The Impact of Native Speaker Volunteers on the Speaking Skills of Non-English Major Students: A Case Study at Hanoi University of Natural Resources and Environment

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Abstract: *This study investigates the perceptions of non-English major students at Hanoi University of Natural Resources and Environment regarding the impact of native speaker volunteers on their speaking skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. The research focuses on how these volunteers influence students' fluency, pronunciation, and overall speaking proficiency. Data were collected through questionnaires from 120 students. The findings indicate that students generally view native speaker volunteers as beneficial for improving speaking fluency and pronunciation. However, challenges such as difficulties with understanding accents and speech pace were also reported. The results underscore the significance of native speaker volunteers in enhancing EFL speaking skills and offer recommendations for integrating these volunteers more effectively into the curriculum at the university.*

Keywords: *Native Speaker Volunteers, Speaking Skills, English as a Foreign Language (EFL)*

1. Introduction

In the context of increasing globalization, English has become an essential skill for communication and professional development, especially in non-English speaking countries. In Vietnam, this global demand for English proficiency has led to various initiatives, including collaborations with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international education programs. Several programs have facilitated the involvement of native speaker volunteers in public universities, providing valuable support in teaching English. At Hanoi University of Natural Resources and Environment, these volunteers, often sponsored by such organizations, play a key role in helping students improve their speaking skills, particularly in areas like pronunciation and fluency. Despite their growing presence, little research has been conducted on how students perceive the impact of these native speakers on their speaking development. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring student perceptions, with the goal of understanding how native speaker volunteers can be more effectively integrated into the curriculum to enhance EFL speaking skills.

2. Literature review

The role of Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms has long been a topic of debate within the field of TESOL. For decades, NESTs have been regarded as the ideal instructors for teaching English, particularly in developing speaking skills, due to their fluency, natural pronunciation, and deep cultural understanding of the language. However, while NESTs are often preferred in educational institutions, recent studies challenge the assumption that their nativeness alone guarantees superior teaching effectiveness.

NESTs and Their Perceived Advantages

NESTs are often seen as role models for language learners due to their ability to provide authentic language input, which includes natural pronunciation, idiomatic expressions, and exposure to cultural nuances. Many educational institutions, especially in non-English-speaking countries, prioritize hiring NESTs because they are perceived as offering a more genuine language learning experience. Students tend to favor NESTs in developing speaking skills, as they believe native speakers can help them achieve a more accurate and fluent command of the language (Al-Omrani, 2008).

The "Native Speaker Fallacy"

Despite the advantages associated with NESTs, scholars such as Phillipson (1992) have criticized the assumption that NESTs are inherently better teachers. This notion, known as the "native speaker fallacy," suggests that nativeness does not equate to teaching effectiveness.

NESTs in the EFL Classroom: Challenges and Critiques

While NESTs are often praised for their fluency and authenticity, several studies highlight the challenges associated with their teaching, particularly in EFL settings. One common issue is that NESTs may speak too quickly or use language that is difficult for learners to comprehend, especially at lower proficiency levels (Sung, 2010). This can lead to frustration among students who may struggle to keep up with the native speaker's pace and linguistic complexity. Additionally, Mahboob (2004) points out that while NESTs can provide natural pronunciation models, they may lack an understanding of the specific linguistic challenges faced by EFL learners.

NESTs and Speaking Skills

In the area of speaking skills, students often perceive NESTs as superior due to their fluency and accent, which are seen as markers of a more "authentic" English (Al-Omrani, 2008). This belief is supported by studies showing that learners value native speakers for their ability to model correct pronunciation and fluent speech (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005). However, research has also revealed that these perceptions do not always translate into better learning outcomes.

In summary, as the native speaker fallacy continues to be challenged, it is essential to consider how best to integrate NESTs into EFL classrooms in ways that maximize their unique contributions while addressing the specific needs of learners.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research Questions

This study explores the perceptions of non-English major students at Hanoi University of Natural Resources and Environment regarding the impact of native speaker volunteers on their speaking skills. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following two research questions:

How do non-English major students perceive the impact of native speaker volunteers on improving their speaking skills?

What challenges do non-English major students face when learning speaking skills from native speaker volunteers?

3.2. Participants

The participants of this study were 120 non-English major students at Hanoi University of Natural Resources and Environment. These students were randomly selected from classes that regularly included native speaker volunteers in their English instruction. The participants represented a range of academic disciplines and English proficiency levels, providing diverse insights into their experiences with native speaker volunteers.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

This study used a quantitative approach with data collected through a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire featured close-ended questions with a Likert scale to assess students' perceptions of native speaker volunteers' influence on their speaking skills.

3.4. Data Analysis

The quantitative data from the close-ended questions were entered into SPSS for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including mean scores, frequencies, and percentages, were calculated to evaluate the overall trends in students' perceptions of the effectiveness of native speaker volunteers.

4. Findings

The results of the questionnaire provide valuable insights into the students' experiences and perceptions regarding their interactions with native speaker volunteers. The data can be summarized as follows:

Pre-Volunteer Interaction

Before the arrival of native speaker volunteers, a significant majority of students (70%) reported limited communication with native English speakers, as indicated by the high percentage (40%) of respondents who strongly disagreed with the statement about regular communication. Furthermore, students indicated a reliance on media, such as TV and videos, for practicing speaking skills, with only 35% expressing agreement. Notably, many students (55%) struggled to understand different accents and dialects, highlighting a gap in their exposure to authentic spoken English.

Post-Volunteer Interaction

The introduction of native speaker volunteers markedly improved students' opportunities

for communication. A substantial portion of students (70%) indicated that they now regularly communicate in English with the volunteers, reflecting a significant increase in engagement compared to the pre-volunteer phase. Additionally, 65% of students felt they spent enough time interacting with the volunteers, suggesting that the program effectively facilitated meaningful exchanges.

Challenges in Communication

Despite the positive changes, students still faced challenges. Approximately 30% of respondents found it difficult to understand the accents of the volunteers, and a similar percentage struggled to keep up with the fast pace of speech. These results underscore the need for ongoing support in developing listening skills and accent comprehension.

Impact on Skills Development

The overall impact of the volunteer program on students' speaking skills was notably positive. A majority of students agreed that communicating with native speaker volunteers improved their pronunciation (65%) and increased their confidence in speaking English (65%). Additionally, 70% of respondents reported improvements in their overall speaking proficiency, emphasizing the effectiveness of regular interaction with native speakers in enhancing language skills.

In summary, the findings indicate that the presence of native speaker volunteers significantly improved students' communication opportunities and contributed to their speaking skills development. While the program successfully addressed some challenges, further strategies may be needed to enhance students' understanding of various accents and to help them adapt to different speaking paces. These insights will inform future efforts to optimize language learning experiences in similar contexts.

5. Pedagogical implications and conclusion

The findings of this study underscore several critical pedagogical implications for enhancing the role of native speaker volunteers in the EFL classroom. First, it is essential to provide targeted training for these volunteers to effectively address student challenges, particularly concerning speech pace and the use of idiomatic expressions, which can hinder comprehension and communication.

Furthermore, integrating structured speaking activities, such as role-plays and guided discussions, can foster interaction and practice in a supportive environment, thereby facilitating language acquisition. Additionally, implementing strategies that familiarize students with diverse accents and enhance their comprehension (through pre-listening tasks and varied audio materials) will significantly improve their adaptability to different speaking styles. Creating a supportive classroom atmosphere where students feel comfortable asking questions and seeking clarification from volunteers is also crucial for reducing anxiety and promoting engagement. Finally, establishing regular feedback mechanisms will enable educators to gather valuable insights into student experiences, facilitating continuous improvement of the program and ensuring that it meets the evolving needs of learners.

Further research should explore the long-term impacts of these interactions on language development.

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