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TEACHER ORIGIN AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AND CROSS-CULTURAL COMPETENCE TO IMPROVE QUALITY EDUCATION OF THAI UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates Thai university students' perceptions of how teachers' origins—local Thai teachers, native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), and foreign non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs)—shape their English language learning experiences and intercultural competence within the broader context of enhancing English quality education in Thailand. Using a phenomenological qualitative design, the research engaged thirty students majoring in English at a southern Thai university. Reflective essays were collected in both English and Thai, and the data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic approach, guided by Garrett's (2010) framework on language attitudes. Four major themes emerged from the analysis. Thai teachers and NNESTs were perceived as particularly effective in teaching grammar and developing linguistic accuracy, owing to their metalinguistic awareness and the use of students' first language (L1) for clarification. NESTs, conversely, were valued for providing authentic models of pronunciation and natural fluency, while NNESTs contributed to adaptability by exposing students to diverse English accents. Furthermore, both Thai teachers and NNESTs fostered student confidence and emotional comfort in classroom interactions, whereas NESTs presented productive challenges that promoted resilience. Finally, exposure to teachers from multiple cultural backgrounds enhanced learners' cross-cultural awareness and communicative competence. The findings underscore the complexity of English learning in the Thai EFL context, demonstrating that each teacher group contributes distinct yet complementary benefits. The study highlights the pedagogical value of diversity and

suggests that an integrated teaching approach—drawing upon the strengths of Thai teachers, NESTs, and NNESTs—can promote holistic language development, intercultural readiness, and inclusive education.

KEYWORDS: English Proficiency, Quality Education, Teacher Identity, Sustainable Communities and Societies, Thai Universities.

1. INTRODUCTION

English has long been recognized as a global lingua franca, serving as a gateway for international communication, higher education, and professional advancement. In Thailand, English is a compulsory subject throughout the education system and a key indicator of graduate employability (Hayes, 2010; Boonsuk et al., 2023). Despite decades of policy reform, the country continues to face challenges in achieving satisfactory levels of communicative competence among learners. The complexity of this situation lies not only in linguistic or methodological issues but also in the diversity of English teachers who shape classroom experiences.

Thai higher education institutions typically employ three major groups of English teachers: local Thai teachers, native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), and foreign non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs). Each group brings different linguistic repertoires, cultural orientations, and pedagogical strengths to the classroom (Ambele & Boonsuk, 2021; Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2014; Channuwong et al., 2025). This diversity reflects the broader global shift towards Global English, where English is no longer viewed as the exclusive property of native speakers but as a pluralistic, evolving means of intercultural communication (Pennycook, 2017). However, within this pluralism persists a deep-rooted ideology—native-speakerism—which tends to privilege teachers from English-speaking countries over others (Phillipson, 1992; Kubota, 2020).

In the Thai context, native-speakerism continues to influence recruitment practices, student expectations, and institutional hierarchies. NESTs are often assumed to represent the “ideal model” of authentic English, while Thai teachers and NNESTs are perceived as less legitimate due to their non-native status (Watson & Pojanapunya, 2022). These perceptions can shape learners’ motivation and self-confidence, potentially leading to internalized linguistic hierarchies (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Conversely, many studies have shown that non-native teachers, because of their shared linguistic and cultural backgrounds with students, may provide greater empathy, clearer grammatical explanations, and a safer affective environment (Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2014; Chun, 2014).

This tension highlights an important pedagogical question: how do students themselves interpret and experience the diverse contributions of teachers from different origins? While comparative research between NESTs and NNESTs has expanded significantly (Aslan & Thompson, 2017; Colmenero &

Lasagabaster, 2023), the Thai context remains underexplored, particularly when considering three distinct teacher groups—Thai, native, and foreign non-native.

Most previous studies have relied on binary comparisons, examining students’ attitudes towards either NESTs or NNESTs (Wang & Fang, 2020; Anggoro & Nguyen, 2021). Few have included local Thai teachers as a separate analytical category, despite their central role in Thailand’s English education system. This omission has limited our understanding of how learners perceive teacher diversity in holistic terms. Furthermore, existing research tends to focus narrowly on linguistic outcomes, with less attention paid to the development of intercultural competence—a vital dimension of English learning in an increasingly globalized society.

Therefore, this study addresses a critical gap by examining Thai university students’ perceptions of the influence of teacher origin—Thai, NESTs, and NNESTs—on both their English proficiency and cross-cultural competence. By focusing on the lived experiences of students, the study adopts a phenomenological qualitative design that foregrounds learner voices as a basis for pedagogical reflection and policy reform.

This research contributes both theoretically and practically to the ongoing discussion of English language education in multilingual contexts. Theoretically, it extends the framework of Global English (Pennycook, 2017) by empirically situating it within a Southeast Asian setting, where teacher diversity is the norm rather than the exception. Practically, the findings aim to inform policymakers, curriculum designers, and educators about the complementary strengths of Thai, native, and non-native English teachers. Understanding these dynamics can lead to more equitable teacher recruitment, inclusive pedagogical strategies, and enhanced learning outcomes in Thai higher education.

1.1. Research Objectives

In line with this aim, the study was guided by the following research objectives:

1. To examine students’ perceptions of how teacher origin influences their English grammatical accuracy and structural competence.
2. To explore students’ perceptions of teachers’ roles in improving pronunciation and speaking proficiency.
3. To investigate how teacher origin affects

students' confidence and learning comfort.

4. To analyze how exposure to diverse teachers enhances students' cross-cultural and communicative competence.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The present study draws upon a combination of sociolinguistic and pedagogical theories that explain how learners perceive and evaluate teachers of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Four major theoretical perspectives guide the analysis: language attitude theory (Garrett, 2010), native-speakerism and linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992; Kubota, 2020), raciolinguistic ideology (Flores & Rosa, 2015), and the Global English framework (Pennycook, 2017; Ambele & Boonsuk, 2021). Together, these perspectives provide a multidimensional lens for examining teacher identity, power relations, and student perceptions in English language teaching (ELT).

2.1.1. Language Attitudes as Socially Constructed Phenomena

Garrett (2010) emphasizes that language attitudes are not innate or static but are socially constructed through discourse, experience, and institutional ideology. Within the context of ELT, students' attitudes towards teachers—whether native, non-native, or local—are shaped by a combination of linguistic ideology, classroom experience, and societal power structures. This implies that perceptions of teacher competence are often grounded less in actual pedagogical performance and more in socially reinforced beliefs about what constitutes “good English”.

In the Thai context, such attitudes are particularly salient because English proficiency is closely associated with socioeconomic status, international opportunity, and prestige. Therefore, Thai learners' perceptions of teachers' language origins are inevitably mediated by broader sociocultural values, including respect for authority, national identity, and global aspiration (Pansuwong *et al.*, 2023; Boonsuk *et al.*, 2023). Understanding these attitudes is crucial because they influence learners' motivation, classroom participation, and self-confidence (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020).

2.1.2. Native-Speakerism and Linguistic Imperialism

Phillipson's (1992) theory of linguistic imperialism argues that global ELT practices have long been dominated by a native-speaker ideology

that positions English as belonging to speakers from inner-circle nations (e.g., the UK, USA, Australia). Under this ideology, native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) are often idealized as the most authentic and desirable instructors, while non-native teachers (NNESTs) and local teachers are viewed as deficient or “less English”.

Recent scholarship (Kubota, 2020; Wang & Fang, 2020) has problematized this ideology as epistemologically racist, noting that it perpetuates inequitable employment practices, reinforces global linguistic hierarchies, and marginalizes diverse English-speaking communities. In Southeast Asia, and Thailand in particular, native-speakerism manifests in the preference for Western accents, physical appearance, and cultural background in teacher recruitment and student evaluation (Watson Todd & Pojanapunya, 2022).

By applying this framework, the current study situates student perceptions within a critical understanding of how power, language, and race intersect in educational settings. It also examines how learners internalize or resist native-speaker assumptions through their experiences with multiple teacher groups.

2.1.3. Raciolinguistic Ideologies and the Social Construction of Legitimacy

Flores and Rosa (2015) introduced the concept of raciolinguistic ideologies to explain how racialized and linguistic identities intertwine to construct perceptions of linguistic legitimacy. According to this view, speakers (and by extension teachers) are not evaluated solely based on linguistic competence but also through racialized listening practices that categorize who is perceived as a legitimate English user.

This theory is particularly relevant in multicultural classrooms, where Thai learners encounter teachers from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Perceptions of NNESTs from Asian or African countries may be influenced by raciolinguistic bias, leading to differential respect or expectations compared with Western native speakers. The framework thus allows this study to explore how students' perceptions are shaped not merely by pedagogy but also by implicit ideologies of race, language, and identity embedded within the Thai EFL classroom.

2.1.4 Global English and Pedagogical Plurality

Finally, the framework of Global English (Pennycook, 2017; Ambele & Boonsuk, 2021) underpins the pedagogical orientation of this

research. This paradigm challenges the notion of a single “standard” English and instead recognizes the multiplicity of English varieties worldwide. In Global English classrooms, emphasis is placed on intelligibility, communication, and intercultural understanding, rather than imitation of native norms.

The Global English framework aligns with the study’s focus on cross-cultural competence, arguing that exposure to teachers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds prepares students for real-world global communication. By viewing linguistic diversity as a resource rather than a deficiency, this perspective informs the study’s interpretation of students’ positive experiences with NNESTs and Thai teachers.

Together, these theoretical foundations provide an integrated framework that bridges linguistic, sociocultural, and pedagogical dimensions—essential for understanding how students perceive teacher origin in a multilingual educational context.

2.2. Related Empirical Studies

2.2.1. Comparative Perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs

A substantial body of research has explored students’ perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs. Aslan and Thompson (2017) found that students often differentiate teachers based on perceived linguistic authenticity rather than teaching ability. Similarly, Colmenero and Lasagabaster (2023) observed that learners typically associate NESTs with oral proficiency and pronunciation, while NNESTs are valued for their ability to empathize with learners and explain complex grammatical structures clearly.

These findings are echoed in the Southeast Asian context. In Vietnam and Japan, Walkinshaw and Oanh (2014) reported that students appreciated NNESTs for their approachability and explicit instruction, but still considered NESTs as pronunciation models. In Indonesia, Anggoro and Nguyen (2021) noted that students’ acceptance of foreign NNESTs depended heavily on accent intelligibility and perceived teaching professionalism. These studies collectively highlight the enduring influence of native-speakerism even in multilingual, globalized educational systems.

2.2.2. The Thai EFL Context: Teacher Diversity and Pedagogical Realities

Within Thailand, a few notable studies have examined similar issues. Hayes (2010) documented how rural schools rely primarily on Thai teachers,

who often compensate for limited exposure to authentic English by integrating bilingual teaching strategies. Ulla (2018) reported that Filipino NNESTs in Thai universities contributed positively to learners’ communicative competence, particularly through cultural proximity and shared regional identity. Boonsuk et al. (2023) extended this argument, contending that Thai higher education needs to reposition English teaching practices within a Global English framework to promote equity and authenticity.

Nevertheless, much of this literature treats Thai teachers and NNESTs as a single “non-native” category, overlooking the distinct sociocultural roles each group plays in the classroom. The current study, therefore, seeks to disentangle these categories to better understand students’ differentiated perceptions of Thai teachers, NESTs, and foreign NNESTs.

2.2.3. Psychological and Affective Dimensions of Learning

Several studies emphasize the emotional and psychological dimensions of language learning. Chun (2014) observed that learners often feel less anxious and more comfortable with non-native teachers who share similar learning experiences. Zarrinabadi et al. (2022) and Wong et al. (2025) further demonstrated that classroom environments that balance emotional safety with communicative challenge enhance learner resilience and willingness to communicate. These insights are crucial for interpreting the present study’s findings regarding students’ confidence and learning comfort across teacher groups.

Dewaele and Dewaele (2020) also pointed out that teacher empathy and emotional intelligence play a central role in shaping learners’ engagement and success. In the Thai context, where power distance and classroom formality are relatively high, such affective dynamics can determine whether students perceive a teacher as approachable or intimidating.

2.2.4. Teacher Origin and Intercultural Competence

A growing body of work has begun to link teacher diversity with the development of students’ intercultural competence. Viáfara González (2020) found that telecollaboration projects between Colombian and European teacher trainees helped participants re-evaluate linguistic ideologies and appreciate diversity in English use. Similarly, Lemana, Waluyo, and Ahmad (2025) revealed that exposure to NNESTs in Thai universities improved students’ cultural sensitivity and satisfaction with

English learning.

These studies reinforce the argument that intercultural exposure through diverse teachers plays a vital role in preparing students for global communication. However, empirical evidence from Thailand remains limited and fragmented, necessitating further inquiry into how students perceive and experience intercultural learning in classrooms led by teachers of varying origins.

2.5. Synthesis and Research Direction

In synthesis, existing research provides a strong foundation for understanding the dichotomy between NESTs and NNESTs but insufficiently addresses the triangular relationship among Thai teachers, NESTs, and NNESTs. Moreover, while much of the literature focuses on linguistic outcomes, few studies integrate psychological and intercultural dimensions into their analyses.

By adopting a phenomenological qualitative approach, this study responds directly to these gaps. It positions student voices at the center of inquiry, interpreting how their lived experiences with different teacher groups shape both linguistic proficiency and cross-cultural competence. The next section presents the methodological framework employed to capture and analyze these experiences systematically.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of Thai university students regarding the influence of teachers' linguistic and cultural origins on English language learning. Phenomenology, as defined by Sohn *et al.* (2017), seeks to uncover the essence of human experiences as they are subjectively understood by individuals. This approach was considered appropriate because the study's focus lies not on measuring proficiency or comparing outcomes statistically, but on understanding how students interpret their experiences with teachers from different backgrounds.

Phenomenological research is particularly valuable in language education, where learning is inherently personal, emotional, and socially situated (Dodgson, 2023). In this context, it allows for a nuanced examination of how teacher identity, pedagogy, and interactional style contribute to learners' sense of confidence, linguistic growth, and intercultural understanding. By prioritizing participants' voices, this design also aligns with

Garrett's (2010) conceptualization of language attitudes as socially constructed phenomena that emerge from experience and discourse rather than innate preference.

3.2. Participants

The participants were thirty first-year undergraduate students majoring in English at a public university located in southern Thailand. They were recruited through purposive sampling, a technique that allows researchers to select individuals with direct and relevant experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). All participants had studied with at least three types of English teachers during their university coursework: (1) local Thai teachers, (2) native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) from countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, and (3) non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) from countries including the Philippines, Indonesia, China, and Bhutan.

The students' ages ranged from 18 to 22 years, with 24 females and 6 males. Most participants reported at least five years of formal English education prior to entering university, ensuring a common baseline of exposure to English instruction. The inclusion criteria required participants to have attended classes taught by all three teacher groups within the previous academic year to ensure comparability of perceptions. Participation was voluntary, and all students provided written informed consent prior to data collection.

This sample size is consistent with phenomenological research conventions, which prioritize depth of insight over breadth of representation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data saturation—the point at which no new themes emerged—was reached after the 25th essay, with the remaining five essays used for validation and thematic refinement.

3.3. Data Collection

Data were collected using reflective essays, a method chosen for its ability to capture introspective, authentic accounts of learner experiences. Reflective writing encourages participants to articulate thoughts and emotions freely, thereby revealing underlying beliefs and values that might not surface during structured interviews (Avarzamani & Farahian, 2019).

Participants were asked to write one essay of approximately 800–1,000 words in response to two open-ended prompts:

1. Describe your experiences learning English

with Thai teachers, native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), and non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs). How did each group influence your learning of English?

2. Explain which teacher group you feel most comfortable learning with and why. What factors shape your preferences or attitudes towards these teachers?

Students were given one week to complete the essays and were allowed to write in either Thai or English. This bilingual option ensured that students could express complex emotions and nuanced reflections without linguistic constraint (Avarzamani & Farahian, 2019). Essays written in Thai were later translated into English by the researchers and cross-checked by a bilingual language expert for accuracy and cultural equivalence.

All essays were submitted anonymously via Google Forms to protect participants' privacy. The researchers assigned pseudonyms to each participant and removed all identifiable information from the dataset prior to analysis.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis, which enables the systematic identification, organization, and interpretation of patterns within qualitative data. Both inductive and deductive approaches were employed: inductive to allow themes to emerge naturally from the data, and deductive to connect those themes with existing theoretical frameworks on language attitudes and teacher identity (Garrett, 2010; Kubota, 2020).

The analysis proceeded through the following steps:

1. Familiarization: The researchers repeatedly read the essays to gain an overall sense of the data and made preliminary notes.
2. Coding: Initial codes were assigned to meaningful units of text that related to participants' perceptions of each teacher group.
3. Theme Generation: Codes were clustered into broader categories that represented recurring ideas across the essays.
4. Theme Review: The emerging themes were compared against the dataset to ensure internal coherence and distinctiveness.
5. Theme Definition and Naming: Each theme was refined and labelled to capture its essence clearly.
6. Reporting: The themes were synthesized into a coherent narrative that reflected the

relationship between teacher origin and learners' experiences.

The final analysis yielded four key themes: (1) Linguistic Accuracy and Grammar, (2) Pronunciation and Speaking, (3) Confidence and Learning Comfort, and (4) Cultural and Communicative Competence. These themes directly correspond to the study's research objectives and are presented in detail in the following section.

3.5. Trustworthiness and Validation

To ensure the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings, several validation strategies were implemented.

1. Triangulation: The interpretations were cross-checked with existing literature and theoretical frameworks to enhance analytical rigor (Ahmed, 2024).
2. Peer Debriefing: Two independent colleagues with expertise in TESOL and qualitative methods reviewed the coding and thematic structure, providing feedback to reduce researcher bias.
3. Member Checking: A subset of participants (n = 6) reviewed the preliminary findings to confirm that the interpretations accurately reflected their intended meanings (McKim, 2023).
4. Reflexivity: The researchers maintained reflective journals to document their assumptions and reactions throughout the analysis process, enhancing transparency.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the university's research ethics committee. Participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without academic penalty.

3.6. Researcher Positionality

As qualitative research emphasizes reflexivity, it is important to acknowledge the researchers' positionalities. The lead researcher is a Thai lecturer in English language and management studies, with prior experience as a non-native English user and educator. This insider perspective facilitated rapport with participants and informed a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural nuances underlying their experiences. The co-researchers, one from Thailand and one from Belarus, contributed intercultural perspectives that supported interpretive balance. This triangulation of viewpoints contributed to the trustworthiness and intercultural sensitivity of the findings.

In summary, this methodological framework was

designed to capture the complex, subjective experiences of Thai students as they navigated learning with teachers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The use of phenomenological inquiry allowed for the exploration of how these experiences shaped students' perceptions, confidence, and intercultural awareness. The next section presents the results of the thematic analysis, organized according to the four emergent themes identified.

4. RESULTS

The thematic analysis of the reflective essays revealed four major themes that encapsulate how Thai students perceive the influence of teacher origin on their English language learning and intercultural competence. These themes were: (1) Linguistic Accuracy and Grammar, (2) Pronunciation and Speaking, (3) Confidence and Learning Comfort, and (4) Cultural and Communicative Competence.

Each theme illustrates distinct but interrelated dimensions of the learning experience, collectively reflecting the multifaceted nature of English education in Thailand. The findings also align directly with the study's four research objectives and are visually summarized in Figure 1, which depicts the conceptual model linking teacher groups to learners' linguistic, psychological, and cultural development.

4.1. Linguistic Accuracy and Grammar

Students consistently described Thai teachers and NNESTs as particularly effective in developing their grammatical knowledge and linguistic accuracy. They emphasized the teachers' ability to clarify rules and concepts using learners' first language (L1), which provided scaffolding for understanding complex English structures. As one participant reflected,

"My Thai teacher can explain grammar in Thai, so I understand quickly and remember how to use it correctly." (Student 11)

Another student expressed similar appreciation for NNESTs, stating,

"Non-native teachers know our problems because they also learned English as a foreign language. They know what mistakes we usually make." (Student 5)

These insights reflect a high level of metalinguistic awareness among Thai and non-native teachers, which enhances the precision and clarity of grammatical explanations. However, some students acknowledged that such emphasis on accuracy occasionally led to limited opportunities for spontaneous communication.

"I know the grammar rules very well, but when I talk, I stop to think about them too much." (Student 8).

This theme aligns with previous research (Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2014; Anggoro & Nguyen, 2021) suggesting that NNESTs' shared learning experiences foster empathetic, learner-centered teaching but may inadvertently prioritize correctness over fluency.

4.2. Pronunciation and Speaking

The second theme concerns students' perceptions of NESTs as models for pronunciation and oral fluency. Many participants described native English-speaking teachers as offering authentic language exposure and opportunities to practice "real" English.

"Native teachers speak naturally. We can learn how to pronounce and use expressions like real English speakers." (Student 14)

Students perceived NESTs as effective facilitators of spoken competence, especially in improving intonation, rhythm, and conversational flow. However, they also recognized the complementary benefits of NNESTs who represented diverse English accents.

"At first, I could not understand my Filipino teacher's accent, but after a few weeks, I got used to it, and now I can listen to many different English speakers." (Student 22)

This finding supports the Global English perspective (Pennycook, 2017), which advocates for exposure to multiple varieties of English to enhance communicative adaptability. Students' reflections suggest a gradual shift from seeking a single "native" model towards appreciating linguistic diversity and intelligibility. The ability to interact with teachers from varied backgrounds contributed to listening flexibility and confidence in real-world communication.

4.3. Confidence and Learning Comfort

The third theme highlights the affective dimension of learning, particularly how different teacher groups influenced students' confidence and comfort in the classroom. Many participants reported feeling more relaxed and supported with Thai teachers and NNESTs, who were described as empathetic and approachable.

"Non-native teachers understand our difficulties. We are not afraid to ask questions or make mistakes." (Student 3)

Thai teachers' use of the L1 and culturally familiar examples helped reduce anxiety and encourage

participation.

“When my Thai teacher explains something in Thai, it helps me feel safe. I can ask questions without embarrassment.” (Student 9)

In contrast, several students described their experiences with NESTs as initially intimidating but ultimately motivating.

“I was nervous at first with native speakers, but after some time, I felt more confident to communicate. They pushed me to try.” (Student 15)

This tension between comfort and challenge reflects the “productive struggle” in language learning (Zarrinabadi, Lou, & Ahmadi, 2022), where anxiety becomes a catalyst for growth. As illustrated in Figure 1, this balance between empathy (Thai and NNEST teachers) and motivation (NESTs) forms a crucial component of learners’ confidence development. Overall, students viewed emotional safety as essential for participation, while periodic challenge was necessary for advancement.

4.4. Cultural and Communicative Competence

The final theme concerns the development of cross-cultural awareness and communicative competence. Students valued exposure to teachers from multiple backgrounds as an opportunity to expand their cultural horizons.

“Native speakers help me understand Western culture, but non-native teachers show me how English is used in other countries.” (Student 20)

Participants perceived NESTs as cultural representatives who introduced Western customs, values, and idiomatic language. NNESTs, however, were praised for promoting multicultural perspectives, drawing on experiences from Asia and beyond.

“I learned that English is not only British or American. Many people use English in different ways. It made me more open-minded.” (Student 28)

This finding resonates with Pennycook’s (2017) and Ambele and Boonsuk’s (2021) arguments that teaching within a Global English framework enables learners to view English as a plural, global resource rather than a singular native norm. By learning from teachers representing different linguistic and cultural communities, students developed not only communicative competence but also intercultural empathy, preparing them for global communication.

4.5. Summary of the Findings

Taken together, the four themes demonstrate that each teacher group—Thai, NESTs, and NNESTs—contributes unique strengths to students’ language development. Thai teachers and NNESTs provide

foundational accuracy and emotional support; NESTs contribute authentic pronunciation and communicative motivation; and both NESTs and NNESTs enrich intercultural awareness.

This multidimensional relationship among teachers is represented visually in Figure 1, where the Student Learning Experience lies at the center, connected to the four surrounding themes. The diagram emphasizes how linguistic, affective, and cultural dimensions interconnect to produce holistic English language learning.

Table 1: Summary of Emergent Themes and Key Insights

Theme	Teacher Group	Key Contributions	
Linguistic Accuracy and Grammar	Thai teachers + NNESTs	Clear grammar explanations; L1 support; high metalinguistic awareness	Provide structural foundation but may limit fluency
Pronunciation and Speaking	NESTs; NNESTs with diverse accents	Authentic pronunciation models (NESTs); exposure to diverse accents (NNESTs)	NESTs viewed as prestigious; NNESTs enhance adaptability
Confidence and Learning Comfort	Thai teachers + NNESTs; NESTs	Empathy and supportive climate (Thai/NNESTs); motivational challenge (NESTs)	Comfort builds confidence; challenge drives progress
Cultural and Communicative Competence	NESTs + NNESTs	Exposure to Western norms (NESTs); global perspectives (NNESTs)	

Source: Data derived from thematic analysis of reflective essays (n = 30).

Table 1 summarizes the four emergent themes, illustrating how each teacher group contributes distinct yet complementary pedagogical benefits. Together, these findings reveal the dynamic interplay among linguistic accuracy, communicative ability, learner confidence, and cultural awareness.

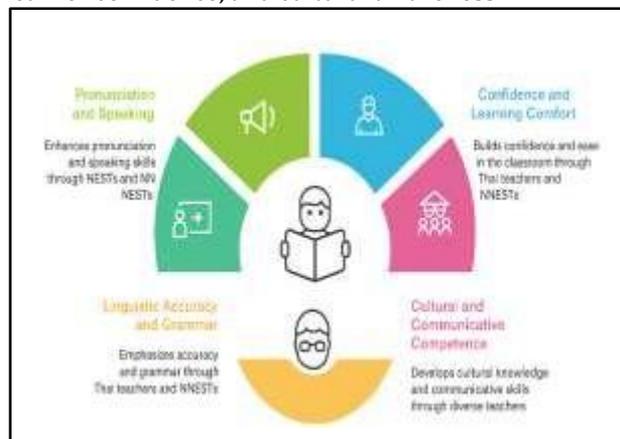


Figure 1 (Conceptual Model of Emergent Themes and Teacher Contributions) graphically represents the interrelationship among the four themes. The central circle—Student Learning Experience— connects to four surrounding nodes: Linguistic Accuracy & Grammar, Pronunciation & Speaking, Confidence & Comfort, and Cultural & Communicative Competence. Arrows between nodes illustrate the bidirectional influence of linguistic, affective, and cultural dimensions.

This model demonstrates that effective English learning in Thai higher education results from a synergistic integration of all teacher groups. Thai teachers and NNESTs establish the linguistic and emotional foundation, while NESTs provide communicative authenticity and global exposure. The overlapping arrows symbolize the interconnectedness of these influences, reflecting the study's conclusion that teacher diversity fosters holistic and inclusive English education.

4.6. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore Thai university students' perceptions of how teachers' linguistic and cultural origins—Thai teachers, native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), and foreign non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs)—influence their English language proficiency and intercultural competence. The findings yielded four interrelated themes: (1) linguistic accuracy and grammar, (2) pronunciation and speaking, (3) confidence and learning comfort, and (4) cultural and communicative competence. Together, these themes provide valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of English education in Thailand and highlight the complementary strengths of diverse teacher groups. This section discusses the findings in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks, followed by pedagogical and policy implications.

4.6.1. Linguistic Accuracy and Grammar: Pedagogical Strengths of Non-Native and Local Teachers

The first theme underscored the significance of Thai teachers and NNESTs in supporting learners' grammatical understanding and linguistic accuracy. Students frequently highlighted the clarity of explanation, metalinguistic awareness, and strategic use of their first language (L1) as critical tools for comprehension. These findings reaffirm previous research (Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2014; Anggoro & Nguyen, 2021) that emphasized the pedagogical advantages of non-native teachers, who, having

experienced similar learning challenges, can anticipate students' difficulties and scaffold instruction accordingly.

From Garrett's (2010) perspective on language attitudes, such positive perceptions of Thai teachers and NNESTs demonstrate that learners' beliefs are socially constructed rather than inherently biased towards native norms. Students value teachers' empathy and clarity because these qualities directly meet their learning needs. The ability to switch between languages also aligns with translanguaging pedagogy, which views bilingualism as a resource rather than an obstacle.

However, the study also revealed a subtle tension between accuracy and fluency. While grammar-oriented instruction provided students with a solid structural foundation, it sometimes restricted spontaneous communication. This finding echoes Hayes (2010) and Boonsuk *et al.* (2023), who noted that Thailand's exam-driven education system often reinforces form-focused learning. As a result, learners may achieve grammatical competence without developing communicative confidence. Addressing this imbalance requires an integrated pedagogy where structural instruction from local teachers is complemented by communicative practice with NESTs and NNESTs.

4.6.2 Pronunciation and Speaking: Native Models and Global English Perspectives

The second theme highlighted the central role of NESTs as models for authentic pronunciation and oral fluency, while acknowledging NNESTs' contributions to exposure to varied English accents. Students' preference for NESTs as pronunciation benchmarks reflects the persistent influence of native-speakerism (Phillipson, 1992), an ideology that idealizes native varieties as the "correct" or most desirable form of English. This perception remains deeply ingrained in both institutional recruitment and learner beliefs across Asia (Kubota, 2020; Wang & Fang, 2020).

Nevertheless, the findings also point towards an emerging ideological shift. Students increasingly recognized the value of NNESTs with diverse accents, noting that such exposure improved their listening adaptability and real-world communication skills. This growing acceptance aligns with the Global English framework (Pennycook, 2017; Ambele & Boonsuk, 2021), which advocates for linguistic pluralism and intelligibility over native conformity. Learners' reflections that "English is not only British or American" illustrate a reorientation from linguistic hierarchy to inclusivity.

These findings suggest that exposure to teachers from multiple linguistic backgrounds fosters accent tolerance and communicative flexibility, qualities essential for participating in global English interactions. As Watson and Pojanapunya (2022) and Khan et al., (2026) observed, attitudes in Thailand are gradually shifting from native preference to a more balanced appreciation of communicative effectiveness. To sustain this shift, teacher education programs must explicitly incorporate Global English-informed pedagogy, encouraging both NESTs and NNESTs to teach English as a plural, international language rather than as a monolithic standard.

4.6.3. Confidence and Learning Comfort: The Affective Dimension of Teacher Influence

The third theme underscored the emotional and psychological aspects of language learning, particularly students' confidence and sense of comfort in class. Thai teachers and NNESTs were seen as empathetic and supportive, while NESTs provided motivational challenge. This duality mirrors the "productive tension" described by Channuwong et al. (2022) and Zarrinabadi et al. (2022), wherein learning anxiety, if properly managed, becomes a driver for communicative growth.

Students' accounts of feeling less anxious with Thai teachers reflect the cultural proximity hypothesis which posits that teachers who share learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds can create affectively safe environments conducive to participation (Zafri et al., 2023; Chun, 2014).

This was further reinforced by teachers' use of L1, humor, and contextualized examples that aligned with Thai cultural expectations of respect and harmony. Such comfort, in turn, enhanced students' willingness to communicate and reduced fear of negative evaluation (Pansuwong et al., 2023; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020).

Conversely, NESTs were described as challenging yet beneficial, pushing students beyond their comfort zones into authentic communication. This aligns with Garrett's (2010) assertion that attitudes are shaped by emotional and cultural negotiations. Students recognized that discomfort with NESTs was not merely a barrier but also an opportunity for self-development. The balance between support and challenge, as depicted in Figure 1, is thus crucial to achieving optimal learning outcomes. Pedagogically, this implies that institutions should cultivate mixed teaching teams, combining empathetic instruction from Thai and NNESTs with experiential, communicative exposure from NESTs.

4.6.4. Cultural and Communicative Competence: Intercultural Learning through Teacher Diversity

The fourth theme highlights how teacher diversity enhances students' intercultural competence. Learners reported that NESTs provided access to Western cultural knowledge and idiomatic use of English, while NNESTs contributed global and multicultural perspectives. This dynamic aligns with Pennycook's (2017) and Rattananda et al. (2025) Kashif et al. (2015) argument that teaching English in global contexts should move beyond linguistic instruction to encompass cultural reflexivity and openness.

Students' experiences also validate Kubota's (2020) call to decolonize ELT by challenging Western-centered ideologies and embracing epistemic plurality. Exposure to teachers from diverse regions encouraged learners to appreciate English as a global communicative resource rather than a marker of Western prestige. In this regard, NNESTs function as mediators of intercultural understanding, bridging linguistic diversity with shared global values.

Furthermore, Lemana et al. (2025) and Ghouali (2025) found that students taught by NNESTs exhibited greater satisfaction and cultural sensitivity due to teachers' ability to contextualize learning within regional and cultural relevance. This finding complements the present study, suggesting that intercultural competence is best achieved through pedagogical pluralism—the strategic combination of varied teacher origins to reflect the multiplicity of English in the real world.

In the Thai EFL context, where exposure to global communication is limited, such diversity not only enhances linguistic readiness but also promotes intercultural empathy and global citizenship. By experiencing English through multiple cultural lenses, students develop the mindset needed to function effectively in multilingual environments.

6.5 Integration with Theoretical Frameworks

Synthesizing these findings through the theoretical lenses of Garrett (2010), Phillipson (1992), Flores and Rosa (2015), and Pennycook (2017) reveals the interplay of ideology, emotion, and pedagogy in shaping students' perceptions.

1. Garrett's theory of language attitudes explains why learners' evaluations of teachers depend on social and emotional factors rather than objective linguistic criteria. Students construct meaning about teacher competence based on their comfort, trust, and communicative experiences.
2. Phillipson's native-speakerism framework

helps interpret students' continued association of NESTs with linguistic authority while also contextualizing their gradual ideological shift towards pluralism.

3. Flores and Rosa's raciolinguistic perspective provides a lens for understanding implicit biases towards teachers from different ethnic backgrounds and how learners' experiences challenge such biases through direct intercultural exposure.
4. Pennycook's Global English paradigm underpins the transformative potential of teacher diversity, framing it as a pedagogical asset that nurtures intercultural competence and inclusivity.

Collectively, these frameworks affirm that learners' attitudes are fluid and socially mediated. As depicted in Figure 1, the four emergent themes are interlinked within the broader ecosystem of English language learning, where linguistic precision, communicative practice, emotional safety, and cultural awareness operate in synergy.

4.6.6 Pedagogical and Policy Implications

The findings of this study have significant implications for English language teaching practice and policy in Thailand and similar EFL contexts.

First, the results highlight the need to redefine teacher recruitment criteria beyond native-speaker status. Institutions should recognize the pedagogical expertise and intercultural value of qualified NNESTs and local teachers. Recruitment policies based on linguistic nativeness perpetuate inequality and limit students' exposure to global English (Kubota, 2020).

Second, professional development program should promote collaborative teaching models that integrate the strengths of different teacher groups. For instance, Thai teachers and NNESTs could focus on grammar, vocabulary, and learner support, while NESTs could lead communicative practice and cultural immersion sessions. This balanced approach can help overcome the form-versus-fluency divide identified in the findings.

Third, curricula should explicitly incorporate Global English perspectives, encouraging students to engage with multiple varieties of English and intercultural communication practices. This will help learners move beyond imitation of native norms and towards intelligibility and adaptability—key competencies in global communication.

Finally, policy-makers should invest in teacher training that enhances emotional intelligence, empathy, and intercultural awareness. As

demonstrated in the theme of "Confidence and Learning Comfort", the affective relationship between teacher and learner is central to success. Teacher education should therefore include modules on psychological safety, cross-cultural understanding, and reflective pedagogy.

In summary, the discussion highlights that the diversity of English teachers in Thai universities constitutes a strength rather than a limitation. Each group—Thai, NESTs, and NNESTs—contributes a distinct yet complementary dimension to students' linguistic, affective, and intercultural growth. The findings not only corroborate but also extend existing theoretical frameworks, illustrating how learners negotiate multiple identities, ideologies, and expectations within their English learning journey.

By situating these insights within the paradigm of Global English, the study advocates for an inclusive and pluralistic pedagogy that values diversity as central to quality English education. This approach supports Thailand's broader educational goal of producing graduates who are linguistically proficient, culturally competent, and globally adaptable.

5. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how Thai university students perceive the influence of teachers' linguistic and cultural origins—local Thai teachers, native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), and foreign non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs)—on their English language learning and intercultural competence. Employing a phenomenological qualitative design, the research collected reflective essays from thirty English-major students at a southern Thai university and analyzed them through Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic framework.

Four key themes emerged from the data: (1) Linguistic Accuracy and Grammar, (2) Pronunciation and Speaking, (3) Confidence and Learning Comfort, and (4) Cultural and Communicative Competence. These themes collectively depict how learners construct meaning around teacher origin, drawing upon both cognitive and emotional dimensions of the learning experience. The findings demonstrate that teacher diversity within Thai higher education constitutes not a challenge but a pedagogical asset—one that enhances students' linguistic development, psychological confidence, and intercultural awareness.

The results of this study lead to several key conclusions regarding English language teaching and learning in the Thai context.

First, Thai teachers and NNESTs were found to

play a vital role in cultivating students' grammatical accuracy and structural understanding. Their shared linguistic background and capacity to use the learners' first language (L1) effectively bridge comprehension gaps and reduce learning anxiety. These findings affirm the pedagogical strength of non-native and local teachers, who are often able to empathize with learners and deliver explicit, accessible instruction.

Second, NESTs contributed significantly to students' pronunciation, oral fluency, and pragmatic language use. Their authentic speech models and exposure to natural discourse patterns served as an important benchmark for communicative competence. However, learners also valued NNESTs' diverse accents, indicating a paradigm shift towards embracing linguistic pluralism consistent with the Global English perspective (Feng & Yong, 2026; Pennycook, 2017).

Third, the affective domain of learning—confidence and comfort—emerged as a central component of student success. Thai teachers and NNESTs created supportive environments that fostered trust and reduced fear of making mistakes, while NESTs provided motivational challenges that encouraged risk-taking and authentic communication. This balance between empathy and challenge represents an essential pedagogical synergy, as depicted in the study's conceptual model (Figure 1).

Finally, teacher diversity enhanced students' intercultural and communicative competence. Through exposure to varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds, learners developed a broader worldview and an appreciation of English as a global language rather than the exclusive property of native speakers. This intercultural awareness is crucial for preparing Thai graduates to participate effectively in international and multicultural contexts.

The findings underscore the need to reconceptualize English language education in Thailand to reflect the realities of linguistic diversity. Rather than privileging one teacher group over another, institutions should adopt an inclusive and collaborative approach that values the unique contributions of all educators.

At the pedagogical level, this means designing curricula that integrate the complementary strengths of different teacher groups. For instance, Thai teachers and NNESTs could focus on grammar, writing, and structured skill-building, while NESTs could facilitate communicative practice, pronunciation drills, and cultural immersion activities. The collaboration among teacher groups

would provide learners with a well-rounded learning experience, combining accuracy, fluency, confidence, and cultural insight.

At the policy level, recruitment and professional development frameworks must evolve to move beyond native-speaker bias. Schools and universities should prioritize teachers' pedagogical qualifications, intercultural competence, and classroom effectiveness over their nationality or accent (Kashif et al., 2015; Kubota, 2020; Farrell, 2015). Additionally, institutional policy should support intercultural teacher training, equipping both Thai and foreign instructors with skills in empathy, reflective practice, and global-minded pedagogy.

The study also supports the incorporation of Global English-informed teaching within Thai higher education. By acknowledging English as a plural and dynamic language, students can develop realistic expectations about language use and greater tolerance for accent diversity. Such an approach promotes linguistic equity and prepares learners to communicate effectively across multiple cultural boundaries.

While this study offers important insights, several limitations suggest directions for future inquiry. The small sample size, confined to one southern Thai university, limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could employ multi-site or comparative studies across different regions of Thailand to explore how institutional and cultural contexts influence student perceptions.

Moreover, a longitudinal design could provide deeper understanding of how attitudes towards teacher origin evolve over time, especially as students' progress through different stages of their degree or interact with new teacher cohorts. Incorporating mixed-methods approaches—combining qualitative reflections with quantitative surveys or classroom observations—would yield a more comprehensive picture of teacher impact on learning outcomes.

Another promising avenue is to examine teachers' self-perceptions alongside students' attitudes. Comparing how Thai, native, and non-native teachers perceive their own roles could reveal productive insights for teacher identity formation and professional development. Finally, extending this line of inquiry to other ASEAN contexts could contribute to regional understanding of teacher diversity and intercultural education within the framework of Global English.

In conclusion, this study reaffirms that the strength of English language education in Thailand

lies in its diversity of teachers and voices. Each group—Thai, NESTs, and NNESTs—brings distinct pedagogical advantages that, when integrated, form a holistic and inclusive model of English instruction. The findings contribute to a growing body of scholarship advocating for the decolonization of English language teaching, urging educators and institutions to value intelligibility, empathy, and cultural inclusivity as much as grammatical

precision.

By situating teacher diversity within the paradigm of Global English, this research offers a progressive vision for English education: one that celebrates plurality, fosters intercultural understanding, and prepares learners not only to speak English but to communicate meaningfully in a global society.

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