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"I HAVE A STEREOTYPE THAT *BULE* ARE SMART": STUDENT PERCEPTIONS ON NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE ENGLISH TEACHERS

Teuku Muhammad Ridha Al Auwal

Samudra University, Langsa, INDONESIA

Email: tm.ridha.al.auwal@gmail.com

Abstract

Tsunami disaster in 2004 has led a massive influx of volunteers from around the world coming to Aceh in order to help and rebuild Aceh. Shortly after that native English teachers, the so-called *Bule*, have mushroomed in many schools and colleges in Aceh. Many educational institutions are highly interested in native English teachers (NETs) than non-native English Teachers (NNETs). The former group is inevitably assumed to be much better in teaching English regardless of their educational backgrounds than the latter that are most of them, in fact, well trained and graduated from several prestigious universities within the inner circle countries. This study investigated the student perceptions on NETs and NNETs. The participants consisted of 26 EFL students who have been enrolled for 3.5 years at Samudra University. The empirical data were collected through a questionnaire, with a series of open-ended questions. The findings revealed that most students (74.07%) prefer to be in NETs class should they are allowed to choose; even though almost all of them (96.29%) have never been taught by NETs. Yet, there are 14.81% of participants who do not have a distinctive preference between NETs and NNETs. Interestingly, the issue of nativeness does not influence student perceptions on NETs and NNETs in terms of which group is more ideal as English teachers; there are around 48.14% of students who believed both groups deserve to be ideal English teachers. Overall, students hold positive perceptions and attitudes towards both NETs and NNETs.

Keywords: Perceptions, students, NETs, NNETs.

INTRODUCTION

In 2004, tsunami disaster struck the province of Aceh, located at the northern tip of Sumatra Islands in Indonesia, killing hundreds of thousands of people and causing havoc. Soon after the catastrophic waves, a massive influx of volunteers from around the world came to Aceh in order to help and rebuild Aceh. This devastating disaster also led to negotiations between Free Aceh Movement, the so-called GAM, and Indonesian Government to end the three decades of armed conflict and sign the peace agreement (Memorandum of Understanding) on August 15, 2005 in Helsinki, or well-known as MoU Helsinki. Moreover, the Acehnese who are able to communicate in English were strongly needed at that particular period. They would be hired and paid with a high salary by most NGOs as translators and interpreters. Since then, the number of English learners has increased significantly, which is also hand in hand with the rapid growth of non-native English teachers in Aceh.

Furthermore, in spite of the fact that there were a few native English teachers found in Aceh during the conflict, the number then had inevitably increased after the catastrophe. Shortly after the

Tsunami, native English teachers, the so-called *Bule*, have mushroomed in many schools and colleges in Aceh. Many schools and universities are highly interested in *Bule* or native English teachers (NETs) than non-native English teachers (NNETs). NETs tend to be employed more than trained and skilled NNETs especially in the expanding circle countries, introduced by Kachru (1985, cited in Kirkpatrick, 2007, p. 28) where English is simply studied and used as a foreign language, such as Indonesia (Amin, 2000; Braine, 1999; Canagarajah, 1999; Rampton, 1996, cited in Maum, 2002, p. 2). It is all because there is a perception that the former group is necessarily much better in teaching English regardless of their educational backgrounds than the latter who are most of them, in fact, well trained and graduated from several prestigious universities within the inner circle countries, in which English is used as the first language or mother tongue, such as USA, UK and Australia. Braine (1999, cited in Moussu, 2006, p. 12) argued that even though most NNETs hold a TESOL degree from English speaking countries, NETs seems hired frequently even without any eligibility in TESOL at all. So it is not surprising when many educational institutions, in Aceh particularly, prefer NETs to NNETs in order to achieve the best teaching learning model for their institutions due to their positive perceptions and attitudes towards NETs.

It is not uncommon for many people to assume that NNETs are not qualified enough to be the ideal English teachers. This perception may lead to linguistic discrimination (Lippi-Green, 1997, cited in Maum, 2002, p. 4). As a result, Kirkpatrick (2007, p. 10) argued that unqualified and inexperienced native speakers may be hired as English language teachers at schools whilst skilled and experienced local teachers are highly likely to be abandoned. In such a situation, Quirk (1990, p. 9) used the term of 'half-baked quackery' to describe the teachers who have very limited linguistic knowledge and teaching language proficiency. In fact, being a native speaker of English will not necessarily make you better at teaching English and become a skilled English teacher (Kirkpatrick, 2007, p. 8). It is because all English teaching skills can be learned through teacher training and education.

In addition, NNETs themselves can be a role model for their students due to their fruitful experiences as language learners. Phillipson and Medgyes (1996, cited in Maum, 2002, p. 3) suggested that NNETs deserve to be deemed as the ideal teachers for English as Second or Foreign Language since they have studied many specific methods and techniques and undergone innumerable experiences in acquiring English as a second, third or foreign language. Another beneficial aspect of being NNETs is their awareness of students' language barriers. Bilingual and multilingual speakers are likely to acquire higher linguistic awareness (Canagarajah, 1996, and Phillipson, 1992, cited in Maum, 2002, p. 4). That is why their knowledge and approaches in learning English are strictly needed especially in terms of improving students' language awareness and cope with their language barriers at the same time. Therefore, it is not unusual for having a perception that the trained and skilled NNETs will easily find out the needs and obstacles faced by the students in studying the target language since they used to be language learners themselves and had valuable learning experiences.

However, it is not implausible for NETs to become skilled English teachers as well, which is through acquiring linguistic knowledge and competence. According to Astor (2000, cited in Moussu, 2006, p. 18), a professional English teacher has to become proficient at least in three expertise areas, the so-called pedagogy, methodology, and psycho- and applied linguistics. Astor added these three proficiencies and skills could be obtained through learning and practicing. Both NETs and NNETs will not automatically become skilled teachers if they have never undergone the proper and formal education. Regardless of their mother tongues, neither NETs nor NNETs could become qualified teachers should they fail to deal with these three competencies.

It is clear that linguistic prejudice plays an important role in shaping our perception and perspective in terms of analysing this dispute. Human beings are likely to be linguistically prejudiced whenever there is a perception that one group seems better or worse than others (Kirkpatrick, 2007, pp. 14-15). Hence, the main purpose of this study is to find out the student perceptions on NETs and NNETs in Samudra University located in Aceh, Indonesia.

METHODS

The empirical data were collected through a set of questionnaires, which is a sole instrument used within the study. Then to meet the criteria, a series of open-ended questions in Indonesian language were designed in order to give the respondents greater freedom of expression so that the

data obtained hopefully will be richer. The questionnaire contained six open-ended questions including specific open- and clarification questions adapted from Dörnyei (2007, p. 107) in order to find out student perceptions on NETs and NNETs, their preference towards each group and their reasons behind it respectively. After that, the questionnaire was distributed to the participants. The participants consisted of 26 EFL students who have been enrolled in English Language Education, Teacher Training and Education Faculty, Samudra University for 3.5 years. Students were provided a maximum of 30 minutes to answer all the questions. Finally, the percentage of each question responded by students was reckoned and presented in the following section. However, it is important to note that this study does not tend to over generalize in a wider context; it focuses only on the participants within this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

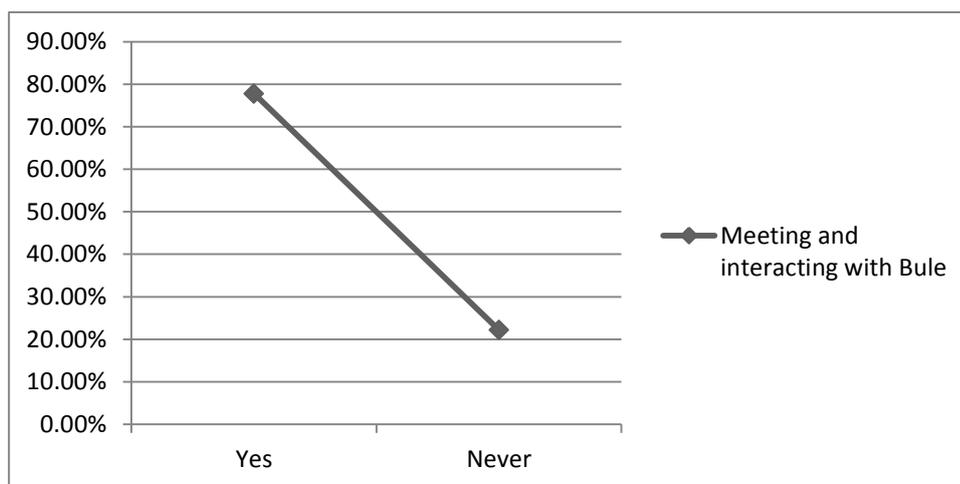


Figure 1. Question 1: Have you ever met or interacted with *Bule*?

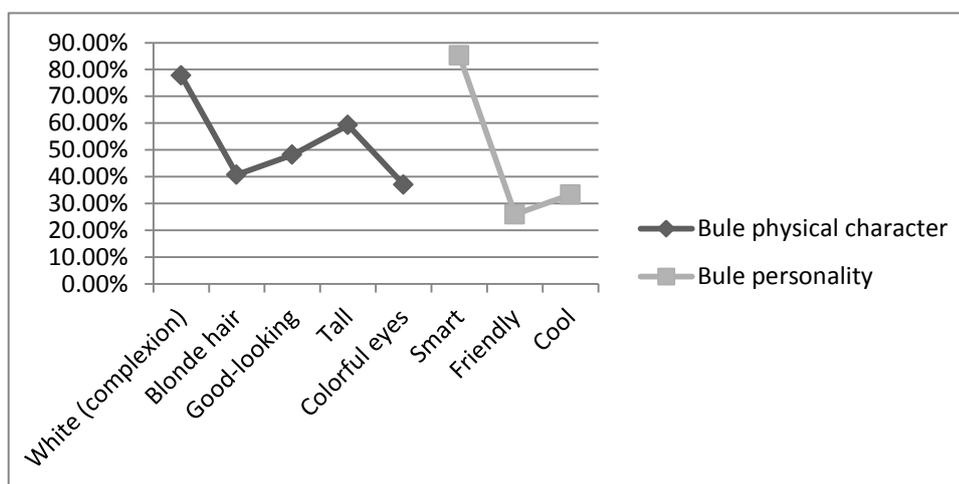


Figure 2. Question 2: In your opinion, what are the characteristics of *Bule*, including their physical character and personality?

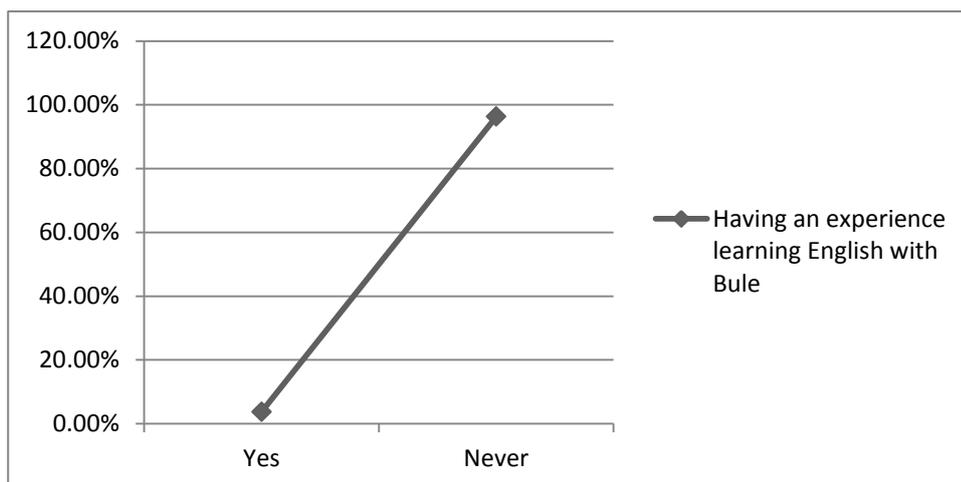


Figure 3. Question 3: Have you ever learned English with *Bule*?

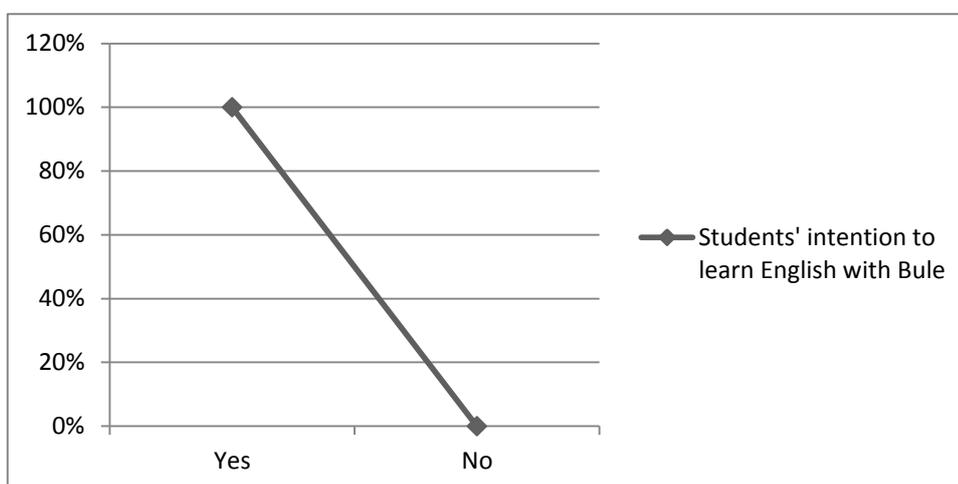


Figure 4. Question 4: Do you have an intention to learn English with *Bule*? Please explain why?

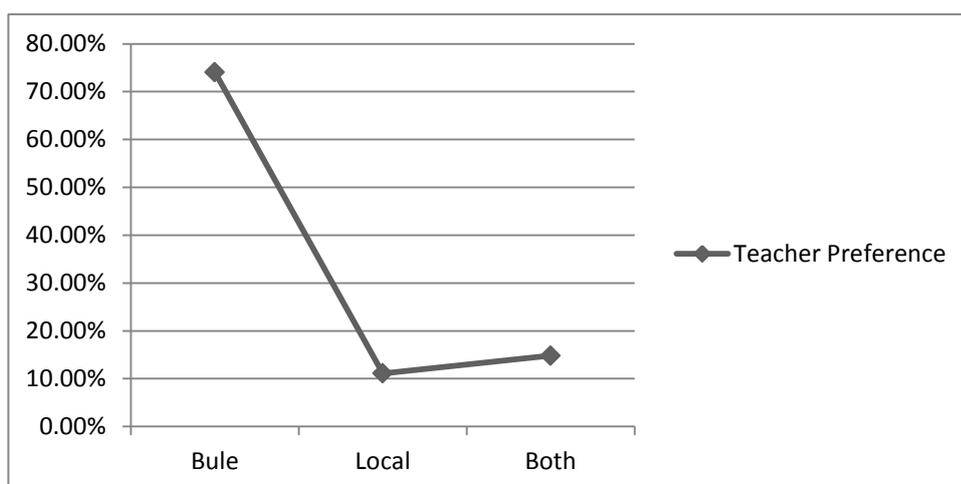


Figure 5. Question 5: If there is a *Bule* in your Study Program and you are allowed to study with *Bule* and local teacher. Which teacher then are you going to prefer? Please explain why?

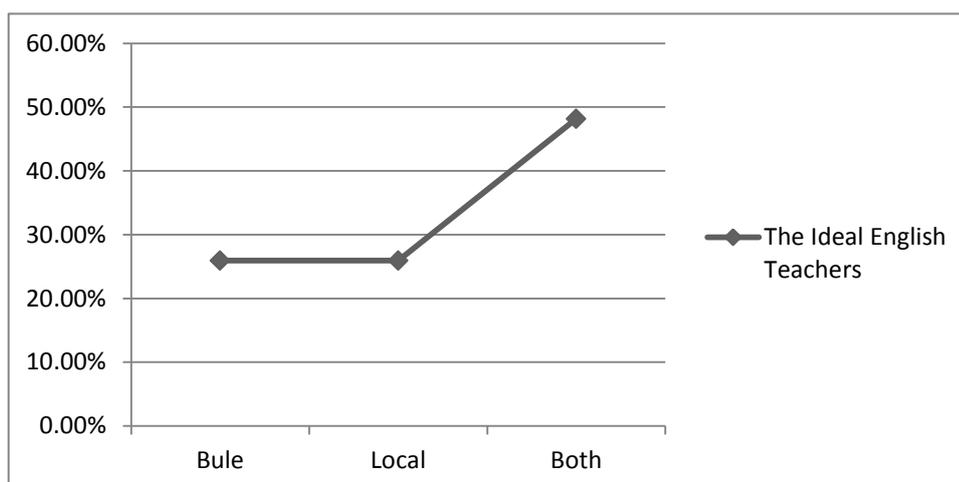


Figure 6. Question 6: According to your perception and also your opinion, which one do you think is more ideal to be an English teacher, *Bule* or local teacher? Please explain why?

The charts above demonstrate the results of each question. It can be seen from the findings above, almost all the participants (96.29%) have never been taught by NETs. Most of them (77.77%) only ever met and interacted with *Bule* within several activities and events. Nevertheless, all of them have a strong intention to learn English from *Bule* directly. After that, one of the most interesting parts is when the students are asked about the characteristics of native speakers both physical character and personality. The term 'native' itself is still completely problematic and ambiguous. All of them still believe in the traditional view assuming native speakers are white (complexion) (77.77%), good-looking (48.14%), tall (59.25%), have blonde hair (40.74%) and colourful eyes (37.03%); whilst in terms of personality *Bule* are deemed smart (85.18%), cool (33.33%) and friendly (25.92%).

Most students (74.07%) state that if they are allowed to choose between NETs and NNETs classes, they will prefer to be in the class of native teachers due to several reasons. First, it is widely believed that NETs will be more skilled, trained and experienced in teaching English. Then NETs are considered much better for speaking, listening and reading classes because they themselves are native speakers of English. Furthermore, learning English with NETs is likely to increase their motivation and passion. One student said that 'I just feel challenged to study with *Bule*' (excerpt from Student 3 coded as S3). Several participants argued 'on average, *Bule* are smart and open minded, so it is going to be so much fun and interesting to study with them' (excerpt from S1, S2, S7, S12, S20 and S23). The other one (S10), moreover, added 'I just feel bored to study with local teachers. That is why I prefer to study with *Bule* because not only are they smart but also good looking'. It agrees with Celik's (2006, p. 372) research revealing that many students in Turkey have positive perceptions and prefer to be much more in NETs class than their counterparts.

On the contrary, it is interesting to find out that there are around 11.11% of students who still favour to remain in the local teachers' classes. One student (S16) stated that 'local teachers would easily understand my strengths and weaknesses in learning English. According to Filho (2002 cited in Ebata, 2008, p. 3) not only are NNETs able to find out and deal with students' problems but also to reckon their strengths and boost their motivation in learning a language. Then another respondent (S8) emphasizes that studying English with NNETs will make him feel more relaxed and have so much fun due to code switching and mixing while learning in the classes. It matches with the Ebata's finding (2008, p. 16) where many students in the language classes in Japan showing that students seems more relaxed while studying with local teachers compared to native teachers though most of them believe that NETs are more qualified in teaching English. Furthermore, the rest (S25) also argues that he will be more easy-going and is not worried at all about their language barriers within the class of local teachers. It is approved by Kachru (1991, p. 5) who assumed that it is good to have non-native speakers of English as teachers since they are firmly related to their own 'multilinguistic, sociolinguistic, and sociocultural contexts', which are presumed as an advantage in the linguistic

world. In addition, there are 14.81% of participants who do not dispute between NETs and NNETs. One of them (S22) argued that 'I will choose both classes because I respect both of them as English teachers. Another participant (S15) said that 'in my opinion, it does not matter whether they are native or non-native. I am happy to have a class with both instructors as long as they are kind and friendly'.

Surprisingly, the result of last question revealed that the issue of nativeness does not affect student perceptions on NETs and NNETs in terms of which group is more ideal as English teachers. Based on the data provided above, it can be noticed that there are around 48.14% of students who believed both groups deserve to be ideal English teachers. One student (S13) argued that 'in spite of the fact that NETs look smarter and more knowledgeable, we are also quite lucky to have several trained and skilled local teachers graduating from the universities within Australia here. They look like native while teaching in the class; they even sound like native'. Another participant (S19) stated that 'I strongly believe that local teachers are able to teach English effectively because they have gone through teaching training and experienced learning EFL as students just like us'. The rest (S21, S18 and S24) believed that Both NETs and NETs have pros and cons, which do not necessarily make one group is better over the other. For instance, the former is good at speaking and listening whilst the latter is strong in structure and writing. It fits with the study conducted by Ebata (2008, p.14) affirmed that the issue of nativeness and non-nativeness does not influence the student perceptions and attitudes towards their native and non-native teachers. Thus, Celik (2006, p. 375) believed that the competence differences between NETs and NNETs do not automatically make one group is more superior to the other. Both groups should embrace each other in order to show their respect and support for the sake of English language teaching in the future.

CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study was to find out student perceptions on native and non-native English teachers. This project took place in Samudra University located in Langsa, Aceh. The results of the data analysis disclosed that all participants have a stereotype that native speakers are white (complexion), good looking, tall and have blonde hair and colourful eyes while in terms of personality smart, cool and friendly. Then most student prefer to be in native class because NETs seem more skilled, trained and experienced in teaching English whilst a few students believed they will feel more relaxed, easy going and are not worried at all about their language barriers in the local teacher class. NNETs are also likely assumed to understand more about their students' abilities, feelings, needs and obstacles in EFL learning. Interestingly, the controversy of nativeness does not necessarily influence student perceptions on which group is more ideal and professional as English teachers. Both NETs and NNETs are perceived as ideal English teachers; thus, they are strongly expected to respect, endorse and embrace each other. Overall, students hold positive stereotypes towards NETs, and also positive perceptions and attitudes towards both groups.

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