 2016). Yet, overcoming such challenges is critical to achieving fluency and spontaneous language use. Garrett's (2010) model of language attitudes highlights the dual influence of cognitive and emotional factors in shaping learner behavior. Thus, a balanced approach that combines the supportive environment offered by local Thai teachers and foreign NNESTs with the motivational challenges posed by NESTs may help students achieve both linguistic competence and communicative confidence, preparing them for authentic language use in real-world settings.

Cultural and Communicative Competence: Exposure to Different Worldviews

A key advantage of learning from foreign teachers, both NESTs and NNESTs, lies in the cultural exposure that extends beyond language acquisition. Many students viewed studying with foreign teachers as an opportunity to broaden their understanding of global perspectives, diverse communication styles, and cultural norms. Student 9, for example, emphasized the significance of this experience, stating, "Studying with a native speaker provides me the chance to understand their culture and have the opportunity to make more foreign friends." Such experiences allow students to engage with different worldviews, fostering cross-cultural competence and enhancing their ability to adapt to globalized settings. Student 4 similarly pointed out that foreign teachers provide a more expansive cultural education, stating, "Foreign teachers teach many different cultures around the world, so students can adapt to different societies." This exposure to cultural diversity not only enriches language learning but also helps students become more globally aware and socially adaptable individuals.

While NESTs were often credited with offering insights into Western cultures, NNESTs contributed distinct cultural perspectives by exposing students to the global diversity of English usage. Student 13, for example, noted that "Studying with both native and non-native teachers helps us understand different English accents, not just the British or American ones." This comment underlined the importance of recognizing English as a global language with multiple varieties, each carrying unique cultural and communicative practices. Garrett's (2010) framework on language attitudes reinforces the idea that language learning encompasses both linguistic competence and cultural understanding. Exposure to diverse cultural norms and communication styles through a mix of NESTs and NNESTs equips students for real-world, cross-cultural interactions. Such an approach encourages language learners to develop not only linguistic fluency but also the intercultural awareness necessary for thriving in increasingly multicultural environments.

Discussion and Implications

The findings underlined the perceived strength of local Thai teachers and foreign NNESTs in teaching grammar and language structure, a theme that aligns with previous studies emphasizing NNESTs' ability to address linguistic complexities with heightened metalinguistic awareness (Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2014). The reliance on explicit grammar instruction reflects the broader educational priorities in Thailand, where exam-oriented teaching predominates (Hayes, 2010). Garrett's (2010) theoretical framework suggests that such instruction stems from deeply rooted educational ideologies equating language mastery with precision and rule-based knowledge. Nevertheless, while grammar-focused instruction provides a robust foundation, it often neglects opportunities for

developing communicative fluency. The findings indicated that students might benefit from a pedagogical shift that integrated communicative language teaching with traditional grammar instruction, an approach advocated by Ambele and Boonsuk (2021) to balance accuracy and fluency.

The perceived superiority of NESTs in pronunciation and speaking fluency reflects enduring native-speaker ideologies, which position native accents as benchmarks of linguistic authenticity (Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2014; Wang & Gao, 2015). Students viewed NESTs as ideal pronunciation models, attributing these advantages to their perceived naturalness and fluency. This belief aligns with Sung (2014), who identified pronunciation and accent as core domains where students often favor NESTs. Nonetheless, the data also revealed an emerging recognition of the benefits of learning from NNESTs with diverse accents, particularly in fostering listening adaptability. One student's ability to adjust to a teacher's unfamiliar accent echoes the findings of Boonsuk et al. (2023), who stress that exposure to multiple English varieties prepares learners for global communication. Garrett's (2010) framework on language attitudes explains such shifts in perception as reflective of evolving linguistic ideologies that challenge traditional notions of language prestige.

In this study, students highly valued the cultural exposure provided by all three teacher groups—local Thai teachers, NESTs, and foreign NNESTs. NESTs were often associated with insights into Western cultural norms, while NNESTs, including those from both Western and non-Western backgrounds, offered students access to a broader range of global cultural practices. The findings are consistent with previous studies (Comprendio & Savski, 2019; Diniz de Figueiredo, 2011; Viáfara González, 2020) that identified cultural enrichment as a critical strength of foreign teachers. Garrett's (2010) framework further supports this interpretation, emphasizing the role of cultural learning in shaping language attitudes and fostering intercultural competence. Importantly, the recognition of NNESTs' contributions to perspectives on global English signals an increasing openness among students to the pluralistic nature of English today.

Furthermore, this study indicated that students' preferences for local Thai teachers and foreign NNESTs were significantly influenced by the supportive and empathetic learning environments these teachers created. The shared linguistic and cultural background of local Thai teachers allowed them to address students' emotional needs effectively, reducing anxiety and fostering participation, as also documented by Chun (2014) and Lemana et al. (2025). Garrett's (2010) model highlights the interplay of cognitive and emotional factors in shaping language attitudes, which aligns with the students' preference for learning environments that minimize foreign language anxiety. Nevertheless, some students noted that excessive comfort could hinder their language progress, emphasizing the importance of challenges posed by NESTs in building resilience and fluency. This perspective underlined the dual role of psychological comfort and linguistic challenge in language development (Zarrinabadi et al., 2022). Such trends reflected the adaptability of students' language learning strategies, as noted by Deng (2024) and Apridayani et al. (2024). Recognizing this dynamic nature can

inform teacher deployment strategies that align with students' developmental trajectories. A balanced pedagogical approach that combines the nurturing support of local teachers and foreign NNESTs with the motivational challenges presented by NESTs could optimize both confidence and communicative competence.

In addition, the use of the L1 by Thai teachers emerged as a significant factor influencing student preferences. Students valued the ability of these teachers to explain complex linguistic concepts in their native language, which enhances comprehension, particularly for beginners. This finding aligns with the work of Hayes (2010), who noted the centrality of L1 in Thai classrooms. Students noted that Thai teachers' use of the L1 facilitated comprehension, especially for learners with limited proficiency, echoing the work of Anggoro and Nguyen (2021), who highlighted the strategic advantage of incorporating L1 in instructional settings. Moreover, cultural familiarity with Thai teachers was considered to foster a comfortable learning environment, while foreign NNESTs were praised for their unique blend of empathy and international perspectives (Lemana et al., 2025; Song & Del Castillo, 2015). These points illustrated the importance of having a diverse teaching workforce capable of addressing both local and global pedagogical needs.

Conclusion

The findings highlighted the importance of integrating the complementary strengths of local Thai teachers, NESTs, and foreign NNESTs to foster a holistic and multicultural language learning environment. Teacher training programs should focus on equipping all teachers—regardless of their linguistic backgrounds—with strategies for teaching intelligible pronunciation and fostering cross-cultural communication. Rather than encouraging NNESTs to “approximate” native norms or NESTs to simply “teach grammar,” programs should cultivate a pluralistic perspective, recognizing the legitimacy of diverse English varieties and teaching practices (Kubota, 2020; Ruecker, 2017). In addition, policy considerations should be foregrounded in any effort to advance these goals. Policymakers and educational leaders have a pivotal role in shaping hiring practices, supporting professional development, and designing curricula that embrace linguistic and cultural diversity. Early and ongoing attention to policy frameworks can ensure that multicultural objectives are embedded in school and university structures, making resource allocation, teacher support, and hiring more equitable across teacher groups.

While this study was conducted in a Thai university context, its implications may be relevant to other EFL settings where students encounter a mix of local, NESTs, and foreign NNESTs. Nevertheless, the feasibility and impact of these recommendations depend on local educational cultures, teacher demographics, policy environments, and available resources. As such, adaptation to local conditions and stakeholder needs is essential for realizing multicultural and multilingual goals in education. By considering these interconnected factors—

attitudes, resources, training, and policy—educators and policymakers can work toward more equitable, inclusive, and effective English language education that equips learners for success in an increasingly interconnected world.

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