

TERTIARY STUDENTS' CHOICE BETWEEN NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE SPEAKER ENGLISH TEACHERS AND THE ROLE OF ENGLISH PROFICIENCY IN LEARNER PREFERENCES: SOME EVIDENCE FROM POST-COLONIAL HONG KONG

Marine Yeung

ABSTRACT

Native-speakerism has generated much debate in the field of English language teaching, with the general assumption that native English-speaker teachers (NESTs) are better teachers and would be learners' preference over non-native English-speaker teachers (NNESTs) given the choice. Despite challenges against such an assumption in recent decades, it is argued that NESTs are still prioritized over NNESTs. Studies on learners' perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs and the factors behind them have produced inconclusive findings, which prompted the present study in post-colonial Hong Kong, where English is a language of privilege. To gain a better understanding of the reality, 253 students from various academic programmes in a tertiary institution in Hong Kong were invited to complete a questionnaire which aimed to elicit their views and preferences concerning teaching by NESTs and local English teachers (LETs, i.e., NNESTs) after being taught by NESTs. Factors affecting their preferences were also explored using open-ended questions and correlation tests. The findings suggest a minor preference for NESTs, but LETs are favoured in terms of effectiveness. Experience with NESTs and learners' English proficiency may also have notable influences over learner preferences. These findings have practical implications for teacher deployment for English courses or programmes at tertiary institutions.

Key Words: native English-speaker teacher (NEST), English proficiency, higher education, Hong Kong

INTRODUCTION

The term “native-speakerism” refers to the established beliefs which prioritize a western culture and the ideals of the English language and English language teaching practices that it gives rise to and which “the native speaker” represents (Holliday, 2005). This ideology underlines the native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) teacher dichotomy, which has long shaped discriminatory views and practices in the ELT and TESOL fields and generated much research interest in language teaching and applied linguistics in recent decades. Although it has been widely recognized that native English-speaker teachers (NESTs) and non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) both have their advantages, beliefs in the superiority of NESTs, or the “native-speaker fallacy” (Phillipson, 1992) as some scholars refer to them as, have been held since the rise of interest in the pursuit of the ideal native speaker (Chomsky, 1965) and well into the 21st century. This NEST/NNEST dichotomy has however been criticized as problematic with the advent of “world Englishes” and the functions English plays as a lingua franca, especially in multilingual societies (Kachru, 1992). Meanwhile, with English being the international language in today’s globalized world, the language is spoken by hundreds of millions as a second or foreign language, making it an inevitable fact that the vast majority of learners of English are taught by indigenous NNS English teachers (Braine, 2012). Therefore, falsity of the dichotomy aside, the fact that NSs are outnumbered by NNSs in the Outer and Expanding Circles by Kachru (1992) means the shortfall of the supply of the traditionally defined “NESTs” simply renders the pursuit of English teaching purely by native English speakers rather impractical.

In view of the issues around the NEST/NNEST paradigm, a few of which are mentioned above, some researchers and scholars (e.g. Ulla Connor, George Braine & Suresh Canagarajah) started the NNS movement in the 1990s to empower NNESTs, promoting their rights ethically and professionally and their role in ESL, EFL and TESOL contexts (Braine, 2012). Despite the achievements of the what is now a worldwide movement in facilitating changes in the TESOL field, the paradigm shift is still in progress with some myths and misconceptions about NNESTs lingering on, such as the beliefs that NESTs are better teachers than NNESTs and that learners prefer NESTs over NNESTs (Selvi, 2014). Changes have been slow because of the deeply seated privileging of NESTs in the applied linguistics and TESOL fields (Mahboob, 2010). Therefore, more research into the perspectives of different stake holders in various

contexts is needed in order to gain a more thorough understanding of the issue and collect empirical evidence to drive and guide pedagogical and policy changes.

Research has investigated various aspects of the issue, such as the inequality and discrimination within the profession (e.g. Fithriani, 2018; Medgyes, 2012, 2017; Rudolph, et al, 2015) and the effects of NEST teaching on students' learning (e.g. Alghofaili & Elyas, 2017; Pae, 2017; Schenck, 2018). However, learners' preferences between NESTs and NNESTs, rather than perceptions of them, have been less researched, particularly in the higher education context in Hong Kong where this study took place. This study set out to explore the preferences for NESTs and LETs among more highly educated learners, which will provide a useful reference for course designers and administrators at tertiary institutions in Hong Kong and in other similar contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Ideal English Teacher

The controversies over the dichotomy of NS and NNS English teachers are premised on the assumption that NSs, with their innate knowledge of the language acquired since early childhood (Davies, 2003) and as their first language (Cook, 1999), have a superior command of the language and knowledge of the embedded culture (Braine, 1999) and therefore make better teachers of English than NNSs. The effects this dichotomy has on NNESTs have been well researched, with NNESTs generally suffering from insecurity about their own accents and over-consciousness about their own language use and the consequent self-doubt and self-discrimination as revealed in various studies (e.g. Jenkins, 2005; Moussu & Llorca, 2008; Reves & Medgyes, 1994; Seidlhofer, 1999).

Students' perceptions of NEST and NNEST teaching have also been explored in studies conducted in different parts of the world, such as the US and in various Asian contexts (e.g. Alghofaili & Elyas, 2017; Aslan & Thompson, 2017; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005; Mahboob, 2004; Park, 2009; Tsou & Chen, 2019). Although NESTs are generally favoured because they are still considered to be the "authentic" models of the language of the West in this day and age (Lowe & Pinner, 2016), findings from these studies mostly do not suggest strong biases for NESTs; rather, they generally illustrate students' appreciation of the respective strengths and weaknesses of

NESTs and NNESTs. NESTs are generally considered more suited for the teaching of speaking and listening and pronunciation skills and the latter better in other aspects of teaching, such as grammar teaching and the use of teaching strategies. Research on learners' perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs often reveals that learners are able to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses or advantages and disadvantages of both (e.g. Liaw, 2012; Ma, 2012; Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2014).

Yet, relatively fewer studies focus on learners' preferences between NESTs and NNESTs. Learners may rationally know the strengths and weaknesses of the two in general, as pointed out above, but their preferences may not necessarily be based on such knowledge. Perceptions and preferences, while akin to each other, could be discussed or treated as two distinct concepts in explaining people's choices as shown in some studies (e.g. Dietrich & List, 2013; Toni et al, 2012). Apart from the important role affective factors play in learning (Arnold, 1999), learner preferences may have implications for resource planning and thus are worth exploring in this era of increasing commodification of higher education. Among studies which focus more on learner preferences, some may find an overall preference for NESTs (e.g. Alseweed, 2012; Karakas et al., 2016; Tsou & Chen, 2019), while some may find no significant differences in learners' attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs (e.g. Aslan & Thompson, 2017; Chun, 2014; Han et al., 2016). Overall, these findings regarding learners' preferences are inconclusive, and more research in different contexts is required to shed light on how far the NEST/NNEST dichotomy is still relevant today.

Factors affecting learners' perceptions of, or preferences for, either NESTs or NNESTs also deserve scholarly attention. Apart from the different qualities and advantages of NESTs and NNESTs as perceived by learners, other mediating factors may include the type of class (Pae, 2017) and teacher contact time, among others (Moussu, 2010). The preference for NESTs may also increase with proficiency and education levels, as revealed by the general preference for NESTs among the university students in Lasagabaster & Sierra's (2002; 2005) study. However, in Lasagabaster & Sierra's study, such preference was held regardless of the students' previous experience of NESTs, which suggests contact or experience may not be an important factor, contrary to what is suggested by other studies (e.g., Cheung & Braine, 2007; Moussu, 2010). In addition, although proficiency was presumed to have an influence on learners' inclination towards teaching by NESTs, the participants' proficiency levels in Moussu's (2010) study did not correlate significantly with their preferences for

NESTs and NNESTs, unlike what was hypothesized with students at higher levels of English proficiency showing slightly more positive attitude towards NNESTs. With such conflicting findings, the effects of prior experience and the relationship between learners' proficiency and education levels and their desires for teaching by NESTs may be areas that deserve further investigation.

The Hong Kong Context

The present study took place in Hong Kong, a former British colony where the English language has traditionally been valued as a language of power and prestige. Apart from being one of the official languages in the biliterate (in English and written Chinese) trilingual (in English, Cantonese and Putonghua) policy, English is the main medium of instruction in six of the eight government-funded universities and in most self-financing tertiary institutions in Hong Kong (Kirkpatrick & Liddicoat, 2017).

In order to maintain if not raise the general English standards among students in Hong Kong, the Education Bureau launched the Native-speaking English Teacher (NET) Scheme in 1997. Since then, NETs (i.e. NESTs) from English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia have been recruited for English teaching in local primary and secondary schools, with the aims of enriching the English language learning environment in schools and of enhancing teaching capacity through fostering collaboration between NETs and local teachers of English (LETs, i.e. NNESTs) (Hong Kong Education and Manpower Bureau, 2020).

As “NET” and “LET” are used to refer to “NEST” and “NNEST”, respectively, in the context of this study, the former are used interchangeably with the latter in discussion of the results and findings in this paper.

The NET Scheme has provided the circumstances for further investigation of the NEST/NNEST issue in the Hong Kong context. Apart from studies evaluating the effectiveness of the collaboration between NETs and LETs (e.g. Trent, 2012) and the effectiveness of such collaboration in enhancing students' learning (e.g. Carless, 2006; Carless & Walker, 2006; Griffin & Wood, 2009; Griffin et al., 2006), there have also been studies investigating students' perceptions of teaching by NETs and LETs (e.g. Ma, 2012; Sung, 2010). Findings from these studies generally concur with those from studies conducted in other contexts, which show that students appreciate the differences between NESTs and NNESTs and their respective strengths and weaknesses in English teaching. Findings from these

studies generally support further collaboration between NETs and LETs for greater effectiveness in teaching in local primary and secondary schools.

While these studies provide evidence for the support of both NETs and LETs in more or less equal weighting, albeit for different reasons, they were mainly conducted in primary and secondary school contexts. Tertiary students, as more mature and better educated young adults, may have more informed and independent views on the issue which are worth exploring as they may shed light on whether or to what extent the preference for NESTs still prevails in society. Besides, most of these studies do not report students' preferences beyond the analysis of their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of NESTs and NNESTs. Tertiary learners' preferences for NESTs and NNESTs have been rather under-explored in the Hong Kong context. The study by Cheung and Braine (2007) elicited views from university students, but mainly towards NNESTs, and the focus was not on the learners' preferences between NESTs and NNESTs.

The Hong Kong context is believed to provide an ideal ground for the exploration of the NEST/NNEST issue among tertiary students. As the majority of tertiary students in Hong Kong have experienced NET teaching at some stage in their education because of the NET Scheme, they are supposed to have a clear idea of the features of NETs and LETs and should thus have some informed opinions about who would suit their interests best. Their views and preferences may therefore be helpful in determining how relevant the NEST/NNEST dichotomy is to students at more advanced levels and whether the experience of being taught by NESTs affects their preferences. These may have important implications for teacher recruitment and deployment in English centres or English teaching units at tertiary institutions.

The study set out to answer the following research questions:

1. Do tertiary students have a clear preference between teaching by NETs and LETs?
2. Does the experience of being taught by NETs change learners' preferences?
3. What are the reasons behind tertiary students' preferences for NET or LET teaching?

METHODS

The Participants

The study was conducted in a small- to medium-size English-medium tertiary institution in Hong Kong, with a student population of around 2,000 mainly recruited locally at the time of the study. The college offered a range of degree and sub-degree programmes in medical and health science, social science and business disciplines. The students' average English levels varied by programme as reflected by the admission figures of the college. Although such figures are confidential, the varying levels of general English proficiency across these programmes could be inferred from the admission scores of the local universities and tertiary institutions, which are accessible to the public on the Joint University Programmes Admissions System (JUPAS) website. In the Hong Kong context, medical and health science programmes tend to attract students of higher calibre, as revealed by students' average scores in the English Language subject and in all the subjects in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education Examination (HKDSE) required for admission to degree programmes. This phenomenon prevailed at the institution where this study was conducted. It was also a known fact that students from most sub-degree programmes including those offered by the college were on average less proficient in English because of the lower minimum English requirement for admission to these programmes, which was Level 2 in English Language in the HKDSE, compared with Level 3 for degree programmes. Students from these different programmes therefore also differed in their average levels of English proficiency, which was also reflected by the college's admission statistics.

Students from all the programmes were required to complete two 45-hour English for academic purposes (EAP) courses. The lectures were mainly delivered by LETs, and most of the tutorial groups were taken up by NETs. This means that the majority of the students had experienced NET teaching except for a small number of them who happened to be assigned to tutorial groups taught by LETs in both of the EAP courses. Since these EAP courses provided a recent common experience of NET and LET teaching for a considerable number of students across a variety of disciplines at both degree and sub-degree levels, they were considered to provide an ideal setting for exploring views on NEST and NNEST teaching among tertiary students.

A total of 253 students (79 male, 174 female) accepted the invitation to participate in the study. Among these participants, 96.4%

were born in either Hong Kong (82.6%, n=209) or mainland China (13.8%, n=35). Over 90% of these participants spoke Cantonese as their first language, and around 7% spoke Mandarin. Of the 252 valid responses to the prompt about their programme of study, 13.9% (n=35) were from sub-degree programmes, 67.9% (n=171) from medical and health science degree programmes and 18.2% (n=46) from business and social science programmes. Of the 248 valid responses to the prompt about their year of study, the majority (85.9%, n=213) were in their second year of study, followed by 7.3% (n=18) in year 1 and 5.6% (n=14) in year 4. The average age of those who reported their ages (n=247) was 19.8, with the majority (98.4%, n=243) aged between 18 and 23 and 51.4% (n=127) aged 19. The demographic data suggest that the participants of this study were highly comparable in terms of their age, language and cultural backgrounds.

Regarding their education background, of the 248 who provided valid responses, around 93% (n=230) of them had been educated in Hong Kong for eight years or more, and most of them (over 95%, n=241) claimed to have learnt English for 10 years or more. The majority of the participants (88.1%, n=223) claimed to have experienced teaching by NETs throughout their years of education, mainly at secondary level or above. Participants were also prompted to report whether they had experienced NET teaching at the college. Of the 241 who responded, 77.3% (n=187) indicated they had been taught by NETs at the college. This means that the majority of these students had had experience with NETs, and most of them also had a recent experience of being taught by both NETs and LETs.

The Questionnaire

Data were collected via a questionnaire conducted at the end of the second of the two EAP courses after the course evaluation had been completed. The purpose of the study was clearly explained to the participants, and they were assured that the data collected would only be used for academic purposes. They were also aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage.

The questionnaire designed for this study consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions eliciting the participants' views and choices regarding NET and LET teaching (Appendix A). Part I of the questionnaire collected the respondents' demographic details and their previous experience with NET teaching; Part II prompted the respondents' reflections on their preferences before being taught by NETs, their expectations of and satisfaction with

NET teaching, followed by the major questions: (a) whom between NETs and LETs they preferred after having experienced NET teaching, and (b) whom they considered to be more effective teachers. As one obvious advantage of LETs is their ability to speak the local language, the participants were also asked whether or how much Cantonese, the local language, should be used in the teaching and learning of English. For most of these questions, response options were provided, followed by prompts for explanations or elaborations of the choices.

Data Analysis

Data collected from the questionnaire were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. For questions where response options were provided, the options were coded and quantified for descriptive analysis, followed by correlation analysis among the variables. To explore whether experience with NETs had any effects on student preferences, individual respondents' reported preferences before and after being taught by NETs were compared using the paired-sample t-test. As for the open-ended responses, main ideas were identified, categorized and synthesized for thematic analysis in relation to the research questions.

FINDINGS

Results from the descriptive and correlation analyses provided evidence that confirms findings from some previous research conducted in local and other contexts while shedding new light on the issue of the NET/LET controversy from the perspective of tertiary students.

Mild Preference for NETs

As the study set out to collect informed opinions and compare preferences before and after NET teaching, only those who had been taught by NETs were instructed to respond to the questions about their preferences. Among those who indicated they had had experience of being taught by NETs (n=223), nearly half of the participants chose the option of "no particular preference" both before and after, showing that overall there was not an overwhelming preference for either NETs or LETs.

Among those who indicated clear preferences, the preference for

NETs was clear before the actual experience of being taught by NETs (Table 1). Before the experience, 34% (n=72) and 18.4% (n=39) of the respondents indicated their preferences for NETs and LETs, respectively. The figures of reported preferences after the experience were however much closer (26.3% for NETs versus 24.4% for LETs), even though there was still a slightly higher tendency of preference for NETs.

Table 1

Preferences Between Teaching by NETs and LETs Before and After the Actual Experience of NET Teaching

		Preference before			Preference after		
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	NET	72	28.5	34.0	55	21.7	26.3
	No particular preference	101	39.9	47.6	103	40.7	49.3
	LET	39	15.4	18.4	51	20.2	24.4
	Total	212	83.8	100.0	209	82.6	100.0
Missing	0	11	4.3		14	5.5	
	System*	30	11.9		30	11.9	
	Total	41	16.2		44	17.4	
Total		253	100.0		253	100.0	

* Respondents who had not been taught by NETs were not required to indicate their preferences

Change of preferences

A comparison between the respondents’ reported preferences before and after the experience of being taught by NETs as shown in Table 1 reveals that the experience had some influence on these learners’ perceptions. After the experience, the figure for NETs dropped from 34% (n=72) to 26.3% (n=55), while that for “no particular preference” had a small increase from 47.6% (n=101) to 49.3% (n=103) and that for LETs increased from 18.4% (n=39) to

24.4% (n=51).

To facilitate statistical analysis, the preference options were assigned numerical values with preferences for NETs and LETs at both ends:

- 1 – Preference for NETs
- 2 – No particular preference
- 3 – Preference for LETs

This coding was used for all the statistical tests reported in this paper. Since the preferences for NETs and LETs are dichotomous in nature, the responses could be considered to fall on a spectrum rather than into discrete groups. Pearson's correlation tests and t-tests were therefore used for data analysis.

Results from the paired sample t-test showed that there was a significant, albeit mild, increase of 0.13 ($p < .01$) in the mean value (Table 2), indicating a tendency away from a clear preference for NETs towards a more judicious choice between NETs and LETs.

Table 2

Change in the mean value of the responses to the question eliciting the respondents' preferences after the experience of being taught by NETs

Paired Differences						
Change in mean (Post – Pre)	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		df	Sig. (2-tailed)
			Lower	Upper		
.134	.573	.040	.056	.212	208	.001

The change in preferences demonstrates that learners' experiences can trigger reflections that may verify or modify their original beliefs, which are not necessarily based on facts or personal experiences. The observation that these students' beliefs were not necessarily based on actual experiences may be further illustrated by the responses of the students who allegedly had not been taught by NETs before. Among the 23 (out of 30) who provided a response to the question about teaching effectiveness, eight of them chose LETs

and 10 of them chose “It depends”. Five of them chose NETs, although only one of them put down a reason for it: “I hope the course can be more interesting, the teachers can communicate with students, just like chatting with friends.” These few students also mentioned the differences between NETs and LETs in response to another question, and their comments about NET teaching included “more attractive”, “more funny and have more activities”, and “NET will encourage me to participate in the class”. Apparently, these were opinions based on presumptions that had yet to be personally verified. If such expectations were not met, their opinions might also change, which may explain their changes in preferences. For example, some of the NETs, as some participants noted, were not as friendly and their teaching not as much fun as expected.

Association between Student Levels and Preferences

Although it was clear from the data that more students favoured NETs to LETs, it was not clear whether this tendency was similarly strong among students from different programmes. A Pearson’s correlation test was run to explore whether the students’ programmes of study were related to their preferences, but no significant correlations were found. Another correlation test was run to explore whether variations in English proficiency levels would have any significant influence on these students’ preferences for NET or LET teaching. The participants were grouped into three categories accordingly to their general levels of proficiency based on the college’s statistics. The categories were then coded in an increasing order of their English proficiency:

- Group 1 (Lowest level) – Associate degrees and higher diploma students
- Group 2 (Middle level) – Degrees (Business and social science) students
- Group 3 (Highest level) – Degrees (Medical and health science) students

The preferences were coded with NETs and LETs at both ends (1 for NETs and 3 for LETs) as mentioned. The Pearson’s correlation test was run, and a mild negative correlation was found to exist between the level of proficiency and the preference for LETs (Table 3).

Table 3

Correlations between types of programmes and preferences for NET/LET teaching before and after being taught by NETs

		Programme of study	Preference Before	Preference After
Programme of Study	Pearson Correlation	1	-.223**	-.287**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001	.000
	N	252	211	208

**p < .01 (2-tailed)

The correlations between the categories (i.e. proficiency levels) and the preferences were $r=-0.22$ ($p<.01$) and $r=-0.29$ ($p<.01$) before and after, respectively. Such negative correlations suggested that the higher the proficiency level, the stronger the tendency towards NET teaching, and in other words, the lower the tendency for students to choose LETs.

Reasons for Preferences

As for the reasons for these participants' preferences, they concurred with views about the most common advantages of LETs identified in the literature. For the choice of LETs, four major types of reasons were identified, with those related to easy communication being the most common (mentioned by 18 participants), followed by those related to the teachers' understanding of their learning needs (mentioned by eight). The teachers' effective teaching approaches, described as more focused and informative by some, were another important type of reason (mentioned by six). The last type included reasons that appear to be more affective and personal, such as "more friendly" and "help me focus because they are less funny". These data provide empirical support for the views that LETs are more effective in their communication with students because of their knowledge of the local culture (Kamhi-Stein, 2009), and that they can empathize with students and provide support because of their own experience as ESL learners (Medgyes's 2017). Their ability to teach bilingually using strategies that cater for local students was also an advantage

(Mahboob & Lin, 2016) which these students could appreciate.

The disadvantages of NETs, some of which being the direct opposites of the major advantages of LETs listed above, were also mentioned as the reasons for these students' preference for LETs. Those who preferred NETs despite these disadvantages mostly laid more emphasis on the benefits they could gain in learning listening and speaking from NETs because of their native accents and proficiency (mentioned by 19), and the chance or need to speak and thus practise English (mentioned by five). These reasons were mentioned by a total of 24 participants (out of the total of 30 who put down any reasons), demonstrating that the advantage of NETs in teaching listening and speaking was a clear reason for preferring NETs. There were a few remarks related to NETs' cultural experiences and teaching approaches, which made their lessons more interactive and fun.

Preference versus effectiveness

To explore whether or to what extent the perception of teaching effectiveness was related to learners' preferences, the participants were also asked to choose between NETs and LETs in terms of their effectiveness. The options were assigned numerical values with NETs and LETs at both ends:

- 1 – NETs being more effective
- 2 – Neither being more effective than the other
- 3 – LETs being more effective

A Pearson's correlation test was conducted and found a moderate positive correlation ($r=0.69$, $p<.01$) between the participants' preferences after the NET teaching experience and their claims about the relative effectiveness of NETs and LETs. The moderate correlation suggested that while individual respondents' preferences tended to correspond with the perceived effectiveness of NETs/LETs, the relationship was far from absolute. In fact, some respondents with a clear preference for either would still indicate "It depends" about the relative effectiveness of the two, with LETs considered more favourably in this regard. As shown in Table 4 below, concerning teaching effectiveness, 45.1% ($n=114$) chose "It depends", while 22.9% ($n=55$) and 29.6% ($n=71$) chose NETs and LETs, respectively.

Table 4

Responses to the question “In general, which seems more effective in helping you learn English, NET or LET teaching?”

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	NET	55	21.7	22.9	22.9
	Depends	114	45.1	47.5	70.4
	LET	71	28.1	29.6	100.0
	Total	240	94.9	100.0	
Missing	0	13	5.1		
Total		253	100.0		

The reasons the participants gave for their choices for NESTs or LETs based on teaching effectiveness largely concurred with ones they mentioned for their preferences. However, what is worth noting more is the more diverse justifications provided by the 45.1% respondents who chose “It depends”, which showed that the NET/LET factor may not be a prime consideration of what constitutes good English teaching and learning for nearly half of the students. The most important factor, as cited by 40 respondents, was the quality of the individual teachers. While many of them simply noted “depends on the teacher”, the others mentioned various aspects of teaching, with the teacher’s attitude and teaching style, methods and skills being the two most important types of factors. These can be exemplified by their comments directly quoted below:

“Funny or not is depends on the teacher.”

“Teaching skill is more important than NET or LET. Nation is not a problem.”

“Depends on teaching, attitude. In addition, NET’s nationality have to be concerned too, due to different accents.”

Nineteen students justified their impartial choice by pointing out the advantages and disadvantages of NET and LET teaching in

different contexts. Below are some examples:

“Different courses have different situation in NET/LET teaching. For example, XXX (course code) is more likely to have LET teaching because the student can ask questions in Chinese when they have problem in academic writing.”

“NET: good for speaking and listening tasks; LET: good for exam skills and abstract ideas (explain in Chinese if needed)”

A few respondents also mentioned factors related to the students themselves, such as their attitude, abilities and their effort in learning. There were also a few who commented that there was no significant difference whether it was NET or LET teaching. As one student put it (in his original words): “I have been taught by lots of NET and LET throughout these years. Yet, it depends on what the teacher can explain and elaborate the key point of the lessons to all students.”

Although not explicitly stated, the ability of the teacher to speak the local language may also be one of the factors contributing to teaching effectiveness. This could be reflected by the students’ responses to the question eliciting their opinions on the use of Chinese in teaching and learning English. “Chinese”, in context, was understood as mainly “Cantonese” in speaking, with the use of Putonghua and written Chinese as necessary. Among the options provided, as many students (n=80) chose the option “The use of Chinese should be avoided in English lessons at all times” as those (n=80) who chose the option “I think it is necessary for English teachers to use Chinese in teaching in some situations”; a similar number of students (n=78) chose the option “I prefer the English teacher to use some Chinese if he/she can”. These suggest that the commonplace use of Chinese/Cantonese in teaching in English-medium tertiary institutions in Hong Kong as revealed in other studies (e.g. Author, 2018; Author, 2020) may also apply to English teaching.

DISCUSSION

This study was motivated by the lack of research into learners’ preferences between NESTs and NNESTs at tertiary level in Hong Kong and the paucity of related research into factors shaping these preferences, such as education and proficiency levels and prior experience with NESTs and NNESTs. Findings from this study

provide an answer to the question of whether tertiary students, at least in the Hong Kong context, have a clear preference for NETs or LETs, and produce evidence as to whether actual experience with NETs would have any effects on such preferences. The reasons the participants gave for their preferences and their views about the effectiveness of NETs and LETs also reveal what tertiary students may consider important in the teaching and learning of English.

For Research Question 1, which asks whether tertiary students have clear preferences for NETs or LETs, the answer to it seems to be a qualified “yes”. It is true that between NETs and LETs, the tendency was slightly skewed for the former; yet around half of the participants did not take a clear stance. Those who had a clear stance indicated preference for either in comparable proportions, showing that the overall learner inclination for NETs may be a rather slight one. It could be claimed that this finding provides some support for the conclusions drawn from some previous research that the preference for NESTs may be higher among learners of higher education levels (e.g. Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2002, 2005), but it also suggests that this phenomenon may not be as conspicuous and pervasive across contexts.

This slight preference for NET teaching may also be tempered by learners’ actual experiences of being taught by NETs. Results from the study provide an affirmative answer to Research Question 2, showing that learners’ actual experiences may affect their preferences for NETs and LETs, with learners becoming slightly less inclined towards NETs and more towards LETs after having experienced teaching by NETs. This finding is similar to Cheung and Braine’s (2007) finding that the positive attitude towards NNEST tends to increase with learners’ length of stay at a university. However, as participants in the present study were mostly junior year students, it may not be so much the length of stay as the actual encounters that have caused such a shift as evidenced by some of their more individualized responses, particularly the opinions of those without NET teaching experience in this study. To a certain extent, the preference for NET teaching is based on some preconceived ideas, or myths about the NEST/NNEST dichotomy, which have been widely discussed in the literature and summarized in Selvi (2014). Having experienced teaching by both NETs and LETs, some learners may have more realistic views about and thus less unquestioned preference for teaching by NETs.

The exploration of the reasons behind these learners’ preferences in answer to Research Question 3 reveals that the choice between NETs and LETs may mostly be a match of the desire for a native

model of the language for learning “better English” and the urge to be able to use the local language for more effective communication in the teaching and learning process. The other views about advantages and disadvantages of NESTs and NNESTs brought up by the participants mostly concur with those found in various previous studies (e.g. Gurkan & Yuksel, 2012; Ma, 2012; Sou, & Chen, 2019; Sung, 2014), but these appear to play minor roles in determining their preferences. Findings from this study show that when well-informed, well-educated learners are asked to make a conscious comparison and choose between the NESTs and NNESTs, their reasons could be rather unambivalent and straightforward.

As the urge to use the local language is apparently the most important reason for learners’ vote for LETs, and the urge or need to use the local language is likely to be related to the learners’ ability to express themselves in English, English proficiency may be one useful predictor of learners’ preferences in this regard. Findings from this study provide some support for this assumption. Although tertiary students are supposed to have higher English proficiency than the average primary and secondary students as they need to meet the English requirements for admission to college or university, there are no doubt variations in the individuals’ levels of English proficiency. This study shows that even for students attending English-medium tertiary institutions, English proficiency still plays a role in affecting students’ choice between NETs and LETs: those with higher levels of proficiency may be more receptive to teaching by NETs than those who are less proficient. Overall the learners’ general permissive attitude towards the use of some Cantonese in the English lessons suggest that to many tertiary students, the local language has a role in English teaching, and so do the local teachers.

Another interesting finding stemming from the exploration of Research Question 3 about the reasons for learners’ preferences is that learners’ judgment or perception of teaching effectiveness may not account for learners’ preferences for, or choices between NETs and LETs. The results suggest that while preferences and judgments of effectiveness are quite closely inter-related with some overlapping reasons behind them, the effective teachers may not be the preferred teachers from these learners’ perspective. Overall, NETs may be considered less favourably than LETs in terms of effectiveness because while “nativeness” of the teacher alone can explain many students’ preferences, it is but a rather unimportant factor among many others in learners’ evaluation or perception of effectiveness. These other factors include the teacher’s qualities, such as their attitude and teaching skills. Some of the factors mentioned reveal

their understanding of their own academic needs at this level of study, which are beyond the learning of speaking skills. Quite a large proportion of these students also believe the use of their own native tongue is necessary for effectively communicating more complicated content. In other words, these students have a clear understanding of their own needs, have their own criteria in judging a teacher's performance, and are capable of making their choice critically beyond the NET/LET framework, similar to their counterparts in other studies conducted in local and foreign contexts (e.g. Ma, 2012; Mullock, 2010). However, while these criteria appear fair and objective, and LETs may be considered more effective based on such criteria, the general preference may still be for NETs. In exploring the issue of the NEST/NNEST dichotomy, perhaps it is important to distinguish between what learners like and what learners think they should appreciate; after all, preferences involve both affect and cognition but could be formed without thinking (Zajonc, 1980), as manifested by the discrepancies between the participants' preferences and their opinions about the teachers' effectiveness.

Findings of this study have three important implications. Firstly, the study provides evidence that at the tertiary level, the NEST/NNEST dichotomy may still be relevant, but only to a small extent. This is possibly because of the students' more advanced and varied academic needs, which a native accent may not address as many of these more advanced and mature learners know. Although some learners may still have a clear preference for NESTs, they do not constitute the majority, and they are quite capable of making fair judgements on their own. As these young adults have the ability to identify effective teachers, their learning needs may best be addressed with the provision of quality teaching rather than the employment of NESTs.

Secondly, English proficiency, rather than education level, may have an important influence on learners' preference for NESTs or NNESTs. Although higher education may imply a higher English proficiency, particularly in an English-medium education environment, variations in students' English levels between and within institutions inevitably exist. Less proficient tertiary students, as shown in this study, may benefit more from teaching by LETs. The proficiency factor may similarly affect learners at lower levels of the education ladder, but this has yet to be further investigated.

Related to the first two implications is that findings from this study provide further support for the role of NNESTs in English teaching at tertiary level. Apart from the fact that learners at this level may not have a strong preference for NESTs or NNESTs, many of

them consider some use of the local language in English teaching is not only desirable but also necessary. The bilingual ones who can communicate in the learners' own language are preferred by enough learners to deserve an equal footing with NESTs in the ELT profession. In an age when even some NESTs opt to engage in bilingual teaching if not restrained by an institutional monolingual policy (Copland et al., 2020), perhaps it is time to move beyond the NEST/NNEST binary and explore how the two can complement each other, as proposed by many researchers in support of the NNS movement (e.g. Houghton et al., 2018; Rudolph et al., 2015).

CONCLUSION

Against the backdrop of the continuing debate over native-speakerism and the NEST/NNEST binary, there are views challenging the over-simplicity of the dichotomy and its present-day relevance; there are also research efforts to illuminate the role of NNESTs in the TESOL profession and find ways to tap into the strengths of both NESTs and NNESTs through mutual appreciation and collaboration. The present study contributes to the understanding of the relevance of the issue in the context of Hong Kong, a post-colonial society where English is omnipotent in business and academic arenas, and where those who natively speak the language are regarded inherently superior in ELT as reflected by the establishment of the NET Scheme. The responses gathered from tertiary students in the study show that while the preference for NESTs still exists, it may no longer be the majority opinion even in such a context. Learners' preferences are also not as firm as presumed and can be changed by the quality of teaching, be the teacher a NEST or NNEST. It is hoped that such an understanding will provide a useful reference for the administrators and designers of English courses and programmes at tertiary institutions.

This study provides an insight into the reasons and factors behind learners' preferences for NESTs and NNESTs. While confirming some common perceptions about NESTs and NNESTs, the study differentiates perceptions from preferences and shows that positive perceptions may not fully account for learner preferences. This is illustrated by the finding that teachers who are perceived to be effective may not necessarily be the preferred ones. Another factor the study sheds some light on is the association between learners' English proficiency and their preferences. Those who are more proficient may have a stronger desire for teaching by NESTs, mainly

for their native accent and proficiency, and those who are less proficient may prefer NNESTs or LETs for their ability to understand and help them, using their shared local language if necessary. Language proficiency may therefore have predictive power of learners' preferences for NESTs and NNESTs. This points to an area that may deserve further investigation.

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Marine Yeung

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CORRESPONDENCE

Marine Yeung, School of Arts and Humanities, Tung Wah College, Hong Kong
Email address: marineyeung@twc.edu.hk

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APPENDIX

Appendix A. Sample questions used in Section 2 of the questionnaire

(Because of the word limit, only sample questions are provided.)

Please indicate your response by putting a '√' in the right box.

1. Before being taught by a NET, did you prefer being taught by a NET or a LET (local English teachers)?

a. NET b. LET c. No particular preference

Reason(s) for your choice:

2. After being taught by a NET, do you prefer being taught by a NET or a LET?

a. NET b. LET c. No particular preference

Reason(s) for your choice:

3. Before being taught by a NET, did you have any expectations of NET teaching? If yes, what were they?

Yes, I had expectations of NET teaching.
I expected

No, I did not have any special expectations.

4. Did the NET(s) live up to your expectations?

a. YES b. NO

If you choose "NO", can you tell us why the teaching did not live up to your expectations?

5. In your opinion, what are major difference between NET teaching and LET teaching?
6. Do you think any of these differences are important to your learning? How?
7. What is your opinion about the use of Chinese **in teaching and learning English**? (You can choose more than one response.)

a. I think it is necessary for English teachers to use Chinese in teaching in some situations. (Please give examples:

_____)

b. I myself prefer to use Chinese in any lessons, including English lessons.

c. I prefer the English teacher to use some Chinese if he/she can. (Ideal percentage of use of Chinese in lessons: _____)

d. The use of Chinese should be avoided in English lessons at all times.

e. I think students should be free to speak Chinese in English lessons, but the teacher should not even if he/she can.

f. I do not have any strong opinion about the use of Chinese in English lessons.

g. Others (Please specific:
_____)

9. In general, which seems more effective in helping you learn English, NET or LET teaching?

a. NET b. LET

b. It depends

Please explain your choice:
