Success of English Foreign Language Education

by

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Abstract

This project studies how age of onset and the choice between Native English Speaking Teachers (NESTs) and Non-Native English Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) influence the success of early English education. English is commonly taught as a foreign language not only in China but in most Asian countries. The wide popularity and large population of English learners makes it important to discover what factors may affect the effectiveness of EFL education. Some findings have been gained. There are different advantages in EFL learning for students of different ages and different advantages that NESTs and NNESTs provide to language learners. Young learners have advantages in learning listening comprehension and pronunciation whereas older learners have advantages in learning grammar and vocabulary. NESTs and NNESTs have been compared in seven aspects and the comparison results show that NNESTs are not inferior to NESTs as English teachers.
Introduction

This project inquires into how different starting ages of English foreign language (EFL) education and choice of English teacher affects the success of EFL education. English is commonly taught as a foreign language not only in China but also in most Asian countries. The wide popularity and large population of English learners makes it important to discover what factors may affect the effectiveness of EFL education.

Ample previous research has been conducted on age of onset of EFL education and comparisons between native-English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and non-native-English-speaking teachers (NNESTs). It has provided me with background information on EFL education. For example, Çelik and Karaca (2014) conducted a study on the relation between age of onset and the success of EFL learning and found that there are some benefits to an earlier start with EFL learning but that earlier age of onset does not guarantee success. Sutherland (2012) discussed different advantages that NESTs and NNESTs can have for foreign language learners. However, most of the research discusses age of onset and type of teacher separately. Very little research explores how these two factors interrelate and affect success of EFL education. Consequently, with this project, I hope to gain insight into how age of onset and NESTs/NNESTs are interrelated and affect EFL education.
My personal experience is one of the reasons I chose this topic. When I first started learning English as a foreign language, I was bored and had no interest in taking English class. My only goal for English learning was to pass the final exam. Without any motivation, it seemed certain my grades would be low. However, during the term, a new English teacher was assigned to teach my class. Her professional teaching skills enabled her to explain English grammar in an easy to understand manner. Under the assistance of this NNEST, I became interested and motivated to learn English and my English learning gradually improved. I had been taught by NESTs prior to this NNEST but with them, my learning did not improve. My experience with learning English makes me wonder whether NESTs or NNESTs are better EFL teachers and how they differ as English teachers.

Some studies acted as anchors for me in the sea of available research. For instance, “All Shades of Every Color: An Overview of Early Teaching and Learning of Foreign Languages” provided me with some background knowledge about early EFL education. “Improving Learner Outcomes in EFL: Does Early Instruction Lead to Greater Achievement” offered me key words such as early education, learning outcomes, and onset ages. “Advantages and Disadvantages of Native-and Nonnative-English-Speaking Teachers: Student Perceptions in Hong Kong” gave me deeper knowledge about NESTs and NNESTs. In short, these papers provided me with key terms such as foreign language
education, benefits, young and late learners, qualified teachers, and native/non-native
teachers and enabled me to enlarge my bibliography.

This project focuses on how age of onset and the choice between NESTs and
NNESTs influence the success of early English education. The review includes two
research questions: (a) Is it better to begin learning English as a foreign language at an
earlier or later age? (b) Are NESTs or NNESTs the best choice for teaching English to
young language learners? What advantages or disadvantages do they have?

This review focussed on learners between the ages of 6 and 12 years of age. There
are two reasons for this: first, it is common in the research literature to consider students
who are between 6 and 12 years of age to be young learners and those who are over the
age of 12 to be late learners. Second, children in the 6-12 age range attend elementary
school and this is the school level where the debate about starting age is most often
focused. In fact, the ages of children studied in the research that is reviewed do not all fall
within the age categories of 6 to 12 years. The age span in the literature is actually larger.
However the priority for interpreting results here is the 6-12 age range.

Some key findings of this review are: Age of onset of students and different types of
teachers are closely related to each other in EFL education. No one age is the ideal age of
onset for foreign language learning. Asserting that an earlier onset age for learning
English can ensure greater success seems too arbitrary. In foreign language learning,
there may be different advantages and disadvantages to having a younger or older age of onset, therefore their EFL education needs may be different as well.

There are advantages and disadvantages to NESTs and NNESTs teaching English as a foreign language. Not either type was born to be a perfect English teacher. Successful EFL education is more likely to be achieved if the advantages of both types of teachers could be combined. Because students of different ages and NESTs and NNESTs have different strengths and weaknesses for EFL education, it may be that one type of teacher is better suited to younger learners while the other type is more appropriate for older learners. More knowledge about different ages of onset for students and different types of teachers should be gained so that appropriate teachers can be assigned to meet students’ different needs, which is important to successful EFL education.

Success of EFL education can be viewed differently. Some may think that success is measured by achieving high scores on examinations. Some may think that success is measured by mastering English reading comprehension and written tasks. Some may think that success is measured by great oral English communication skills. Success in EFL education should be measured by considering students’ needs.

I used various search engines for this project. Web of Science, JSTOR and ERIC were used as the main search engines while Google Scholar and the search engine for the
University of Victoria’s library were used as alternative tools when I could not find certain papers through the main search engines.

The whole project contains three main sections: introduction, literature review, and implications. The literature review section contains four sub-sections. Respectively they are: introduction, ages, different types of English teachers, and discussions about the former two factors and how they interrelate. In the sub-section regarding different types of English teachers, I compare NESTs and NNESTs in the following areas: English proficiency, language exposure, teaching methods, role models, confidence, teaching preparations and skills, and accents.
Review of the Literature

English is commonly taught as a foreign language not only in China but in most Asian countries. The wide popularity and large population of English learners makes it important to discover how various factors may affect the effectiveness of EFL education. This section reviews the literature on the success of teaching English as a foreign language along two dimensions: (a) the role of age of onset and (b) the choice of English teacher. The first two subsections present the results of a review, which are discussed in a third subsection that follows.

The Role of Starting Age in Language Development

This section addresses the question “Is it better to start English as a foreign language education at an earlier or later age?”

The earlier the better? Starting foreign language education from a younger age has become common in many countries. For instance, compulsory English instruction begins at age 10 in Japan (McCurry, as cited in Çelik & Karaca, 2014), and in grade three in China, when students are around 8 years old (Silver, Hu, & Iino, 2002). South Korea also begins English instruction in the third grade (NCIC, 2009). An earlier age of onset for EFL education is becoming more common in many countries even though there is controversy about whether an earlier age or an older age would be best for EFL education.

Age is a vital factor in English foreign language education and there is controversy about the optimal starting age. The controversy is whether an earlier or a later age of
onset for learning a foreign language can help learners achieve better language acquisition. Specifically, there are two main types of argument surrounding this question. Some experts believe that learning a foreign language at a younger age ensures success, while other scholars believe that later starters have advantages in learning English as a foreign language. Those who favour starting foreign language education from an early age claim young learners have greater success with listening comprehension and pronunciation in the long term (Cameron, 2001). In this case, primary school would be the ideal time for language education because students can establish a solid foundation of oral language skills for further foreign language development. Larson-Hall (2008) found younger learners around 9 years of age achieved greater success in grammar tests and received higher scores in a phonemic discrimination test than later starters around 12 years of age. Meanwhile, Stakanova and Tolstikhina (2014) found that beginning to learn a foreign language at 10-11 years of age helps to create a solid base for foreign language acquisition. On top of the advantages listed above, results also showed that young starters are more likely to achieve native-like or near native-like ability in speaking a foreign language (Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam, 2008). This result is further supported by another study conducted by Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam (2009). The group \( n = 195 \) included learners with ages of onset between 1 and 47 years. They found that a majority of the learners who began learning another language under the age of 12 could be perceived as
native speakers of the second language, while only a small number of the participants who began learning after the age of 12 could achieve the same results.

There are researchers who have found that an earlier age of onset for learning a foreign language does not guarantee success. Earlier learners may be superior to later learners when the latter begin their English learning due to the former’s greater exposure to the foreign language and their longer amount of total learning time. But once they’ve been exposed to the language for a longer period of time, later learners could catch up with earlier learners in foreign language learning. Pfenninger (2014) conducted a study on a group of 18-year-old learners ($n = 200$). Four sub-groups were set among these 200 participants. Fifty of the participants were early starters who had attended an immersion program in elementary school and had continued immersion education in secondary school. The second group included another 50 participants who had followed the same elementary school program but received traditional EFL instruction after elementary school. The third group consisted of 50 late starters who began English immersion learning in secondary school. The last 50 participants attended a traditional EFL program in secondary school. Results showed that age does not directly relate to success in English learning because those participants who began their English education in elementary school did not have greater competence with the language. English competence in this study was measured in areas such as written fluency, complexity,
morpho-syntactic accuracy, and vocabulary size. Results also showed that older learners could be proficient learners as learning results of the two late-starting groups caught up with those of the early starting groups.

There are more studies reporting that late learners can perform as well as early learners (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1999). Older learners have distinctive strengths in learning foreign languages. Muñoz (2014) conducted a study on starting age and input on EFL learning. He studied 160 English learners’ English proficiency and his results demonstrated that input has a greater effect on learning than does starting age. He also found that syntactic and morphological rule acquisition, metalinguistic ability, and vocabulary were the areas that older learners (12 to 15 years of age) excelled at, which reflected the more advanced cognitive development of older learners.

The advantages of an early age of onset include better performance on oral English competence and listening comprehension. Starting early has also been found to help the learner acquire a solid base for EFL learning. It has also been shown that younger learners are more likely to achieve native-like or near native-like foreign language competence. The advantages of late-onset learners are different, but they can be proficient learners as well. Those who are older than 12 years are observed to be good at syntactic and morphological rule acquisition and they have better metalinguistic and vocabulary abilities, which is a reflection of a more advanced cognitive development.
One of the findings of younger learners’ advantages specifically stands out—native-like or near native-like levels of attainment. There is evidence supporting the notion that starting from an earlier age helps learners to achieve native-like or near native-like levels of English proficiency. According to the research of Munro and Mann (2005), a strong negative correlation between starting age of learning English and learners’ English proficiency has been found. However, the criteria for judging whether a learner has reached native-like attainment is not clear. How can people whose first language is not English, such as the parents of students, distinguish whether one’s English competence has reached native or near native-like levels?

Some have suggested that being a native English speaker makes teachers better models (Cook, 1999). This would be the case particularly for young learners, who more easily acquire native-like levels of pronunciation. The young may indeed be viewed as better learners. As a result, parents may be more willing to let their kids start English learning at a younger age. However, native-like English competence requires more than excellent pronunciation.

Researchers such as Cook (1999) associate level of English acquisition with native-sounding speech. But the measure of success in EFL education should not be restricted to native-like pronunciation. Learners’ needs and goals for learning English should be considered when success is determined. Native-like or near native-like levels of English
proficiency is indeed a mark of success in foreign language learning. But the criteria for judging whether a learner has achieved native-like or close to native-like acquisition are vague. For instance, would an English-Chinese oral interpreter who can speak fluent English but whose English reading comprehension and writing skills are not as advanced as his oral English competence, be viewed as having achieved native-like or close to native-like levels of acquisition? Would a Chinese underground engineer who has excellent English reading and writing skills but whose oral English skills are not as high be considered to have native-like or near-native-like foreign language skills? Learners in these two examples are able to fulfill their tasks and their occupations’ responsibilities with their levels of English competence; therefore their needs and goals for EFL learning have been accomplished. They may not be native-like, but they are demonstrating high levels of competence and successful learning.

A younger age of onset will be considered advantageous in areas of listening comprehension and pronunciation whereas an older age of onset will be considered advantageous in areas of grammar and vocabulary.

**Summary and discussion.** In sum, the age of onset for learning a foreign language is an important factor but it cannot, on its own, determine the success of foreign language education. What is successful EFL education? It should be defined according to learners’ goals. Success in EFL education should not be viewed in the same way for every learner.
If a learner’s goal for learning English has been achieved, then his EFL education should be considered successful. In fact, given the evidence cited above, we cannot conclude anything about age of onset as it pertains to English foreign language acquisition. The assertion that an early age of onset is linked to success in foreign language education does not make sense. The criteria for success depend on what kinds of language abilities are expected. When better listening comprehension or pronunciation is desired, starting earlier is preferable. But if a higher vocabulary or syntactic and morphological rule acquisition is desired, starting later may be preferable.

The former section discussed how age of onset affects EFL education and respectively the advantages of starting EFL at a younger age and older age. Success in learning also depends on the effectiveness of teachers. Now I will discuss how different types of English teachers affect EFL learning. The comparison of native-English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and non-native-English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) will consider the following areas: English proficiency, language exposure, teaching methods, role models, confidence in teaching English, teaching preparations and skills, and accents.

Native vs. Non-native English Speaking Teachers

The success in learning English as a foreign language cannot be achieved without qualified English teachers. Teachers with two main types of English language background commonly teach at elementary schools: native-English-speaking teachers
(NESTs) and non-native-English-speaking teachers (NNESTs). These two types of teachers can be compared in many ways. In the past, NESTs were thought to be ideal and better qualified as language teachers than NNESTs. This is known as the native speaker fallacy (Phillipson, as cited in Butler, 2007). Both groups of teachers have advantages and disadvantages. Knowing what advantages and disadvantages each type of teacher offers can maximize teaching effects and help students to achieve success in their EFL education. In this section, I review the literature in terms of: English proficiency, language exposure that teachers provide to students, teaching methods, teachers as EFL learning role models, teacher confidence, teaching preparation and skills, and teacher’s accent.

**English proficiency.** The English proficiency of NESTs is rarely questioned. According to Tang (1997) and Butler (2007), NESTs have better English pronunciation and better fluency. But this does not necessarily mean that NNESTs have low levels of English proficiency. Ping and Ma (2012) noted that some NNESTs have achieved very high levels of English competence and can be regarded as expert users. This evidence shows that NESTs may be more proficient in English than NNESTs but NNESTs’ English proficiency can still be excellent.

A higher English proficiency does not guarantee higher quality teaching. According to Medgyes (1992), if language competence is the only factor used to judge teachers’
performance, then any native speaker would be considered to be a better English teacher. But this is obviously not true. Effective teaching requires more than a teacher’s high proficiency in English. Medgyes (1992) further supports this point by stating that “the more proficient in English, the more efficient in the classroom” (p. 347) is a false statement, proving that higher English proficiency alone cannot guarantee teaching quality.

NNESTs can provide effective elementary EFL education even if they do not have native-like English proficiency. According to Nunan (2003) it is not necessary for elementary English teachers to obtain native or native-like English proficiency. In other words, an expectation of native or native-like levels of English proficiency for elementary English teachers is unrealistic. Nunan provides evidence for this claim by saying that NNESTs who have not achieved native or native-like English proficiency are still able to provide successful English education with the help technological tools and appropriate materials. A high level of English proficiency would be helpful in order to successfully teach EFL but that is not to say that elementary English education will only be effective if teachers are NESTs. Even if NNESTs have relatively lower levels of English proficiency than their NESTs counterparts, with technological tools and appropriate materials, they can still teach elementary English well.
Based on the findings of the study cited above, NNESTs' English proficiency may be lower than their NEST counterparts but their English proficiency does not hinder their teaching performance. If NNESTs are expert users of English, their English proficiency is good enough to teach elementary English because a native or native-like level of English proficiency is not necessary for teaching English at the elementary school level. In terms of English proficiency, NNESTs are not inferior to NESTs for elementary EFL education.

**Language exposure.** NESTs are usually believed to be able to provide more language exposure to language learners. Clayton (1990) stated that NESTs can offer wider English exposure to learners as compared to their non-native counterparts. Cook (1999) and Butler (2007) published evidence stating that NESTs tend to use more English in class, which provides language learners with a greater exposure to English. Most NESTs who teach English as a foreign language are monolinguals whose mother tongue is English. They do not share a mother tongue with their students and English is the only communicative tool that can be used in classroom. Thus, English is used more frequently in NESTs’ classes than in NNESTs’.

More frequent use of English can be an advantage of NESTs but it can also be a disadvantage. On one hand, using more English in class can widen students’ exposure to English. On the other hand, more frequent use of English in class may cause more
confusion in students, leading to lower understanding, especially for those who are being first introduced to English or those who lagged behind in previous classes.

NNESTs provide less English exposure to language learners but they can provide a deeper exposure. Deeper English exposure here refers to the complexity of English used in the classroom. According to Sutherland (2012), students are exposed to more complex English in NNESTs’ classes than in NESTs’. Shin and Kellogg (2007) performed a 4-month study in which they recorded and transcribed six lessons taught by NESTs and NNESTs. Through collecting the data and comparing the utterances of NESTs and NNESTs, they found that NNESTs frequently used grammatically complex sentences using, for instance, subordinations, while NESTs did not. NESTs tended to use simple sentences in class. Lynch (1988) describes this phenomenon as “foreign talk.” It is a simplified language used by native speakers to those they view as linguistic and social inferiors. Native teachers tend to use simple methods of conveying meaning in order to ensure successful conversations with students. Lew (2016) mentioned that learners do not have great processing load in their production process when teachers used foreigner talk. This provided evidence that “foreign talk” helps students understand teachers better.

However, the English used in EFL classes should not consist only of simple sentences. Knowing how to use grammatically complex sentences is an important aspect of EFL education. Lemke (1989) expressed that classroom language may be more useful
if the focus shifts from being on oral language to being on written language. EFL education should not only focus on teaching oral English, which is less complex than written English. Understanding written English is an important aspect of EFL curriculum.

In sum, NESTs provide students with wider English exposure while NNESTs provide students with deeper English exposure. Wide exposure is achieved because NESTs use more English rather than other languages in class and deep exposure is achieved because NNESTs use more grammatically complex classroom English. A successful EFL education should provide learners with both a wide and deep exposure to English. This can be achieved if the teaching strengths of NESTs and NNESTs could be combined.

**Teaching methods.** In the past, NESTs were considered to be English teachers who knew the most updated teaching methods. This is not the case anymore. Holliday (2006) and Honey (1997) found that NESTs used the most updated teaching methods with foreign language learners. According to Takada (2000), with the popularity of studying overseas, it is not difficult for NNESTs to access and learn up-to-date teaching methods. NNESTs can now know the most updated teaching methods, as well. As a result, NESTs are no longer the most pedagogically up-to-date.

NNESTs have a better understanding of which kinds of teaching methods may or may not work in their home countries as compared to NESTs. Samimy and Brutt-Griffler
(1999) explained that, compared with NESTs, NNESTs are more familiar with their home countries’ English education situation, and it is easier for NNESTs to choose teaching methods that would be appropriate for their students. Since NESTs are not as familiar with foreign countries’ English education situations, they may carry out an imbalanced curriculum.

Sutherland (2012) found that it is more likely for the students of NNESTs to achieve success in examinations, which are an important part of the curriculum; whereas students of NESTs may not achieve success in examinations because NESTs place too much emphasis on oral communication skills and not enough on preparing for examinations. This is worth mentioning here as a suggestion that English teachers, especially NESTs, should research the countries where they are going to teach English as a foreign language in order to help them choose teaching methods that better fit foreign language learners.

Role models. There are two different points of view as to which type of teacher is a better role model for foreign language learners. Some experts find NESTs to be better role models for learners while others consider NNESTs as the better role models. Cook (1999) suggests that NESTs are the best models for foreign language learners because they are native English speakers. Ellis (1996) further supported this claim by stating that NESTs are the best role models because, as native speakers, they provide English learners with motivation. Ellis explained that NESTs can act as cultural informants,
introducing students to their home culture, which may motivate students’ learning. As a matter of fact, many students who take English classes at school do not choose to out of interest, but are required to, and as such they feel little need to put effort into it. Their greatest concern is to pass the course. NESTs may motivate students to learn English if students are interested in their teacher’s culture. Lung (1999) disagreed, believing that the increase in motivation provided by NESTs would soon fade. Lung explained that students may easily feel embarrassed in NESTs’ classes because these teachers place too much emphasis on native pronunciation, which soon decreases their motivation. This point is supported by McKay (2000) who stated that NESTs may offend or annoy students because of the cultural inappropriateness of their requests. McKay used garage sales as an example of this. Teaching students about garage sales may be fine with some students, who view them as a common social activity, but it may cause other students, who view them as being unpleasant, to feel annoyed.

Medgyes (1992) and Tajino and Tajino (2000) stated that NNESTs provide students with an imitable and realistic model for English learning. Murphy-O’Dwyer (1996) stated that NNESTs’ English learning knowledge can help learners to build up language awareness. Lipovsky and Mahboob (2010) and Boyle (1997) note that cultural affinity between students and NNESTs renders teachers more sensitive and empathetic to students’ needs, which is further evidence to support NNESTs as more imitable and
realistic models for English learners. Unlike NESTs, NNESTs have worked hard to learn the foreign language; a similar process to that which their students are undergoing. Compared to NESTs, NNESTs are more familiar with what learning strategies are useful and what types of difficulties will be encountered during the learning process.

The mother tongue shared by students and NNESTs can be used as a tool for instruction (Tang, 1997). Butler (2007) considered that one of students’ greatest needs is for English teachers to explain the differences between English and the source language. Young learners who are being first introduced to English or slow learners of any age may encounter questions and doubts they do not know how to express in English. NNESTs can understand students’ questions and provide more thorough and satisfying answers to students in this case, when compared to NESTs.

Another reason why NNESTs are more imitable models for students is that it is easier for them to develop bonds with students. Sutherland (2012) concluded that NNESTs would develop stronger bonds with students than NESTs because they may be more likely to anticipate students’ learning difficulties.

In sum, NESTs are considered to be good models for EFL learners due to their identity as native English speakers. Students’ interest in their culture can also act as motivation to learn. NNESTs are considered to be imitable models because they share a mother tongue with students, which allows them to more easily explain language
problems and develop bonds with students. Moreover, NNESTs went through a foreign language learning process similar to that which students are experiencing. Students can therefore imitate what NNESTs did to achieve success with their learning. In my opinion, NESTs and NNESTs serve as different, but not conflicting, models for foreign language learners. One of the important reasons NNESTs are more imitable models for foreign language learners is that they share the same native language. The character of the NNESTs accent is a much more realistic model for the students to achieve.

**Confidence of English teachers.** The confidence of English teachers is also a factor related to the success of early foreign language teaching. Chacón (2005) mentioned that teachers’ confidence affects their teaching and their students’ outcomes. Bandura (1925/1997) explained that teachers’ confidence can influence their classroom environment and how they judge tasks that are performed to bring student learning. Success of early EFL education depends on a good classroom environment and teacher performance. Teachers who feel more confident are more likely to teach language learners effectively. Students whose teachers have low confidence may experience less success.

NESTs generally have higher confidence in their English teaching skills than do NNESTs. Butler (2007) claimed that NESTs show more confidence than NNESTs. Hyde (2002) and Bernat (2008) reported that NNESTs show a lack of confidence when
teaching English. Canagarajah (1999) estimated that almost 80% of English teachers have a non-native background.

**Teaching preparations and skills.** English teachers’ levels of preparation and teaching skills are sometimes believed to be more essential than competence with the English language (Ling & Braine, 2007). In terms of evaluation skills, NESTs and NNESTs show equal levels of performance. Shi (2001) studied NESTs’ and NNESTs’ criteria for Chinese students’ English writing tasks and the scores they gave to the students. For this study, 46 teachers (half NESTs and half NNESTs) evaluated 10 essays, the full score for which was 10 points. The findings showed that there was no significant difference in the evaluation provided by NESTs and NNESTs. The only difference found was that NNESTs paid more attention to the organization and length of the essays they evaluated. Similar results were found in Zhang and Elder’s (2014) study. They studied NESTs’ and NNESTs’ judgments of students’ oral proficiency based on a college spoken English test. Results showed that the two types of teachers may use different approaches to evaluate students’ oral abilities but their overall evaluation behaviours were similar.

Where other teaching skills are concerned, NESTs do not perform as well as their NNEST counterparts. NESTs have been found to be unprepared for class and to deliver lessons in an unsatisfactory manner (Shaw, 1979). In the case of grammar especially, NESTs tend to use their intuition to judge whether or not student work is grammatically
correct instead of providing detailed explanations to students using metalanguage (Ping & Ma, 2012). Árva and Medgyes (2000) also found NESTs to be lacking in comparison to their non-native counterparts in explaining grammar knowledge, concluding that NESTs’ grammar teaching skills are inferior to those of NNESTs. In their opinion, NNESTs have advantages in teaching grammar due to their experience learning English explicitly, not intuitively. Moreover, NNESTs’ bilingual ability is a strong asset when teaching English grammar as compared to NESTs. Being able to switch between their mother tongue and English makes the process of teaching and learning English grammar much easier for NNESTs and their students.

**Accents.** Accent is another factor of comparison between NESTs and NNESTs. Some might assume that students will acquire native English pronunciation when they are taught by NESTs who speak English without foreign accents. Levis, Sonsatt, Link, and Barriuso (2016) disagree with this assumption. They considered that pronunciation can be taught equally well by both NESTs and NNESTs, just like any other kind of language skill.

The exposure to accents is often avoided in English classes because of the belief that to speak English with a foreign accent is considered to be speaking English unsuccessfully. Sutherland (2012) disagreed with this belief providing evidence that students are likely to encounter various accents in their daily lives when they are using
English as a communication tool. Listening to different accents during the English learning process can better prepare them for their real-life use of English. It is common in that we encounter English speakers with different accents. If classroom education provides only native English training, students will not be familiar with different accents and thus comprehension problems may arise.

Both NESTs who speak English without foreign accents and NNESTs with foreign accents should be included in early EFL education. This move can help learners to build up an understanding of how native English sounds while also becoming familiar with different foreign accents.

**Discussion**

In this section, the two factors affecting the success of EFL education are discussed, followed by a discussion of the interaction of these two factors.

**Age.** Based on the findings of literature review, it cannot be concluded that earlier learners are superior to older learners in EFL learning. The findings show that young learners have more advantages in learning listening comprehension and English pronunciation whereas older learners have more advantages in syntactic and morphological rule acquisition as well as vocabulary learning due to their more advanced cognitive development. Since each group of students have different advantages in EFL learning, we cannot unequivocally judge which are the better learners. According to Gan,
Humphreys, and Hamp-Lyons (2004), successful learners are those who can apply appropriate language learning strategies to different tasks and less successful learners are those who use language learning strategies in a less appropriate way. Under this definition, both younger learners and older learners can be successful foreign language learners because both groups have the potential for the appropriate use of these language learning strategies. Younger learners may have better abilities in English listening comprehensive learning strategies and pronunciation strategies. Older learners have better abilities in vocabulary learning strategies and strategies related to cognitive development.

More important aspects for EFL learning than age of onset should be attended to. For example, paying attention to the different advantages of each group of students and developing specific curriculum for students of different age groups in order to maximize their success with EFL learning.

Age is an important factor for EFL learning but that does not mean an earlier start with English learning will ensure higher English proficiency. We should not hold the prejudice that older learners have less advantages in EFL learning. Both younger learners and older learners should be encouraged to learn a foreign language if they are interested.

**Choice of English teachers.** The comparison between NESTs and NNESTs did not find that NESTs are better qualified teachers who can provide more successful English education. In fact, I found that NNESTs are as capable as their NEST counterparts in
many aspects of teaching English as a foreign language and in fact have superior qualities in some areas. The above comparison between NESTs and NNESTs showed that NESTs have more advantages than NNESTs in two aspects: English proficiency and confidence in English teaching. NNESTs have more advantages than NESTs in two different aspects: teaching methods and teaching preparation and skills. The two types of teachers have been found to be equally competent in the remaining three aspects: language exposure that they provide to students, being foreign language learning role models, and accents. NNESTs’ English proficiency may be lower than their NEST counterparts but this does not hinder their teaching performance. NNESTs do not have a disadvantage in terms of providing learners with English exposure. The two types of teachers provide English exposure to learners in different ways. NESTs provide students with a wider English exposure while NNESTs provide students with a deeper English exposure. NESTs can provide students with a wider language exposure by using more English and not using students’ mother tongue in class, while NNESTs can provide a deeper English exposure to learners by making more frequent use of grammatically complicated sentences containing elements such as subordinations. NNESTs not only have access to the most updated teaching methods, but they also know better than their NEST counterparts which teaching methods would better fit with students in their home countries. Both NESTs and NNESTs can be good role models for EFL learners, with NESTs being the best role
models because of their natural acquisition of English and NNESTs being imitable models because they have undergone a similar foreign language learning process as their students. The foreign accents of NNESTs may not be a disadvantage. On the contrary, the learners’ exposure to the NNESTs’ accents can help learners become more familiar to English spoken in different accents, which is a common situation in English speaking environments. Although both NESTs and NNESTs show equal ability in evaluating students, NNESTs have been found to have better professional teaching skills than NESTs. The only weakness found with NNESTs is that they are more likely to have a lack of confidence in their English teaching skills, which may influence their classroom learning environment and affect students’ learning results.

The NNESTs’ lack of confidence is described by Bernat (2008) as “impostorhood”; NNESTs feel inauthentic as English teachers. The lack of confidence is not related to their levels of achievement in English but to a feeling of inadequacy in teaching English.

NNESTs have no reason to feel less confident than NESTs in their skills as an English teacher. The findings cited above serve as evidence for this.

In sum, success in learning English as a foreign language cannot be achieved without good teachers. In my opinion, whether a teacher is NEST or NNEST does not matter because both types possess good qualities as teachers. As Astor (2000) once stated, a “good teacher” should be a person who has a combination of two skills: linguistic skills
and pedagogical skills. A good NEST, then, should be a native English speaker with good pedagogical skills in teaching English as a foreign language whereas a good NNEST should be a skilled English teacher who has excellent English proficiency.

**Age and choice of English teachers.** As students with different ages show different advantages in EFL learning, NESTs and NNESTs also have different advantages in EFL teaching. If teachers’ advantages can match up with students’ needs and advantages, students will have the greatest success. Take grammar as an example. The best success with learning grammar may occur when NNESTs teach grammar to older learners because NNESTs are better grammar teachers and older students have advantages in learning grammar due to their advanced cognitive development. By the same token, more doubts about and problems with learning grammar may arise in a class of younger students taught by an NEST. When these students have difficulties understanding English grammar, they cannot ask questions in their mother tongue since NESTs would not understand the language. Therefore, their doubts would not be easily resolved by NESTs. This illustrates the idea that different English teachers should be assigned to teach different EFL classes according to their students’ strengths and weaknesses. Mismatches between students and teachers will cause less effective EFL education.

The different advantages of younger and older learners and the different strengths of NESTs and NNESTs indicate that student age and choice of teachers are related to each
other in EFL education. When decisions about teachers are being made, students’ ages should be considered so that successful EFL education is more likely to be achieved.

English classes should not be lead by only one type of teacher. If a teaching team is adopted in EFL classrooms, students will have the opportunity to learn from different teachers, whose co-presence also compensate for their individual weaknesses and competencies.

In conclusion, age and choice of teacher are two important factors for EFL education. Having some understanding of these two aspects can help educators such as school administrators to make better decisions in order to increase the quality of EFL education.
Implications

The English language is gaining increasing importance in China. One reflection of this can be seen in the English scores on college entrance examinations. Jin and Cortazzi (2002) provided evidence that scores have increased from 100 in 1990s to 150 in 2002. Nonetheless, students and parents are not satisfied with English classes at public schools; they desire better English foreign language (EFL) education. This can be seen in the number of students who attend after-school classes. Students and parents are unsatisfied with public EFL education for many reasons. First, class sizes are usually very large in a public EFL classroom. The average class size is 32 students, which is not surprisingly large, but they can be as large as 60 or more (Jin & Cortazzi, 2002). It is hard for one English teacher to pay attention to all students during a 40-minute English class, therefore not all students receive enough attention in a public EFL classroom. Second, teacher-centered and book-based activities are still dominant in public school English classes (Jin & Cortazzi, 2002). By book-based activities, I mean activities based on national textbooks that are usually the same across the country, with only slight differences in some areas. Applying the same material to all students cannot satisfy individual students’ learning needs. The content in the textbook may be too easy for some students and too challenging for others. Either situation creates ineffective EFL learning. Students who learn English at a faster rate would have to learn what they already know while students who learn at a slower rate would not understand the textbooks. These are two of the many
reasons why students and parents feel unsatisfied about public EFL education and would like to turn to private after-school teaching for a better EFL education.

More parents are sending their kids to private language schools where they receive additional education (Deng, 1997). In 1994, the percentage of private schools in China was less than 4% (Kwong, 1997). In 1998, the number of private education institutions dramatically increased to near 42,000. Eighty-five percent of schools were private at preschool levels, 11% at the elementary and secondary levels, and 3.5% at the tertiary level. Excluding the tertiary sector, these private institutions enrolled 6.5 million students in 1998 (LaRocque & Jacobsen, 2000).

Private after-school EFL education is common in China but the quality of English classes provided cannot be guaranteed. The quality of private institutions is one of many concerns. Xu (2002) noted that governments seemed to be more interested in financial gains from these private education institutions rather than their educational quality. Private education institutions bring a huge amount of income to the government but the government does not in turn invest in teacher training to create a sufficient supply of teachers for these private education institutions. According to Lin (1999), teachers who are employed at most private EFL institutions are part-time teachers or retired teachers who work for extra income. As a result, not all private institutions that contain EFL classes can provide satisfying EFL educational to students and parents, who have paid
extra for this education.

I have a strong personal interest in working in or operating a private out of school English language centre. In this section I will demonstrate the implications of the literature review by applying the findings in a concrete way in the context of an imaginary English language centre. Taking the lessons from the literature review into consideration for the benefit of both public EFL education and private EFL education, this future English centre would provide English classes to students who are willing to devote extra time and pay extra money for their English learning. In this section, I will explain how this after-school English centre is going to be run and why these decisions have been made.

This part mainly includes four sections: (a) age and curriculum focus; (b) recruitment of English teachers; (c) use of native English speaking teachers and non-native English speaking teachers; and (d) advertising for this English centre.

**Age, Curriculum Focus, and Evaluation**

In this subsection, three important aspects of the English centre to be created are described: age, curriculum focus, and evaluation.

**Age.** This English centre is open to students who are between 6 to 18 years of age. Students will be divided into two groups: a younger group and an older group. The age range of the younger group is between 6-12 years while that of older group is between
13-18 years. I came up with these categories because most children begin their
elementary education from the age of 6. Students from grades 1 to 6 are from 6 years old
to 12 years old. Some big cities in China begin English education in grade 1, so students
who are as young as 6 could be learning English at school, or at least be interested in
getting a head start on English learning and would benefit from attending an English
centre for young children. The older group would consist of middle and high school
students who are all receiving English classes at school and who are expected to write
government English exams.

The findings described in previous sections show that young starters and older
starters have their own advantages in learning English as a foreign language. The
advantage of starting young lies in learning English listening comprehension (Cameron,
2001), whereas the advantage of starting older lies in activities related to their greater
cognitive development such as grammar and vocabulary accumulation (Muñoz, 2014).
Although I found no evidence to demonstrate the problems many private institutions face
by teaching all EFL learners the same curriculum, according to my own internship
experience, many private EFL education institutions do not pay enough attention to
differences between students. Unlike public schools, which divide students into different
grades according to their ages, many private EFL education institutions have students of
many ages in the same classroom. They use the same teaching material for all students.
For example, there is a series of EFL textbooks named as *The New Concepts of English*, which include four books for learners with different levels of English. Book 1 is for learners who are without any background or experience with English. Book 2 and Book 3 are for those with a basic knowledge of English. Book 4 is for advanced English learners. These textbooks are widely used in EFL classrooms. Since the four books are written for learners with different levels of English acquisition, each book is intended for students with similar English skills. It is not unusual to see an EFL classroom full of learners with an age span of 6 to 18 years. When teachers are using the same textbook for this type of EFL class, younger learners’ and older learners’ specific needs sometimes may not be met.

**Curriculum.** There are some specific plans for the curriculum. Since younger learners are better at learning English listening comprehension and pronunciation, their curriculum will focus on these two aspects. “Young learners’ own understanding comes through hands and eyes and ears. The physical world is dominant at all times” (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990, p. 3). Physical, visual, and auditory activities are best for young learners so their curriculum will include activities using these three sensory methods. When listening comprehension training is given to students, visual activities such as watching English cartoons will be included as a part of the curriculum. At the beginning stage, cartoons with lower levels of difficulty will be chosen. Audio activities such as listening
to English songs and small listening comprehension quizzes will be included in listening comprehension teaching. Songs for young learners will be chosen starting from an easy level and gradually the level of complexity will be increased as students are progressing with their English listening comprehension. For example, songs with simple English words and a lot of repetition will be chosen as teaching materials in the beginning. As learners develop basic English knowledge, songs containing more complicated words and longer sentences will be chosen. As for English pronunciation teaching, activities such as role-plays will be included in the curriculum. Younger learners will be asked to choose characters that they like from cartoons they’ve watched. Lines from the cartoons will be provided to as a supportive tool for the role-plays. Through participating in role-plays, young learners will have the opportunity to imitate the pronunciation from the show, and students will practise their English pronunciation in the process.

The curriculum for older learners will focus on vocabulary and grammar. Vocabulary will be taught along different themes and categories, focusing on one theme or category at a time. Also, games will be used as a tool to teach. Playing games is a good way to teach a foreign language. Stakanova and Tolstikhina (2014) suggest that EFL learning is a process which requires a lot of effort for a long period time. Games can be used as a way to help learners stay interested and motivated. Games also help teachers to create language contexts that are meaningful and useful.
The curriculum for younger learners should be more aware of the duration of activities because young learners have shorter attention spans. Espinosa (2010) stated that a too-lengthy assessment will frustrate young learners. A balance should be maintained between different activities in the curriculum. The length of an English class for younger learners will be not be over 30 minutes, during which they will take part in three types of activities lasting around 10 minutes each. The length of English classes for older learners will be around 45 minutes.

There will be in-class assignments and home assignments for both groups of learners. In-class assignments include working in pairs and class activities. Homework assignments include individual work and group work. For younger learners, working in pairs and class activities will focus on listening comprehension and pronunciation training.

**Evaluation.** Evaluation is common in formal educational settings. However, Xu (2002) mentioned that one of the problems with private schools is that they lack systematic evaluation methods. Many private schools fail to provide evaluation for students. The evaluation of students can serve to reflect the outcomes of their education. Teachers can have insights into how students are progressing with their English learning and in which ways they are succeeding and in which areas they are experiencing difficulty. As a result, a curriculum should pay attention to evaluations for both groups of
learners. One of the issues to consider in creating this English centre is that evaluation is an important professional skill English teachers possess, and the findings show that NESTs and NNESTs have similar evaluation skills (Shi, 2001; Zhang & Elder, 2014).

Evaluation will be carried out in various ways in this English centre. First of all, there will be traditional paper examinations. Since after-school private institutions exist in order to provide a supplement to public EFL education, private English centres cannot totally ignore scores. One way to help students achieve better scores on traditional examinations is to familiarize with examinations. A second method of evaluation is through oral conversations. Oral conversations will follow two patterns. One is a one-on-one oral conversation between teacher and student. Teachers can directly evaluate students this way. The other pattern is an oral conversation among students. Students will converse in groups about specific topics. In this case, teachers will not participate in the conversations. They will observe students’ conversations, take notes on each student’s behaviour, and, afterwards, evaluate the students. The observation of students’ conversations can provide teachers with useful information. If a student is willing to speak English in public and is able to speak fluently, it shows that this student is confident in his or her English skills. If a student shows frequent repetition of words, this may reflect their vocabulary accumulation is lacking and he or she should work on
vocabulary. Teachers will evaluate students at this English Centre by comparing their current performance to their previous performance.

**Recruitment of English teachers**

One of the findings of this review indicated that good English teachers exhibit both of a high level of English proficiency and professional teaching skills (Astor, 2000). However, English teachers at some private EFL institutions do not meet these standards. According to Wolff (2010), in EFL classrooms, Chinese NNESTs usually use Mandarin instead of English and students sit in a theatre-style arrangement and memorize set English phrases. Some EFL classes are taught by NESTs who have no formal foreign language teaching experience or training. These NESTs only teach students songs and games. The implication of this finding is that English teachers who possess high levels of English proficiency and professional skills in teaching English should be recruited. This English centre will maintain strict requirements for hiring English teachers. First of all, native English speakers with high levels of English proficiency but no professional teaching skills will not be hired at the English centre. Also, non-native English speaking teachers who have EFL teaching experience but low proficiency in English will not be hired.

Many schools in China, including some public schools and some private institutions, hire native English speakers for the purpose of attracting students and parents. Jin and
Cortazzi (2002) suggest that many parents believe native speakers are more ideal EFL teachers. However, many are not professionally trained English teachers. What is worse, some are without any relevant background in education or experience teaching English. These individuals know little about early English education. When students encounter learning problems in class, the untrained teachers cannot provide helpful solutions for students’ problems. The quality of English classes cannot be guaranteed if these people are hired at the English centre. Also, NNESTs who know how to teach English as a foreign language but lack a high level of English proficiency will not be hired because they also fail to meet the requirements for successful English teaching. Medgyes (1992) indicated that NNESTs’ English classes are less efficient when teachers have lower levels of English proficiency.

The summary of the findings comparing NESTs with NNESTs shows that both NESTs and NNESTs have distinct advantages for EFL teaching. NESTs can provide language learners with wider English exposure than NNESTs by adopting English as the only communication tool in class (Butler, 2007; Cook, 1999). However, in order to avoid confusion, NESTs usually use “foreign talk” (i.e., simple sentences) in class, which decreases learners’ depth of English exposure. However, the depth of English exposure in NNESTs’ English classes is greater because they tend to use more complicated sentences with elements such as subordinations in class (Shin & Kellogg, 2007). They do not worry
about confusion as much as NESTs do because they share a mother tongue with learners. Sharing a mother tongue makes it easier for NNESTs to explain complex grammatical sentences. The findings suggest that one type of teachers’ strengths may complement the other’s weaknesses.

Numbers of NESTs and NNESTs in many public schools is imbalanced. The percentage of NESTs in most public elementary schools is very small. Some elementary schools only have one NEST on staff, which is insufficient. This makes it difficult for NESTs to take care of every student in class. The NEST’s high workload makes for insufficient communication and interactions between students and NESTs, and as a result, the effects of NESTs’ teaching cannot be seen. However, no concrete percentage of NESTs in Chinese public schools was found during the literature search for this project so the percentage of NESTs in China I’ve stated is drawn from my own learning and school visiting experience. The implications of the findings regarding the advantages of both types of English teacher will be to recruit the same number of NESTs and NNESTs at this private EFL centre. An imbalance in the number of NESTs and NNESTs is a problem with EFL education at public elementary schools. If this after-school English centre aims to bring successful EFL education to language learners, it should strive to solve the problems public schools face with their teaching.
Use of Native and Non-native English Speaking Teachers

All students at the English centre will be taught by both NESTs and NNESTs. The comparison between NESTs and NNESTs in the literature review demonstrated the different advantages of NESTs and NNESTs. If students have the opportunity to learn from the two types of teachers, they may be able to benefit from both teachers’ advantages, which will enhance their English learning. The combination of both NESTs and NNESTs in the classroom can be described as team teaching. Medgyes (1992) stated that “an ideal EFL environment should maintain a good balance between NESTs and NNESTs, where they complement each other in their strengths and weaknesses” (p. 347). Medgyes further commented that a mixed form of collaboration can be provided if there is a balance of both NESTs and NNESTs. NESTs have weaker professional skills than NNESTs (Ling & Braine, 2007) while NNESTs are not as confident in their teaching abilities as NESTs (Bernat, 2008; Hyde, 2002). If the two types of teachers are combined to teach as a team, one’s advantages can compensate the other’s disadvantages and vice versa.

Advertising Point

A larger number of NESTs does not make a private EFL institution better than another one. Some private institutions use their large number of NESTs as an advertising point. The screenshot below (Figure 1) is an advertisement from an English institution in
China. From a Chinese perspective, this photo of the website shows the images of foreigners. It is unclear whether the people in the photo are all NESTs. They may all be native English speakers, but they may not be native-English-speaking teachers. As has been described in the preceding literature review, native-English-speaking teachers should have a high level of English proficiency as well as professional teaching skills.

The images in the screenshot do not provide any detailed information about the NESTs. The website does not provide readers with a name, education background, or previous teaching experience for these “teachers.” In fact, they might not be English teachers at all. It is not uncommon for foreigners with no teaching experience and no background in education to teach English in China. Wolff (2010) used the moniker “white monkeys” to describe those native English speakers who are without any teacher training or education background. This indicates that a large number of NESTs should not be an advertising point for a private English centre.

A finding from Medgyes (1992) shows that “an ideal EFL environment should maintain a good balance between NESTs and NNESTs, where they complement each other in their strengths and weaknesses” (p. 347). The implication of this finding is that this English centre is going to use team teaching as its advertising point. The difference between this English centre and other EFL institutions is that it will maintain a balance of NESTs and NNESTs on staff. The workload for each group will not be overwhelming, in
order to ensure that each type of teacher can pay enough attention to students.

![Figure 1. Screen shot of a private English centre showing foreign teachers](image)

In conclusion, the most important finding that I have gained from this project is that NNESTs have the potential to be as qualified EFL teachers as their NEST counterparts. They actually have advantages in some respects. First, they have a better knowledge about what types of teaching methods will be more appropriate for students in their home countries. Moreover, they are better prepared and possess better teaching skills than NESTs when teaching EFL classes. Another impressive finding was with regards to the different advantages of students of different ages. Young learners are better at learning listening comprehension and pronunciation, whereas older learners are better at learning grammar and vocabulary due to their more advanced cognitive development. I have been interested in EFL education for a long time. After having read the literature about EFL education in the process of doing this project, some of my questions have been answered.
However, this project still had some limitations. One of the limitations is that I used some research that was written a long time ago. These old studies sometime cannot represent what is currently relevant in EFL education. But due to a lack of resources, some more recent studies could not be found. Another limitation of the project was a lack of concrete statistical support. Again due to limited resources, specific numbers could not be found, so some statements could only be derived from my own experience.
References


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