Abstract

Recent research documents the interest toward the subject native and non-native English speaking teachers. Although studies have focused mainly on teachers (Medgyes 1994; Árva & Medgyes 2000; Llurda 2004, 2005), there is a growing body of research on students’ preferences (Chit Cheong 2009; Mahboob 2004; Lasagabaster & Sierra 2005). The present study was conducted at a university in the French Brittany among 78 students of the License en LEA (Applied Foreign Languages Program). For this purpose, a survey was carried out and students were asked about their preferences in regards the type of teacher. Although the majority of students taking part in the study acknowledged preferring native English speaking teachers when asked in general, the results of the analysis in detail are not clear-cut.

1. Introduction

The present study attempts to be a contribution to the body of work on the dichotomy native English speaking teachers (hence NEST) and non-native English speaking teachers (hence NNEST). The aim of this study is twofold. In the first place, I intend to explore which are the preferences, if any, of the students in the Applied Foreign Languages Program at the University of Rennes 2, in the French Brittany, towards being taught by NEST, NNEST or both of them. In the second place, my aim is to discover whether the level of studies plays a part in these preferences.

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students’ preferences. As some scholars have suggested, the two groups of teachers have different styles and strategies. For example, Árva and Medgyes (2000, p. 464) pointed out that native teachers seem to be more tolerant towards students’ errors and non-native teachers would be more committed to teaching (2000, p. 369). Clark & Paran (2007, p. 10) state that NNEST have some advantages such as the fact that they share students’ first language and have a shared cultural background.

Building on recent research (Chit Cheong, 2009; Mahboob, 2004; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005), the first hypothesis is that university students in this particular university would prefer a different kind of teacher depending on whether background knowledge/first language is needed to fully grasp the subject. That means that NEST would be preferred to teach speaking, pronunciation, listening and culture; NNEST would be regarded as more suitable for grammar and learning strategies; and BOTH for vocabulary and reading. The second hypothesis is that the most advanced the students, the more they will prefer being taught by BOTH (Cheung & Braine, 2007; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005; Madrid & Pérez Cañado, 2004; Moussu & Braine, 2006).

For this study, a questionnaire was carried out among 78 students of the three years Licence en LEA (Applied Foreign Languages Program). Students in this program learn two compulsory languages (in this study, all had chosen English and Spanish) and they have two study options, whether they want to become translators or international commercial agents.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 NEST vs. NNEST?

According to some authors (Mousu & Llurda, 2008), an analysis of the two types of teachers seems to implicitly acknowledge differences between them. Although it is not the aim of this study to tackle this dichotomy in itself, some explanations are to be included for the sake of clarity. In this paper, the terms NEST and NNEST would be related to the fact that teachers in this particular study have different origins whether they were born in France or in an English-speaking country. Indeed, in France, traditionally the public education system hired only teachers with French nationality. From 1992 onwards however, the system had to accommodate to the dictates of the Treaty of Maastricht that opened the system to teachers coming from other European countries. According to Derivry-Plard (2004, p. 50), that also led to the birth of a new category of teachers to be included in the yearly statistics: the native speaker teacher.

2.2 NEST and NNEST in France

As the development of English seems unstoppable, many positions for teachers of English have been created worldwide. In this situation, although the majority of the language teaching relies in NNEST’ hands (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 91), NEST are sometimes preferred over NNEST by employers (Mahboob, 2004, p. 121). In France, teachers of all subjects have to pass a selective civil servant competition, the CAPES or the Agrégation in order to be able to work in the public education system. At university, only PhD holders are allowed to have permanent positions, although there are some posts for teachers having passed the Agrégation. As a result, the difficulty of this process legitimatizes the intellectual status of educators (Derivry-Plard, 2004, p. 49), irrespective of their origin. Indeed, Árva & Medgyes add that teachers “should be hired solely on the basis of their professional virtue, regardless of their language background” (2000, p. 358).

In her study, Derivry-Plard (2004) demonstrates how foreign teachers, despite of French teachers’ worse prospects, do not outnumber local teachers. Nevertheless, she also shows that NEST’ success in national competitions is higher in certain languages: e.g. in English and in German.

More specifically, in this particular university, in the Department d’Anglais LEA (English as Applied Language Department), out of 18 teachers, 7 of them are Anglophones, including 2 lecteurs (a lecteur is a young person who holds a temporary position with no research obligation and who is native of the language taught).
2.3. Students Preferences

Research on students’ preferences shows how students hold positive and negative views regarding NEST and NNEST. Two factors seem to play a role in students’ preferences.

The first would be linked to the subject taught, as even when students regard positively NNEST, they seem to prefer NEST for subjects connected with oral skills including pronunciation, culture and civilization, speaking and in a lesser extent, vocabulary (Chit Cheong, 2009; Mahboob, 2004; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005). On the other hand, NNEST are well appreciated overall for their grammar skills (Mahboob, 2004; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005), and personal factors such as being themselves ESL learners, for being perceived as hard-workers (Mahboob, 2004) or for their empathy towards students (Chit Cheong, 2009; Mahboob, 2004; Moussu & Braine, 2006). However, some areas seem to throw misleading results: for example, NEST are appreciated by their innovative teaching methods in some studies (Chit Cheong, 2009), whereas in other studies NNEST are perceived as having a better or more varied teaching methods (Mahboob, 2004).

Another feature would be connected with the students’ level of studies. As Lasagabaster & Sierra (2002) show, although university students hold positive attitudes towards NNEST, they seem to prefer NEST when at university but they hold a different view for primary education (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005; Madrid & Pérez Cañado, 2004). In contrast, some studies show that at university level, positive attitudes towards NNEST increased through time (Moussu & Braine, 2006; Cheung & Braine, 2007).

3. Methodology and Data

In order to gather the students’ preferences in this specific university in Rennes towards NEST and NNEST, a questionnaire was distributed among 78 university students at the beginning of the first semester. These students are engaged in the three years Licence en LEA (hence, L1, L2 and L3). Although students have to learn two mandatory languages, English is required for all the students, their choice being reduced to a second-second language. In this study, all the students have chosen Spanish as their second-second language. Students in this program follow a general first year and from the second year onwards they have to specialize and become translators or international commercial agents.

The questionnaire was designed by the author based on the questionnaire provided by Lasagabaster & Sierra (2005). It consisted of 18 items and students were offered three options as an answer: NEST, NON-NEST or BOTH. The category BOTH was included as some scholars regard it as crucial to understand students’ preferences (Medgyes, 1994; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005). The participants were asked to fill out the questionnaire distributed at the beginning of the course and completed during class time. They were informed that it was a voluntary study and that they could withdraw with no penalty. The questions were in French as well as the instructions. The questionnaire took about 15 minutes to complete, being the return rate of 100%.

4. Results

In general, the students in this study show their preference towards NEST (in L1, 51%; in L2, 60%; in L3, 51%), which is in tune with other studies (Lasagabaster & Sierra 2005). However, when subjects are taken separately, the results are not clear-cut. NNEST stand out only in one subject and for the students in the first year of university: they are preferred to teach grammar, over all in L1 (41%), otherwise in L2 and L3, students prefer the category BOTH. Indeed, NNEST are usually attached to grammar, in studies focused on students’ preferences (Mahboob, 2004; Chit Cheong, 2009) and even in teacher-centered analysis (Medgyes, 1994; Árva & Medgyes, 2000) where NNEST claimed that grammar is their strongest subject.

The BOTH category seems to be appreciated to teach vocabulary, strategies and culture (except for the students in L2 that show their preference towards NEST in the latter). These results contrast with other studies where NEST are valued as teachers of vocabulary or culture (Mahboob, 2004; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005; Moussu & Braine, 2006). NNEST are usually preferred regarding the teaching of strategies (Mahboob, 2004).
Students preferred NEST in the rest of the items analyzed, pronunciation (L1, 85%; L2, 96%; L3, 81%), reading (L1, 69%; L2, 69%; L3, 62%) and oral exercises (L1, 81%; L2, 88%; L3, 73%). In comprehension, students in the first year preferred BOTH (50%) closely to NEST (46%), but in L2 and L3 they preferred NEST (65%; and 50% respectively). The preference showed by the students towards NEST may be explained by ideological constructs attached to native speakers. For example, following Braine (1999) native speakers are believed to be more fluent, more reliable regarding acceptability of language forms, as well as more knowledgeable about cultural facts. These results correspond to the outcomes from other studies (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005; Mahboob, 2004; Chit Cheong, 2009).

5. Conclusions

In this study, the preferences of 78 students of the License in LEA (Applied Foreign Languages Program) in a French university in Brittany were analyzed by means of a questionnaire. Although students preferred NEST in some items, overall in subjects connected to oral production such as pronunciation or oral exercises, in others such as grammar, culture, strategies and vocabulary learning, they are inclined towards NNEST or both types of teachers. Therefore, the first hypothesis regarding the fact that students of this particular university in Rennes would prefer a different kind of teacher depending on whether background knowledge/first language is needed to grasp the subject is not fully confirmed, as the subjects I have proposed for each category do not match entirely. However the older the students, the more it seems they are inclined to prefer the BOTH category, and thus, the second hypothesis is confirmed.

In addition, it is worth noting the disappearance of the category NNEST in favor of the category BOTH in many of the items. These results seem to be very positive regarding NNEST as whenever both types of teachers are given a high score, non-native teachers seem to be considered as equally valuable as NEST.

Some limitations of the study are the small sample of students and the fact that only a quantitative analysis was carried out. As some researchers claim (e.g. Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005), this type of studies should be quantitative and qualitative. Indeed, after the statistical analysis of the questionnaire, I informed the students about the results in general and addressed them some questions. These exchanges that were done in an informal way, engaged the students into a discussion of their preferences that will be analyzed elsewhere.

Finally, the results presented in this study are against the “native speaker only” policy applied by many employers invoking students’ preferences regarding native speaker teachers.

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