

A mixed-methods study of Vietnamese university EFL students' perception of native English-speaking teachers' qualities

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated Vietnamese university EFL students' perception of the desired qualities of native English-speaking teachers (NESTs). A mixed-methods approach, including questionnaire data and semi-structured interviews, unveiled key attributes highly valued by the students. In order of importance, these encompassed engaging classroom interaction, robust subject matter knowledge, effective assessment strategies, and positive teacher-student relationships. Although these aspects of NEST qualities emerged as top priorities, the study also highlighted the comparative importance of other qualities in relation to classroom pedagogies, classroom management, personality traits, and professional behavior. In addition, the study identified ten highly endorsed qualities as strong predictors of an effective NEST model within the EFL context, as well as the rationale behind the students' perception of these qualities. The study emphasizes the need for NESTs to consider and adapt their teaching practices to enhance EFL students' learning experiences, while also providing implications for NEST preparation and training in Vietnam and in similar EFL contexts.

Keywords: EFL students; native English-speaking teachers (NESTs); students' expectations; students' perception; teachers' qualities

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the increasing demand for high-quality English language education across Asia has driven the widespread recruitment of native-English-speaking teachers (NESTs). Schools and universities are actively recruiting NESTs as part of their attempts to enhance English language instruction and offer students immersive learning experiences. The preference for hiring NESTs stems from their ability to deliver an authentic language learning environment (Arvizu, 2014; Tjokrokanoko & Tedjasuksmana, 2013). NESTs are also regarded as the custodians of the genuine English language, with their proficiency serving as a benchmark for standard language (Davies, 2006).

This growing interest is particularly evident in Asian countries (Jeon & Lee, 2006). In Thailand, the positive attitude towards NESTs is associated with their widespread presence in the

country (Todd & Pojanapunya, 2022). In Indonesia, universities often collaborate with NESTs to elevate the quality of English language education; indeed, 40% of students have displayed high motivation when taught by NESTs (Mangendre, 2020). Cambodian learners highlight NESTs' English proficiency for both instruction and cross-cultural communication, class preparedness, punctuality, and ability to create a welcoming learning atmosphere (Dy & Oladele, 2019). In Vietnam, students have a clear preference for NESTs, placing importance on the qualities of NESTs in reference to desirable traits in an ideal teacher: teaching experience, qualifications, friendliness, enthusiasm, the ability to deliver interesting and informative classes, understanding of students' local culture, and advanced English communicative competence (Walkinshaw & Duong, 2012). In contrast to the traditional belief that proficiency constitutes effective teaching, mere linguistic competence does not guarantee success as an English instructor. The key to being a quality teacher is not determined only by their nationality or accent but by their passion, drive, and determination to help students and make a meaningful impact through teaching (Lee, 2000).

In the past few decades, Vietnam has experienced a notable increase in the presence of NESTs across various educational levels, from primary schools to universities. Typical programs such as Princeton in Asia (<https://www.princetoninasia.org/>) or Fulbright English Teaching Assistant Program (<https://vn.usembassy.gov/fulbright-english-teaching-assistant-program/>) have played a significant role in bringing NESTs to contribute to English learning and intercultural exchange throughout the country. Notably, both public and private institutions have joined in the trend, actively recruiting NESTs. Given this landscape, it becomes imperative to support NESTs in understanding and fulfilling their roles within this EFL context. A crucial aspect of this understanding involves NESTs' qualities from the perspective of EFL students. Thus, this study seeks to investigate how Vietnamese EFL university students perceive the qualities of NESTs to increase awareness among current and future NESTs regarding specific expectations. This is essential for guiding NESTs in adopting student-oriented English teaching pedagogies while working in the Vietnamese EFL context. Although rooted in this context, this study is expected to contribute a localized account of perceived NEST qualities to the international scholarship on native-speakerism in EFL education and offer insights that may be relevant to stakeholders' reflections in similar EFL contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The qualities of non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) have been featured in the literature. Studies showed that EFL students value NNESTs' role in teaching grammar, writing, and reading (Chun, 2014; Jieyin & Gajaseeni, 2018; Nelly & Arvizu, 2014; Sung, 2014). NNESTs were also perceived as more effective, particularly in test preparation (Liaw, 2012; Sung, 2014). In terms of classroom interaction, the strengths of NNESTs were reported to include their proficiency in students' first language, familiarity with learning challenges, and clear instruction and communication (Dy & Oladele, 2019; Ma, 2012). NNESTs were also appreciated for prioritizing teacher-student interaction in the classroom (Mede et al., 2018) and understanding students' learning needs and challenges (Dy & Oladele, 2019; Sung, 2014). Regarding personalities, NNESTs were recognized for qualities such as patience and understanding, making them effective for teaching beginners (Chun, 2014). In assessment, research revealed that NNESTs tended to focus more on students' proficiency, thus emphasizing accuracy in evaluating their learning (Mede et al., 2018). However, NNESTs were known for their inclination towards traditional, teacher-centered teaching—a point Sung (2014) highlighted as a drawback for them. In the Vietnamese EFL context, a comprehensive study was conducted by Tran (2015), who surveyed 339 students at various English centers in southern Vietnam to determine essential teacher traits. The students identified 12 qualities as significant factors influencing their learning: English competence, subject matter knowledge, knowledge of cultures of English-speaking countries, knowledge of Vietnamese culture, EFL teaching principles, ability to meet students' learning needs, effective use of teaching material,

classroom management, effective assessment, the application of information technology, professional attributes, and personal characteristics.

Compared to this body of research on NNESTs, there appear to be fewer studies investigating students' attitudes toward NESTs. Despite limited in number, these studies consistently showed a preference among students for NESTs, particularly in the areas of cultural knowledge as well as listening, speaking, and pronunciation instruction (Guerra, 2017; Jieyin & Gajasen, 2018; Liaw, 2012; Ma, 2012; Nelly & Arvizu, 2014; Rao, 2010; Sung, 2014). Many NESTs were found to possess bilingual skills, and extensive experience and qualifications (Copland et al., 2020). EFL students highlighted NESTs' proficiency in providing authentic language input and sharing cultural insights (Rao, 2010), facilitating oral communication across diverse contexts (Dy & Oladele, 2019; Liaw, 2012), and their excellence in teaching pronunciation, listening, and speaking courses (Chun, 2014). Beyond precise pronunciation, students acknowledged NESTs' ability to employ interactive pedagogical methods (Sung, 2014) and an English-only approach (Rahman & Zuzar, 2020). Regarding assessment, students expected NESTs to provide accurate and immediate feedback on their language performance (Sung, 2014). Notably, they collaborated with other teachers and employed various teaching methodologies, demonstrating their adaptability and willingness to negotiate (An et al., 2021). In addition, research showed that EFL learners also anticipate specific qualities in their personalities. For example, Rao (2010) found students highly valued positive personality traits exhibited by NESTs, such as conscientiousness, enthusiasm, friendly demeanor, warm-heartedness, and rapport with the class. Dy and Oladele (2019) reported that students regarded good preparation, punctuality and ability to create friendly learning environment as NESTs' key personalities. Nevertheless, concerns have also been raised in relation to NESTs. For instance, Ma (2012) pointed out that some learners experienced discomfort when studying with NESTs, citing challenges such as comprehension. As a result, NESTs frequently leaned towards instructional methods that fostered a more relaxed classroom atmosphere. Another concern was about NESTs' classroom interaction, characterized by a pronounced teacher-centered approach and constrained student participation in both quantity and quality (An et al., 2021).

Within the international scholarship on native-speakerism, there is a notable scarcity of research on NEST qualities, especially in the Vietnamese EFL context. A study by Walkinshaw and Duong (2012) revealed that students placed value on all these NEST qualities: "teaching experience, qualifications, friendliness, enthusiasm, the ability to deliver interesting and informative classes, understanding of students' local culture, and advanced English communicative competence" (para. 1). They also considered NESTs' native pronunciation as the most ideal model for instruction. However, this study, like others reviewed earlier, appeared to place their foci on NESTs' linguistic proficiency, pedagogical knowledge, interaction, assessment, and personalities. Notably absent was consideration of NESTs' qualities with respect to professional behavior and teacher-student relationships. In addition, the study had a limited number of participants and relied on an open-ended self-report questionnaire rather than probing interviews to support its quantitative data. This might have resulted in sampling bias, limited generalizability, and diminished statistical power. There is a need to address these gaps, and after over a decade since Walkinshaw and Duong (2012), it is also imperative to look further into Vietnamese students' perception of NESTs, given their increasing presence in Vietnam in recent years, as mentioned in the introduction, in order to inform NESTs' EFL teaching, NEST training, and NEST support policies. Accordingly, the present study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What aspects of NEST qualities are perceived by Vietnamese EFL students as important for EFL instruction at the tertiary level of education?
2. Why are these qualities considered important?

METHOD

Participants

Our study included 262 participants, all of whom were undergraduate students hailing from universities in the Mekong Delta region of Vietnam. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 20. Out of these, there were 188 females and 74 males. These students had learned English as a primary subject at high school, where English was taught by Vietnamese teachers using the traditional grammar translation method. At university, they had opportunities to learn with NESTs in speaking skills and pronunciation courses.

Instruments

In conducting this study, we used a mixed-methods approach to investigating how university EFL students perceived the qualities of NESTs. This methodology incorporated both qualitative and quantitative research techniques, which allowed for an in-depth understanding of this phenomenon. Employing a simple sequential explanatory design (Creswell, 2014), we first collected quantitative data and then supplemented it with qualitative data. This approach enhanced the study's findings by cross-referencing data from two different sources, making the results more robust. In addition, the interview data contributed to answering our research question 2 by illuminating representative participants' perspective on the reasons behind the overall perception of the participant population.

In order to gather quantitative data, we designed a questionnaire with two main sections. The first section aimed to acquire background information from the student respondents. The second section, which was based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "1 = not important" to "5 = extremely important", was used to collect data regarding the respondents' perception. This section comprised 8 scales with a total number of 55 items: personalities (8 items), professional behaviors (5 items), subject matter knowledge (5 items), classroom pedagogies (8 items), classroom interaction (8 items), classroom management (8 items), teacher-student relationship (8 items), and assessment (5 items). In developing this section, we adapted items from the instruments of two previous studies: Liaw (2012) and Dy and Oladele (2019). The rationale for our adaptation of these studies' instruments was that their research was conducted within an Asian context, particularly Taiwan (Liaw, 2012) and Cambodia (Dy & Oladele, 2019), two EFL contexts similar to our own in that English is taught as a foreign language subject and students' exposure to NESTs is restricted to the classroom. However, considering our local context, we modified many of the items from these studies to make them better align with EFL learning and teaching in Vietnam.

Following the questionnaire, we conducted semi-structured interviews to collect responses that would help us better understand the questionnaire results. According to Newcomer et al. (2015), interviews complement and enrich the insights gained from other research methods in mixed-methods studies. The interviews (N= 4) were carried out in Vietnamese to enable participants to fully and articulately express their thoughts.

Data collection and analysis

At the outset of this investigation, we initiated a pilot study by engaging our TESOL colleagues in a think-aloud activity to obtain their feedback which helped to enhance the clarity and conciseness of the questionnaire items (Rasool & Winke, 2019). Once the questionnaire was revised based on the feedback, we employed a snowball sampling technique whereby we recruited participants based on referrals from our initial participants (Parker et al., 2019). Our questionnaire, which was hosted on Google Form, was distributed among potential teachers and students who would subsequently pass it on to their acquaintances. Via this chain of sharing, we obtained 262 online responses. At the end of the questionnaire, we included an invitation to participate in a post-questionnaire semi-structured interview. Four of the questionnaire respondents agreed to participate.

To conduct our data analysis, we used SPSS 20 to examine the questionnaire data. Our approach primarily revolved around employing descriptive statistics and deriving mean-based

rankings. This methodology aligned with our objective, which was to discern the NEST qualities favored by Vietnamese EFL learners and formulate corresponding implications.

The interview data were transcribed verbatim in Vietnamese, translated by us into English, subjected to qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013). In this analysis, we constantly compared the interview data with the quantitative data to identify how the former corresponded to the latter. Due to the modest size of the interview dataset, the themes were identified based on occurrences rather than frequencies. During the coding process of the interview data, we worked independently. To ensure the quality of our coding, we measured intercoder reliability, resulting in an 80% agreement between us. Ultimately, we engaged in multiple discussions until we reached a unanimous consensus on our initial coding decisions.

FINDINGS

Quantitative results

Reliability of the scales

A scale test was conducted to assess the internal consistency of the scales in the questionnaire. The values for Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the eight scales included in the questionnaire are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Reliability of the scales in the questionnaire

Scales	No of items	Cronbach's alpha
Personalities	8	.956
Professional behavior	5	.958
Teacher-student relationship	8	.951
Subject matter knowledge	5	.955
Classroom pedagogies	8	.953
Classroom interaction	8	.952
Classroom management	8	.953
Assessment	5	.953

Cronbach's alpha value above .70 is considered satisfactory, and a value exceeding .95 indicates exceptional reliability (Dörnyei, 2007; Pallant, 2007). Additionally, for scales with fewer than ten items, a reliability coefficient of .60 is deemed acceptable (Dörnyei, 2003). In our study, our statistical analysis revealed that the questionnaire displayed a high level of overall reliability, as evidenced by its Cronbach's alpha coefficient ($\alpha = .98$). According to the standards, all the scales in Table 1 were exceptionally reliable. This means that these scales' items consistently measured the associated constructs, rendering it a reliable tool for gauging the participants' perception.

Descriptive statistics of the questionnaire

Table 2 presents the mean values and standard deviations of all the scales in the questionnaire. The ratings for each scale ranged between 3.92 and 4.36, indicating consistently high levels of performance across the scales. Standard deviations for each category were relatively low ($SD < 0.71$), meaning that the mean values were relatively consistent and not widely spread out and that our questionnaire relatively well measured the participants' perceptions.

Table 2

Means and standard deviations of the scales

Scales	M	SD
Classroom interaction	4.36	0.68
Subject matter knowledge	4.30	0.71
Assessment	4.20	0.70
Teacher-student relationship	4.19	0.71
Classroom pedagogies	4.17	0.67
Classroom management	4.05	0.69

Personalities	4.02	0.67
Professional behavior	3.92	0.69

In particular, the table shows that the scale of classroom interaction stood out with the highest rating ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 0.68$). This indicates students' strong expectation for NESTs to excel in engaging with them, facilitating peer interaction, and fostering a positive classroom atmosphere conducive to interaction. The students also highly endorsed NESTs with a strong knowledge of the English language and the topical contents covered in their lessons ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.71$). Following closely were assessment ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.70$) and teacher-student relationships ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.71$) and classroom pedagogies ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.67$), suggesting that NESTs' qualities related to these pedagogical aspects were perceived as very important. The two other scales, classroom management ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.69$) and personalities ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 0.67$), were also considered as important qualities expected of NESTs. Although the scale of professional behavior received the lowest mean score of 3.92, this value was way above the neutral point, indicating that in the students' view, the way NESTs behave in the classroom influences their impression on the teachers' professionalism to a considerable extent.

In summary, the students' responses highlighted the significant importance they placed on various qualities expected of NESTs, with classroom interaction, assessment, and classroom pedagogies leading the way, and even the lowest-rated scale—professional behavior—was still considered as significantly influencing their perception of teacher professionalism.

Ten top-rated NEST qualities

To identify most favored NEST qualities, we calculated the mean values, standard deviation, and frequency for the 55 items in the questionnaires. The results showed that ten specific items had the highest mean scores: assessment (item 54), classroom interaction (items 15, 29, 30, 33, 38), personalities (items 1, 3), teacher-student relationships (item 50), and subject matter knowledge (items 14). These top-scoring items are presented in [Table 3](#).

Table 3

Means and standard deviations of the items

Items	M	SD	5	4	3	2	1
Q54. Teachers should remain fair and unbiased in assessment	4.51	.782	63%	29%	5.3%	1.1%	1.5%
Q30. Teachers should provide friendly learning and relaxing environment	4.47	.751	57.6%	35.9%	4.2%	0.8%	1.5%
Q33. Teachers should understand students' difficulty in learning English	4.47	.786	59.5%	32.8%	4.6%	1.5%	1.5%
Q29. Teachers should be willing to answer students' questions	4.44	.785	57.3%	33.6%	6.9%	0.8%	1.5%
Q3. Teachers should be responsible	4.42	.849	57.6%	33.2%	5.3%	1.5%	2.3%
Q50. Teachers should maintain a friendly and respectful teacher-student relationship	4.42	.875	57.6%	33.2%	5.3%	0.8%	3.1%
Q1. Teacher should be friendly	4.41	.852	56.9%	33.2%	5.7%	2.3%	1.9%

Q38. Teachers should speak clearly and comprehensively	4.41	.767	53.1%	38.9%	5.7%	0.8%	1.5%
Q14. Teachers should have sound and updated knowledge of English	4.39	.880	55%	36.3%	5%	0.4%	3.4%
Q15. Teachers should give adequate information considering students' level	4.38	.843	54.2%	35.1%	6.5%	2.7%	1.5%

Note: 5 = extremely important; 4 = very important; 3 = important; 2 = somewhat important; 1 = not important.

Examining the top-rated qualities of NESTs shed light on the key factors influencing students' perceptions of effective teaching. The findings revealed that students placed high value on fairness and unbiased assessment ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 0.782$), highlighting the importance of objective evaluation methods. Additionally, a friendly and relaxing learning environment ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 0.751$) and teachers' understanding of students' difficulties in learning English ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 0.786$) were also highly endorsed. The respondents indicated a strong preference for teachers' willingness to answer questions ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 0.785$) and strong sense of responsibility ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.849$). The maintenance of a friendly and respectful teacher-student relationship ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 0.875$) was similarly emphasized. Other qualities such as teacher friendliness, clear and comprehensive communication, sound and updated subject knowledge, and the provision of adequate information considering students' levels also scored notably high ($M = 4.38$ to 4.41). The distribution of responses based on percentages showed that most students in the sample identified these NEST qualities as very important or extremely important. This reinforces the idea that these qualities hold significant value from their perspective.

Interview results

Classroom interaction

The questionnaire revealed that students considered NEST's qualities related to classroom interaction to be the most important, with four specific qualities making their way into the top-rated list. This finding was supported by the interview data. In particular, they expressed the need for their instructors to use language that matched their proficiency level to ensure effective classroom interaction. One participant stressed the importance of NESTs being attentive to students' limited English proficiency, a common issue among EFL students in Vietnam, during their classroom interactions. For instance, Interviewee 1 expressed her own expectation:

"I hope the teacher will use simple vocabulary, because when communicating completely in English but the teacher uses words that are too advanced, it will be difficult for students to understand."
(Interviewee 1)

In addition, three out of four participants expressed their appreciation for the positive impact of an accommodating classroom atmosphere. For example, Interviewee 1 suggested the integration of "classroom activities, such as relaxation and warm-up exercises" at the beginning of each lesson to stimulate students' learning. This viewpoint was supported by Interviewee 2, who said that NESTs need to create "a comfortable learning environment" by using open and flexible teaching styles. Additionally, Interviewee 3 stressed the importance of a "stress-free learning environment" and acknowledged that students perform better when they feel at ease. However, Interviewee 4 recommended creating a classroom environment that strikes a balance between being accommodating and maintaining a serious tone. In particular, the interviewee remarked:

"Sometimes learning environments should be fun but other times they must be serious. Therefore, we should combine both approaches." (Interviewee 4)

Overall, when it comes to classroom interaction, students expected NESTs to adjust their language use and cultivate a friendly atmosphere through enjoyable activities. They valued a stress-free environment, though maintaining a balance between having fun and being serious was seen as essential.

Subject matter knowledge

The interview data yielded insights into what students expected in terms of NESTs' subject matter knowledge, which received the second-highest mean score, according to the questionnaire. While considering teachers' subject knowledge as "more methodical" (Interviewee 4), the participants expected NESTs to possess thorough knowledge of English for pragmatic communication and real-world situations in which real native English is used, as evidenced by the following responses:

"I hope that they can impart sentence patterns frequently employed by native speakers and, most importantly, not limit themselves to content found only in textbooks. When acquiring listening and speaking skills from native speakers, I primarily expect exposure to common sentence patterns followed by pronunciation since communication places less emphasis on grammar than writing." (Interviewee 4)

"Foreigners have a clear advantage in terms of practical experience due to their immersion in an English-speaking environment. When they share these real-life experiences with us, we will learn more effectively." (Interviewee 2)

In addition, the interviewees expressed their expectation for NESTs to have a grasp of English-speaking cultures and incorporate it into instruction to expose students to these cultures. They believed that this job is better done by NESTs than Vietnamese teachers (Interviewees 3 and 4). This, as they commented, could help them to "avoid culture shock" (Interviewee 3) when traveling or studying abroad. Nevertheless, NESTs were also expected to have "a comprehensive understanding of Vietnamese cultural norms" (Interviewee 3) to prevent unintentional offenses arising from improper language use in specific contexts.

Assessment

The questionnaire brought to light that students viewed the assessment-related qualities of NESTs as crucial. It was noted that NESTs' ability to carry out assessments with fairness and impartiality was one of the most favored qualities. The interview data expanded on this finding, with the interviewees mentioning that NESTs might face difficulties in implementing assessments due to their unfamiliarity with the assessment culture in Vietnam. Interviewee 2 suggested that NESTs leverage students' self-reflection and self-assessment, which would serve as a basis on which to provide feedback on students' learning:

"NESTs should encourage learners to reflect on their own learning process by sharing insights through verbal or written communication. This approach may yield more precise results than traditional tests. NESTs should provide feedback after the completion of student self-reflection activities." (Interviewee 2)

In addition, the interviewees also expressed their preference for NESTs' attention to giving timely feedback, as shown in the comments below:

"I believe that everyone appreciates prompt feedback." (Interviewee 2)

"In case they cannot address my questions during class, I would appreciate it if they could respond later via text messages so that I feel like my progress is being monitored closely." (Interviewee 3)

This preference for continuous and timely communication highlighted the perceived link between feedback and the sense of progress, indicating that students valued not only the substance of the feedback itself but also the regularity and responsiveness of the feedback delivery process.

Teacher-student relationship

The questionnaire responses highlighted students' recognition of NESTs' awareness of the teacher-student relationship as a significant quality. They particularly stressed the importance of teachers being able to uphold a friendly and respectful connection with students, considering it among the most desirable qualities in NESTs. The interview data corroborated this observation. When asked about their expectations, the interviewees conveyed a preference for NESTs to nurture a friendly connection with students grounded in friendship, transparency, and mutual understanding. They also underscored the importance of maintaining mutual respect to establish appropriate boundaries between teachers and learners. For example, Interviewee 2 remarked:

"In my view, a friendly association between NESTs and students constitutes an effective relationship characterized by empathy and meaningful dialogue. Nonetheless, it's crucial to maintain courtesy by respecting students' privacy." (Interviewee 2)

The interviewees also added that NESTs should be mindful of striking a balance between being approachable and maintaining professionalism. They underlined the need for NESTs to understand how to uphold an appropriate professional distance with students, avoiding both excessive intimacy and aloofness. The following comments illustrate their preference:

"I believe that we should limit our interactions with teachers to professional exchanges unless there is genuine compatibility between our personalities. If there is mutual affinity and no objection from the teacher's side, then we may engage in conversation beyond class work; otherwise, communication will remain restricted within academic spheres." (Interviewee 1)

"NESTs ought not be excessively intimate nor overly detached from their students as either way can have negative consequences. Instead, moderation is key so as to establish connections without compromising professionalism." (Interviewee 4)

Classroom pedagogies

Questionnaire responses revealed that NESTs' classroom pedagogies were perceived as a crucial aspect of their overall qualities. In terms of this aspect, the interview data indicated an expectation for NESTs to prioritize practice-oriented and non-conventional activities to enhance effective learning. This is clearly illustrated in the comment below:

"As far as methodologies are concerned, relying solely on theoretical instruction is insufficient, so practical experience is crucial." (Interviewee 4)

Regarding teaching methodologies, a balance between theory and practice should be struck. For instance, after introducing a new grammar concept, NESTs should demonstrate its usage and encourage students to engage in activities that extend beyond conventional methods. Incorporating games or activities requiring students to utilize the acquired grammar point would foster greater interaction and proficiency (Interviewee 1).

Relatedly, Interviewees 2 and 4 expressed their expectation for NESTs to bring the real world into the classroom through the development of life-like scenarios to facilitate students' English communication practice. Their comments are as follows:

"I appreciate when instructors employ classroom scenarios as an opportunity for students to engage in communication." (Interviewee 2)

"Each teacher may have their own approach towards designing lesson plans but I find that mini projects which align with real-world scenarios tend to yield superior outcomes." (Interviewee 4)

Some other expected pedagogical strategies for NESTs involved their capacity to seamlessly incorporate culture into teaching, skillfully utilizing visual aids like images (Interviewee 2), and employing music to alleviate in-class stress and enhance student engagement (Interviewee 3).

Furthermore, there was an expectation that NESTs should conduct in-depth assessments of their students' learning objectives and potential challenges to offer timely support. Three interviewees shared their perception:

"I hope teachers will familiarize themselves with their students' educational aspirations so they can tailor their instruction accordingly." (Interviewee 2)

"NESTs may employ different teaching methodologies than Vietnamese teachers; therefore, it would be prudent for them to inquire about any challenges faced by their students." (Interviewee 1)

"Instructors should empathize with learners who struggle and create strategies to help them." (Interviewee 4)

Classroom management

In terms of classroom management, NESTs were recommended to be adept at efficiently organizing their time by "establishing clear timelines for each classroom activity" (Interviewee 2), a skill considered fundamental for creating a structured and purposeful learning environment. Beyond time management, NESTs were expected to integrate collaborative techniques into their managing the class (Interviewee 2). The incorporation of group work within classes was underscored as a crucial way to foster an interactive and dynamic atmosphere that enhances students' engagement and cooperative learning skills.

Personalities

As revealed by the questionnaire, the personalities of NESTs emerged as a quite important aspect of their overall qualities. Friendliness and responsibility were two traits that received high ratings. This observation finds further support in the interview data. NESTs were expected to exhibit open-mindedness, dynamism, and a keen sense of responsibility in caring for students. Their comments on these expectations are as follows:

"NESTs should exhibit friendliness, open-mindedness, and dynamism. They ought to acquaint themselves with their students' names, English-speaking skills, and applications. In general, they must pay more attention to learners." (Interviewee 1)

"Native teachers should pay more heed to students. Because sometimes they can get engrossed in teaching or due to cultural disparities, they can find it challenging to comprehend their students." (Interviewee 2)

While NESTs were expected to be generally affable, there was a consensus among the interviewees that a degree of discipline was advisable. The comments below illustrate their perspective:

"In the classroom, I expect that NESTs will maintain cordiality but also firmness at times." (Interviewee 3)

"I believe NESTs should strike a balance between being friendly and strict. If they are too lenient with students, it could foster dependency and hinder motivation towards learning. Therefore, strictness is essential because it trains students on how best to confront difficulties and pressure." (Interviewee 4)

Furthermore, interviewees anticipated NESTs to demonstrate patience, empathy, and punctuality. To illustrate, the participants provided comments:

“Several students may struggle with comprehending what’s taught in class but having patience while explaining back would enhance the learning experience.” (Interviewee 2)

“In addition to friendliness, NESTs should listen attentively, respect student opinions. When there is an error, students deserve correction not criticism or judgment.” (Interviewee 3)

“Punctuality cannot be overemphasized as well. There may exist time zone differences, but tardiness beyond reasonable limits is unacceptable since its effects are detrimental towards lesson quality.” (Interviewee 4)

Professional behavior

Among the eight scales on the questionnaire, professional behavior garnered the lowest mean score, suggesting that EFL university students did not place notable importance on this aspect. The interviewees went on to share their detailed perspectives on this issue. In particular, there was a unanimous agreement that NESTs’ choice of attire reflects their “dedication to work and investment in one’s image” (Interviewee 3). Echoing this sentiment, Interviewee 2 added:

“I believe clothing helps distinguish teachers from students. Therefore, if they adhere to common standards of dressing, they will appear more respectable in the eyes of their students.” (Interviewee 2)

Furthermore, maintaining regular presence was seen as a contributing factor to the professional behavior of NESTs, as exemplified in the following comment:

“Though it may be difficult to avoid missing classes entirely, NESTs ought not to miss too many sessions. In case of absence or cancellation of classes, they could either arrange for make-up classes or assign homework.” (Interviewee 3)

DISCUSSION

The study revealed that NEST qualities in the area of classroom interaction were perceived as most important, which could be linked to the increasing endorsement of communicative language teaching approaches in the Vietnamese EFL context (Ngoc & Iwashita, 2012). Given limited genuine opportunities for extramural English communication, students in a communicatively oriented classroom aspire to engage with native speakers from diverse social and cultural backgrounds (Liaw, 2012), but they also rely heavily on their classroom teachers as models for natural language usage (Tran & Dang, 2019). Our finding aligns with Sung (2014), which found that Hongkongese students perceived interactive teaching styles and accurate pronunciation as NESTs’ strengths for teaching English communication. This appears to suggest that, because of these qualities, NESTs are still considered effective teachers of English communication, although the distinction between native-speakerism and non-native-speakerism in defining effective teaching is increasingly questionable today. In addition, our study found students’ expectations for NESTs to focus on their language-related difficulties in interaction and on creating a comfortable, relaxing interactive classroom environment. This expectation resonates with Ma’s (2012) findings, indicating a desire for stress-free learning in the typical EFL classroom where exam-oriented learning often dominates, although a certain level of seriousness, as our interview data suggests, is still deemed necessary.

Another finding is that NESTs’ subject matter knowledge was highly endorsed. Specifically, NESTs were expected to possess a thorough and up-to-date knowledge of English and adapt their language to their students’ proficiency levels, which echoes prior research (e.g., Liaw, 2012; Jieyin & Gajaseni, 2018; Nelly & Arvizu, 2014). NESTs are often perceived as excellent English instructors (Rao, 2010; Sung, 2014) for providing a native-like language model that aids in developing listening

and speaking competencies (Jieyin & Gajasen, 2018). Nevertheless, it is important to note that they might be linguistically limited to their dialect and unaware of global English practices, while English is today a world lingua franca (Guerra, 2017). NESTs therefore need to carefully consider this when teaching in a particular EFL context with its idiosyncratic practices in English. Additionally, NESTs were expected to be knowledgeable about English-speaking and especially Vietnamese cultures. Indeed, students in EFL contexts regard NESTs as a valuable source of cultural learning (Sung, 2014) and prefer those who can share engaging stories from their own culture (Jieyin & Gajasen, 2018). Also, our study aligns with other studies (e.g., Guerra, 2017; Rao, 2010) in documenting students' expectations for NESTs to understand local culture to avoid unintentional cultural insensitivity when using English in the classroom. This underscores the importance for NESTs in Vietnam and similar EFL contexts to be culturally aware and responsive, as neglecting learners' native culture hinders their duty fulfillment (Rao, 2010).

NESTs' assessment-related qualities were also highly valued by the students in our study, who emphasized fair assessment and prompt feedback. This indicates the need for NESTs to establish and clearly communicate fair assessment criteria in the EFL classroom. Also, to meet students' needs, NESTs could provide on-the-spot feedback in communication classes as well as timely after-the-event feedback. Teachers' timely constructive feedback practices help students identify their knowledge gaps before their learning proceeds (Tran, 2015) while simultaneously preventing their reluctance in communication (Mede et al., 2018). Furthermore, our study demonstrated a preference among students for self-reflection followed by NESTs' feedback, which they believed more accurately reflected their learning. Indeed, alternative methods such as self-assessment are featured in many published English textbooks but are often overlooked in both the EFL curriculum and classroom teaching. This may also be associated with the students' need for novel assessment experiences with NESTs. Such a preference is noteworthy in the Vietnamese ELF context, which is dominated by standardized testing protocols and students' in-class passiveness. Overall, adopting appropriate assessment practices in response to Vietnamese students' expectations could facilitate their acquisition of English language skills (Tran, 2015).

The students in our study indicated a preference for a teacher-student relationship that strikes a balance between intimacy and respect. Creating a friendly and laid-back atmosphere in the classroom could be fostered through storytelling, sharing personal experiences, or injecting humor into lessons (Ma, 2012). This environment not only encourages students to freely express themselves but also prevents the potential monotony associated with conventional rote-learning methods (Ma, 2012). As observed in the literature, NESTs, who are often lauded for their enthusiasm and friendliness, are thought to excel in building rapport with EFL students (Rao, 2010). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the teacher-student relationship should also be rooted in mutual respect. The open teaching style adopted by NESTs may clash with traditional learning approaches, potentially causing discomfort for some students (Rao, 2010). This underscores the importance of NESTs investing time in understanding their EFL students' balanced expectations to cultivate positive relationships in the classroom.

In addition, NESTs' qualities in classroom pedagogies were not perceived as important as those related to classroom interaction, subject matter knowledge, and assessment. Research shows that classroom pedagogies are essential for making lessons captivating, enjoyable, and stimulating for students (Mede et al., 2018). In the Vietnamese context, students strongly endorse Vietnamese teachers' pedagogies (Tran, 2015). However, our study found that students placed less emphasis on this NEST aspect, which echoes the notion that pedagogy is a potential weakness for NESTs (Lee, 2016). As observed by Lee (2016), NESTs' cultural and linguistic competence is their asset, yet these qualities are not sufficient for effective teaching. Students' lower expectation of NESTs' pedagogies can also be connected to NESTs' less exam-oriented and more flexible teaching approaches (Ma, 2012), which might be seen as less 'pedagogical'. Despite this, NESTs are effective in creating practical and innovative learning experiences for students via their activity-based teaching approach (e.g., game-like activities) (Ma, 2012). This appears to be NESTs' advantage when teaching in EFL

contexts, where, as our findings suggest, students prefer practice-based activities focused on real-world scenarios, visual aids, and music. The students' additional expectation for NESTs to tailor teaching to their learning challenges also highlights the importance of their pedagogical learner knowledge (Le, 2020).

Compared to other desired NEST qualities, classroom management took a back seat in fulfilling the expectations of the study's participants. Indeed, Vietnamese students tend to place a diminished emphasis on classroom management in shaping teachers' desirable traits (Tran, 2015). In our study, it was expected that NESTs would excel in effectively managing their time, a sentiment supported by Yuan's (2021) observation that NESTs demonstrate a natural ability to navigate class schedules, regardless of whether instructional objectives are met. Beyond this, our participants expressed a preference for NESTs to employ collaborative techniques in classroom activities, which echoes our related finding that students valued NESTs' interaction-related qualities. By incorporating communicative and collaborative approaches, NESTs can encourage active participation in language practice, especially in English communication classes (Yuan, 2021). Implementing group work can also create an interactive atmosphere in the classroom, offering students with varying levels of English proficiency equal opportunities to express their thoughts in what Tran (2015) describes as "a relaxing but intellectual environment" (p.12).

Finally, NESTs were expected by the students to demonstrate various personal attributes (e.g., friendliness, responsibility, open-mindedness, dynamism, discipline, patience, and empathy). However, across our findings, students emphasized the importance of NESTs demonstrating care, manifested as attention to students' presence, proficiency, learning difficulties, and overall expectations. Miller and Gkonou (2018) characterize this as 'teaching-as-caring pedagogies', highlighting that NESTs are expected to embody qualities such as optimism, empathy, patience, and enthusiasm. NESTs therefore need to adhere to teaching-as-caring principles in their professional practice to make students feel understood, supported, and motivated to actively participate in the learning process. Above all, they need to be aware that "teachers' personalities play a significant role in accomplishing students' educational achievement" (Noreen et al., 2019, p. 92). Nevertheless, they should also be mindful of their inability to communicate in students' native language (Rao, 2010), which may factor into a perceived lack of approachability, empathy, and students' comprehension (Chun, 2014). In terms of professional behavior, our study indicates that students did not have high expectations for NESTs in this regard. However, certain aspects, such as adherence to dress codes and discipline, were identified as elements contributing to their professionalism.

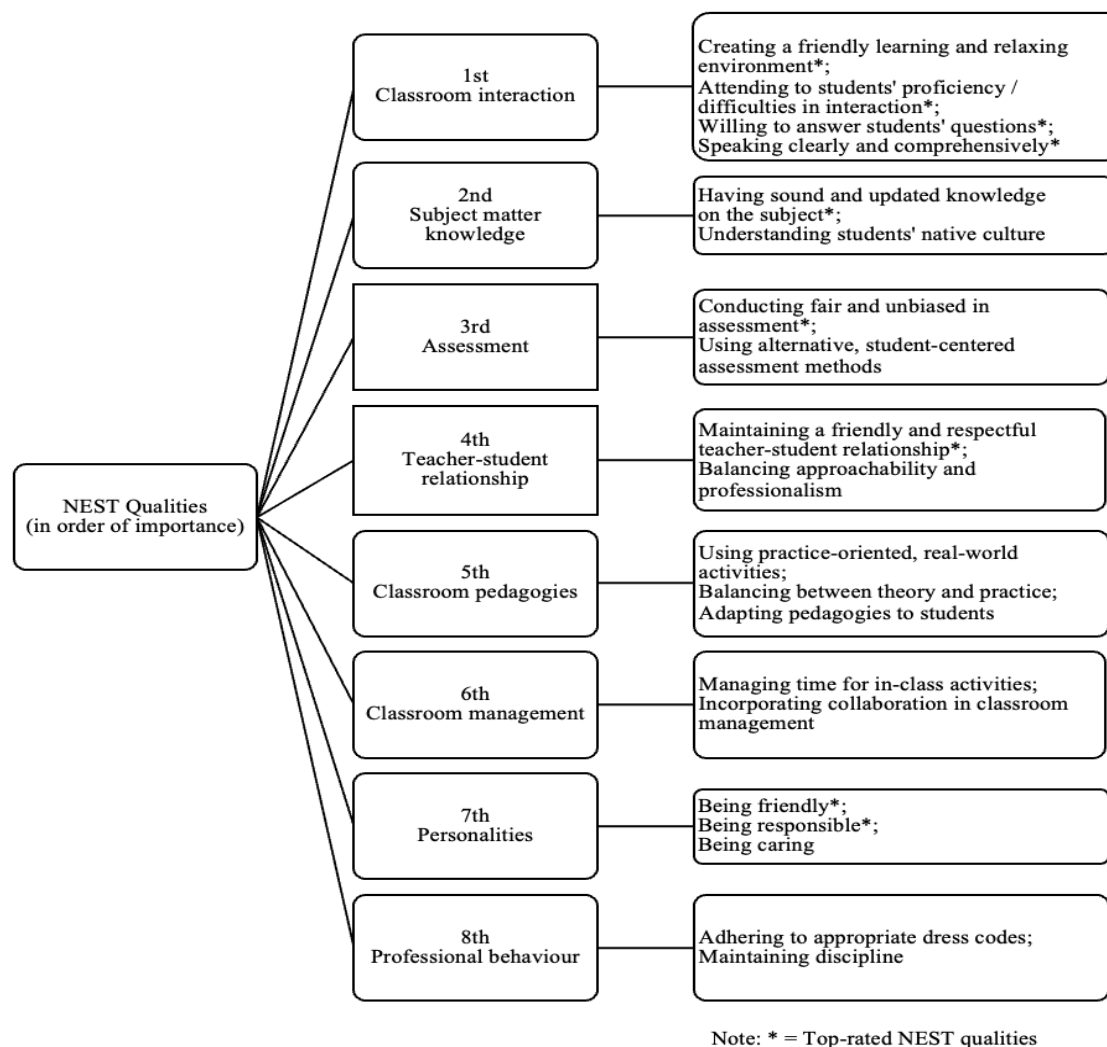
CONCLUSION

Our study provided insights into the perceptions of Vietnamese university EFL students regarding the qualities they valued in NESTs. From a student perspective, the study brought up key attributes that NESTs should consider, including classroom interaction, subject matter knowledge, assessment skills, teacher-student relationships, personality traits, classroom management abilities, classroom pedagogies, and professional behavior. Notably, among these characteristics, it is crucial that NESTs prioritize fostering engaging classroom interactions, demonstrating a strong grasp of their subject matter, and implementing effective assessment strategies. Despite classroom interaction, subject matter knowledge, and assessment being highlighted as top priorities, the study suggests that NESTs should be mindful of tailoring their teaching approaches to suit the preferences of their student demographic (see Rahman & Yuzar, 2020). Furthermore, while other aspects such as teacher-student relationships, personality traits, classroom management, and professional behavior may have less significant impacts, as suggested by the findings, the study underscores their continued relevance and importance to the sample population. Finally, the most favored NEST qualities were identified as strong predictors of an effective NEST model for the students (Figure 1). It is, however, important to be mindful that, although the model reflects collectively preferred qualities, individual preferences may vary across student populations in different institutional, regional, and

national contexts. This necessitates NESTs' use of open channels of communication and ongoing feedback from students in these contexts to effectively cater to their diverse expectations.

Figure 1

NESTs' most favored qualities identified in the study



Drawing on our study, TESOL teacher education programs can better prepare pre-service NESTs for the EFL industry by focusing on some key aspects. These programs should introduce the expectations of students in EFL contexts to enhance teachers' awareness before entering the profession. Pre-service NESTs also need a comprehensive understanding of English as a lingua franca and its global variations to navigate linguistic differences successfully. Additionally, given unique expectations in specific EFL contexts, the emphasis on intercultural awareness becomes indispensable. This underlines the importance of developing NESTs' intercultural competence (Jieyin & Gajaseeni, 2018; Lee, 2016), as they must adeptly navigate the cultural nuances and expectations of their students. For host institutions in EFL contexts, it is imperative to support NESTs through orientation programs that specify local students' preferences, learning styles, and individual differences, as these may vary significantly across institutions and regions in the country. These attempts may somehow ensure that NESTs are ready enough to meet local expectations rather than become a "potential menace" (Phillipson, 1992, p. 14).

The study has limitations that should guide future research. One limitation is its exclusive focus on EFL university students' perceptions while neglecting NESTs' perspectives. This gap inhibits an understanding of potential disparities between students' expectations and NESTs' self-perceptions in effective EFL instruction. Future research should include NESTs' viewpoints for a more holistic view. Another limitation is the absence of exploration into perceptual variations related to proficiency and gender among students, hindering insights into how these factors influence expectations and learning experiences. Prospective research could delve into these dimensions to understand their impacts. Finally, understanding the correlation between students' perceptions of NESTs and their motivation to learn English is also an interesting avenue for future studies.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT:

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest associated with this paper.

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