

## LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF FILIPINO EFL TEACHER EXPERTISE

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### ABSTRACT

*This study examined learners' perceptions on Filipino EFL teachers' language skills, pedagogical skills, and explicit language knowledge. These days, more and more Japanese learners of English study the language in the Philippines instead of in Inner-Circle countries. However, there has not been much research on Filipino teachers of English. Therefore, as a first step, this research tackled this issue from the perspective of learners' perceptions, taking into consideration various types of language teacher expertise and Filipino English teachers' advantages and disadvantages that had been discussed by some scholars, since they are the ones who choose to learn English in the Philippines. Nineteen people from various countries who were studying English at a private university in Manila participated in this research. They were given a questionnaire equipped with five-point Likert-scale items concerning Filipino EFL teachers' language abilities, their skills in explaining grammar, and teaching English well, compared to native English teachers. The main findings are that the learners evaluated Filipino EFL teachers highly in all the question categories, which supports an assumption that Filipino teachers of English possess all three types of language teacher expertise. Notably, fewer students gave high ratings to teachers' pronunciation than to the other target language abilities. However, this is not a serious problem since there are various accents even among native varieties of English. Since a small number of learners from only one language institute participated in this study, larger-scale further research is necessary for generalization. In addition, more empirical research on Filipino EFL teachers' English and native English teachers' English abilities as well their explicit knowledge of the target language and teaching skills.*

Keywords: English as a global language, Filipino EFL teacher, expertise, learners' perceptions, various accents

### Introduction

“The Philippines is fast becoming the world's low-cost English language teacher—with rapid increase in overseas students coming to learn English...” (McGeown, 2012, p. 1). Learning English in the Philippines has been getting more and more popular (Haisa, 2016) because of the low cost (Brock, 2015; Haisa, 2016; McGeown, 2012) and Filipinos' high English proficiency (Chavez, 2014; Ozaki, 2011; Pearson, 2013). English learners have been shifting to the Philippines from Inner-Circle countries—the UK, the U.S., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (McGeown, 2012). For instance, in July 2008, the Korean government announced that Filipino teachers of English would be granted a visa to teach in Korea to replace their counterparts from Western countries (The Philippines EFL, n.d.). Furthermore, a large number of online-English schools for people living in other countries are based in the Philippines (Keitel, 2009; Ozaki, 2011), and it is beneficial to learn English in the Philippines from the perspective of global language (Ozaki, 2011).

However, only a limited amount of research (e.g., Haisa, 2016; Haisa & Watanabe, 2013; Ozaki, 2011) has been conducted on Filipino EFL teachers (Filipino teachers of English for people from other countries). For example, after discussing both the advantages and disadvantages of learning English in the Philippines, Ozaki (2011) concluded that the advantages outweighed the disadvantages. One of the advantages he mentioned is that Filipino EFL teachers have attributes of both non-native English teachers (NNETs) and native-English teachers (NETs): They possess all three types of language teacher expertise suggested by Medgyes (1994): “skills in the target language,” “explicit knowledge about the language,” and “pedagogic skills” (p. 57). However, this view has not yet been investigated empirically.

Therefore, as a first step, this study investigated how learners perceive their Filipino EFL teachers concerning the three types of expertise suggested by Medgyes (1994), because students are the ones who choose to learn English in the Philippines, and they judge their teachers on the basis of their perceptions rather than by objective measurements. This is a small-scale pilot study for larger-scale future research.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews literature on Filipino EFL teachers, language teacher expertise, and the advantages as well as disadvantages of NNETs and NETs.

The advantages of learning English in the Philippines are as follows (McGeown, 2012; Ozaki, 2011):

- (1) Teachers with advantages of both NNETs and NETs (Ozaki, 2011)
- (2) Very competitive rates (McGeown, 2012), especially for one-on-one lessons (Ozaki, 2011)
- (3) A particularly high oral output due to the affordable cost of one-on-one lessons (Ozaki, 2011)
- (4) Clear American accent (McGeown, 2012)

- (5) Ease of making friends with local people (Ozaki, 2011)
- (6) Much communication in the target language outside of school as a result of making friends with locals (Ozaki, 2011)
- (7) Opportunity to use English as an international language with Filipinos (Ozaki, 2011)
- (8) Opportunity to learn English with very advanced English learners from the Philippines (Ozaki, 2011)

Among these, the first advantage is especially important since learners who study abroad to improve their English usually hope to be taught by native English speakers, whereas most Filipino teachers of English are non-native English speakers. In fact, Haisa (2016) found that Japanese learners of English regarded native English speakers' language as their model both before and after their learning experience in the Philippines. Haisa (2016) investigated the influence of learning English in the Philippines on learners' attitude towards the English language. He found that Japanese learners of English regarded native English speakers' language as their model both before and after their learning experience in the Philippines, although they showed favorable and generous attitude towards Filipino English after the study-abroad program. These studies are very valuable as a first step in the field; however, they never researched learners' perception of Filipino teachers from the viewpoint of language teacher expertise. Therefore, it is essential to examine the expertise of Filipino teachers of English in comparison with their native counterparts on the basis of learners' perceptions since learners are the ones who decide whether to study in an English-speaking country or the Philippines.

Medgyes (1994, p. 57) suggested three areas of language teachers' expertise: such as "skills in the target language," "explicit knowledge about the language," and "pedagogic skills," which are a well summarized definition and useful as the framework of such an investigation. There are some other pieces of literature concerning language teachers' expertise; for example, Choi (n.d.) created a checklist of teacher expertise on the basis of an extensive literature review. The checklist includes the following categories: "planning and preparation," "lesson presentation," "lesson management," "classroom climate," "discipline," "assessing pupil's progress," and "reflection and evaluation" (Choi, n.d., pp. 3–4). Furthermore, there are so many specific criteria in these categories. However, learners are usually the ones who evaluate teachers, and these categories are too complicated for them to understand and evaluate. On the other hand, Richards (2011, pp. 3–4) categorized language teacher expertise into the following four categories: "language proficiency," "content knowledge," "teaching skills," and "contextual knowledge." The first three match the three categories suggested by Medgyes (1994). The last category covers knowledge of "school's goals and missions," "its management style and school culture," "physical resources," "the curriculum and course offerings," and "the role of textbooks and tests" (Richards, 2011, p. 4). These pieces of teachers' knowledge are also not relevant for students to evaluate since it is hardly possible for students to know whether teachers have such knowledge.

Generally, non-native teachers are less skilled than native teachers in the target language. This view is strongly reflected in the *dominancy approach*, as opposed to the *difference approach*, which suggests that both native and non-native speakers can be good language teachers (Sung, 2014). The linguistic disadvantages faced by non-native English teachers are significant, especially in a country such as Japan, where people do not have many opportunities to use English in their daily lives and study it merely as a school subject. However, in the Philippines, people grow up using English as an official and second language, and it has been adopted even as a main medium of instruction at various school levels. Consequently, native Tagalog speakers evaluate their English competence highly (listening: 83.41; speaking: 75.40; reading: 90.00; writing: 82.60), compared to their Tagalog competence (Nakahara, 2005). Furthermore, their average TOEFL score is the second highest in Asia (Educational Testing Service, 2009, p. 10). Therefore, it is assumed that English teachers there have a very high command of the English language.

On the other hand, NNETs have an advantage in explicit knowledge about language, for example, in explaining grammar points, especially to low-level students (Beare, n.d.). Mahboob (2004) discovered that students in the U.S. felt that NNETs were more effective in answering students' questions and teaching literacy and grammar; Sung (2014) found the same phenomenon in Hong Kong. This advantage stems from the fact that the NNETs have acquired the target language consciously rather than unconsciously (Cook, 1999; Medgyes, 1994; Sung, 2014).

Furthermore, since NNETs are target-language learners themselves, they tend to be better at teaching learning strategies than NETs (Medgyes, 1994), which gives them a pedagogic advantage. In fact, university students in Hong Kong considered NNETs to possess very effective teaching strategies (Cheung & Braine, 2007). In contrast, Sung (2014) reported that students in Hong Kong considered NNETs' classes boring and NETs' classes more interesting because of the activities conducted. However, this does not mean that NETs have better teaching skills nor that students can improve their English more efficiently in NETs' classes. Filipino teachers of English learn English as a non-native language and a school subject with conscious effort, in addition to using it in their daily lives as a second and official language. Thus, they are probable to have explicit knowledge of English and good pedagogic skills as well as a great command of the language.

Although there has been considerable research on NETs and their non-native counterparts (eg., Butler, 2007; Cheung & Braine, 2007; Cook, 1999; Medgyes, 1994; Mahboob, 2004; Sung, 2014), research focusing on Filipino teachers teaching English to international students has been scarce.

## RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHOD

As a first step in investigating the expertise of Filipino teachers of English, I decided to conduct a small-scale pilot study at one language institute to answer the following question: How do learners evaluate Filipino EFL teacher expertise: skills in the target language, explicit knowledge about the language, and pedagogic skills? The method I adopted is described in the following subsections.

### Institute and Participants

It should be noted that the sample size of this study is small, since this is merely a pilot study for larger-scale research. The research was conducted at a private university in Manila. I contacted some universities that offered an EFL program in Manila, and only this university, which is one of the most prestigious schools in the nation, accepted my request mainly due to a short notice. The school had only one class, in which all four skills (speaking, listening, writing, and reading) were taught by four female teachers whose ages were between 25 and 60. All these teachers taught the four skills. The class was offered from 9:30 am to 12:00 pm and from 1 pm to 3:30 pm, and all the 19 students who were enrolled in the program participated in the research. There were 10 male and 9 female students, whose average age was 27.9 (youngest: 17, oldest: 46; SD: 8.9). They were from six different countries: (South Korea: 7 students, Thailand: 5 students, China: 2 students, Japan: 2 students, Taiwan: 2 students, Indonesia: 1 student). On average, they had been learning English in the Philippines for 8.7 weeks (shortest: 2 weeks, longest: 32 weeks; SD: 8.6). Their English levels were also diverse: Two of them had taken the TOEFL (PBT: 486, iBT: 65), and five had taken the TOEIC (450, 600, 630, 781, 830; mean: 532.2). These pieces of information indicate the participants' diversity despite their small number.

### Instrument

To achieve the research goal, questionnaire items rated on a five-point-Likert-scale (see Appendix) were developed based on three areas of language teacher expertise suggested by Medges (1994), since these criteria well summarize what language teachers need and they were simple enough for learners to evaluate their teachers with. It should be noted that the actual questionnaire had more items than those used for this article, since it was developed not only for the purpose of this but also for another purpose, such as investigating their reasons for choosing the Philippines and their experiences outside school. Appendix presents only the items related to this study.

The questionnaire was designed to have the participants evaluate Filipino teachers on the basis of their perceptions or impressions rather than by objective measurements, since this is what they usually do when they judge their teachers. The categorization adopted for this study may seem too simple and not specific enough. However, learners are not teaching specialists; it is difficult for them to answer or evaluate complicated questions or statements. Thus, I formed actual questionnaire items that can be understood by non-teaching specialists on the basis of the three categories. The questionnaire contained items concerning learners' perceptions of their teachers' abilities in speaking, pronunciation, listening, writing, reading, grammar, vocabulary, their skills in explaining grammar, and teaching English well. The first seven are related to teachers' skills in the target language, the eighth is related to their explicit knowledge of the language, and the last is related to their pedagogic skills. The questionnaire has more statements concerning the first category of teacher expertise than those regarding the other two categories, because the first one tends to be the most significant difference between NETs and NNETs including Filipino teachers of English, and this category has diverse aspects, and yet they are easy even for learners to understand. In contrast, explicit knowledge of the language and pedagogic skills are more difficult for learners to understand and examine. Therefore, I decided to simplify these two categories and formed only one questionnaire item for each.

It should be noted that I initially attempted to ask learners to evaluate each teacher who was teaching them; however, I had to give up this idea due to objections by some of those who were working for the English language program and cooperated with me on this research project. Their claim was that such an evaluation would hurt teachers' feelings and ruin their reputation; therefore, the teachers would not agree to cooperate with this project. In addition, students might evaluate their teachers on the basis of their feelings towards them if they were asked to evaluate individual teachers. The other reason was that the goal of this research is to discover learners' perceptions of Filipino teachers of English in general, rather than their perceptions of individual teachers. Thus, the questionnaire did not ask the participants about particular teachers, although four Filipino teachers were teaching them at the time of this research. Therefore, their answers were based on their general impression about Filipino EFL teachers who had taught them.

Finally, the participants provided certain personal information: genders, countries of origin, ages, lengths of learning English in the Philippines, and English proficiency test scores (TOEFL, IELTS, TOEIC, etc.). I myself distributed the questionnaires to the students so that I could answer their questions, if any.

### Data Analysis

The results of the questions were analyzed descriptively (e.g., rate for each question, means, modes, medians, and standard deviations). I did not conduct any statistical tests to examine the relationships between the students' perceptions and personal factors; such as gender, length of stay, and age, since the size of both the sample and variables were too small.

## RESULTS

The results are not generalizable to all international students learning English in the Philippines, since this is a small-scale pilot study for future larger-scale research, as has already been explained. However, they are generalizable to the population in this particular university since all students who were enrolled in the program at the time of the research participated in the survey. The following Table presents the results of the nine items on the questionnaire.

**Table. Questionnaire Results Showing the Number of Students Selecting Each Rating**

	1	2	3	4	5	Mean (SD)
Speaking	0	0	3 (15.8%)	10 (52.6%)	6 (31.6%)	4.2 (0.69)
Pronunciation	0	0	5 (26.3%)	9 (47.4%)	5 (26.3%)	4.0 (0.74)

Listening	0	0	1 (5.3%)	10 (52.6%)	8 (42.1%)	4.4 (0.60)
Writing	0	0	0	12 (63.2%)	7 (36.8%)	4.4 (0.50)
Reading	0	0	1 (5.3%)	11 (57.9%)	7 (36.8%)	4.3 (0.58)
Grammar	0	0	0	13 (68.4%)	6 (31.6%)	4.3 (0.48)
Vocabulary	0	0	2 (10.5%)	11 (57.9%)	6 (31.6%)	4.2 (0.63)
Grammar explanation	0	1 (5.3%)	2 (10.5%)	12 (63.2%)	4 (21.1%)	4.0 (0.74)
Teaching skills	0	1 (5.3%)	2 (10.5%)	12 (63.2%)	4 (21.1%)	4.0 (0.74)

The results show that, on average, students evaluated their teachers highly in all the categories; of a possible 5.0; the means for all the questions were at least 4.0 (S: 4.2, P: 4.0, L: 4.4, W: 4.4, R: 4.3, G: 4.3, V: 4.2, GE: 4.0, TS: 4.0). In addition, both the modes and medians for all the questions were 4.0. Although overall ratings were high, fewer students chose 4 or 5 for teachers' pronunciation (73.7%) and speaking skills (84.2%) than for the other target language skills (L: 94.7%, W: 100%, R: 94.7%, G: 100%, V: 89.5%). Furthermore, fewer students chose 4 or 5 for teachers' vocabulary (89.5%) than for their various skills, including listening, writing, and reading, as well as grammar. Conversely, all students chose 4 or 5 for teachers' writing skills and grammar, although fewer students (84.3%) gave 4 or 5 to teachers' ability to explain grammar.

Notably, two students with relatively high scores on the TOEIC (830) and the TOEFL iBT (65), respectively, evaluated their teachers' English skills very highly. The former rated all the skills but pronunciation at 5, and the latter rated all the skills at 5. It should be noted that the significance of this difference was not tested statistically due to the small number of both participants and those who had taken an English proficiency test.

## Discussion

The results show that learners highly evaluated Filipino teachers in the following areas: English language skills, explicit grammatical language knowledge, and skills in teaching English. This supports Ozaki's (2011) assumption that Filipino EFL teachers possess all three types of language teacher expertise: skills in the target language, explicit knowledge about the language, and pedagogic skills. It is particularly noteworthy that their language skills were highly evaluated since they are the weaknesses of NNETs and one of the biggest reasons why learners want to be taught by NETs. This implies that language teacher issues should not be discussed merely based on the dichotomy between native and non-native teachers, since some teachers, especially those who are from the Outer-Circle, where English is used as an official, second, and/or educational language on a daily basis, possess the characteristics of both native and non-native teachers. It may be necessary to discuss separately teachers from the Outer-Circle from teachers who are from the Expanding-Circles, where the language is merely a school subject, and people do not use it in their daily lives.

With respect to low ratings for pronunciation and speaking, it is assumed that these results are due to Filipino teachers' accents. Although one of the advantages of Filipino teachers is a clear American accent (McGeown, 2012), not all Filipinos speak with an accent like that of Americans. Filipino English has unique phonological features that have arisen from the contact between various mother tongues in the Philippines and American English (Tayao, 2008). Language learners usually consider native-like pronunciation as good pronunciation; for example, Butler (2007) found that Korean students perceived American-accented English as good pronunciation. Furthermore, one of the participants in Haisa's (2016) study stated that his goal was to attain native-like pronunciation, although he went to the Philippines to learn English, since he believed that the closer his pronunciation was to native English speakers', the more easily people would be able to understand him. Another possibility is that the participants of this study automatically believed that Filipino EFL teachers had their own English accents, which were different from native English speakers'. Either way, the unique phonological features of Filipino English are not necessarily a drawback of Filipino teachers since there is no Standard English accent (Smith, 1992; Trudgill & Hannah, 1994). For example, British and American accents sound different. Furthermore, "...native speaker accents are not necessarily the most intelligible or appropriate accents when a non-native speaker is communicating with another non-native speaker" (British Council, 2011, p. 1). Smith (1992) states that "native speakers are not the sole judges of what is intelligible, nor are they always more intelligible than non-native speakers." Students may have more opportunities to speak English with other non-native English speakers than with native speakers, because many of the non-native speakers learn English owing to its status as an international *lingua franca*. Finally, even if teachers are native speakers of English, it is not easy for students to acquire the same accent as their teachers'. This is especially true when people start learning a language after attaining puberty, as the critical period hypothesis suggests that it is not easy to acquire native-like levels of language after a certain developmental period ends (Long, 1990). Therefore, the accent of the Filipino teachers is not a huge disadvantage. Learners and users of English as an international language or world *lingua franca* should be informed of these facts so that they will be able to accept various English accents: both native and non-native varieties.

Another possible reason for the rating of speaking skills is that Filipinos' English speaking skills in general may not be as good as their other skills. As was explained in LITERATURE REVIEW, native Tagalog speakers tend to evaluate their English-speaking ability lower than their reading, listening, and writing skills (Nakahara, 2005). Filipinos develop their English language skills mostly by studying various school subjects in English; therefore, they may have fewer opportunities to practice their speaking skills than their reading, listening, and writing skills, as students may not speak much in class and may not use English in conversation outside class. Finally, since teachers speak in front of students in every class, speaking skills including pronunciation stand out more than the other skills and are therefore easier to evaluate.

Relatively fewer students chose 4 or 5 for teachers' vocabulary, and a possible reason is that the students felt that Filipino teachers do not use many idiomatic or colloquial expressions compared to NETs. Filipinos mostly learn English at school and do not frequently use the language with their friends or family members in casual settings. Naturally, they do not learn as many idiomatic or colloquial expressions as NETs do. Another reason may be that Filipino English has its own unique words and expressions. For example, they usually call a toilet or bathroom *CR* (comfort room).

A possible reason for students' high ratings of teachers' writing skills and grammar is that Filipinos learn English as a non-native language and school subject; therefore, they have good knowledge of English grammar, as Ozaki (2011) put forward. Another possible reason is that teachers correct students' writing, especially in terms of grammar. In other words, teachers can explicitly demonstrate their skills and knowledge. Thus, students naturally believe that their teachers' writing and grammar skills are good. The differences in their evaluation concerning the teachers' grammar and their ability to explain grammar imply the difficulty of explicitly explaining grammar in a manner that the students understand. Furthermore, it may be difficult for learners to understand grammar explanation in English. These points need further empirical investigation.

Finally, the fact that those who obtained a high English-proficiency-test score evaluated teachers highly might further indicate the teachers' high command of English, since learners with a high level of proficiency can evaluate others' English skills more accurately than counterparts with a low level of proficiency.

## CONCLUSION

This study investigated learners' perceptions of Filipino EFL teachers' skills in the target language, their explicit knowledge of the language, and their pedagogic skills on the basis of an assumption that they possess all of these. The findings support this assumption, which suggests that language teachers should not be discussed merely based on the dichotomy between native and non-native teachers. However, since this was a small-scale pilot study, the results of this research need to be confirmed by a larger-scale investigation that includes more language institutions at different levels: not only universities but also language schools. Students' evaluations might have been high in this study because it was conducted at a prestigious university where most teachers were highly educated and qualified. Classroom observation and interviews with both learners and teachers are also necessary in order to further investigate the results.

In addition to larger-scale research, different types of further investigation should be conducted. For example, Filipino teachers' English and NETs' English can be compared more objectively based on their English proficiency test scores. Furthermore, interviews and classroom observation, especially in terms of explicit knowledge of the target language and teaching skills, should be carried out in order to see a more complete picture of Filipino EFL teachers.

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## APPENDIX

### Questionnaire Items Concerning Learners' Perceptions

- Compared to native English teachers, Filipino English teachers' English speaking ability is high.  
1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Uncertain 4. Agree 5. Strongly agree
- Compared to native English teachers, Filipino English teachers' English pronunciation is good.  
1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Uncertain 4. Agree 5. Strongly agree
- Compared to native English teachers, Filipino English teachers' English listening ability is high.  
1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Uncertain 4. Agree 5. Strongly agree
- Compared to native English teachers, Filipino English teachers' English writing ability is high.  
1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Uncertain 4. Agree 5. Strongly agree
- Compared to native English teachers, Filipino English teachers' English reading ability is high.  
1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Uncertain 4. Agree 5. Strongly agree
- Compared to native English teachers, Filipino English teachers' English grammar is good.  
1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Uncertain 4. Agree 5. Strongly agree
- Compared to native English teachers, Filipino English teachers' English vocabulary is large.  
1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Uncertain 4. Agree 5. Strongly agree
- Filipino English teachers can explain English grammar points well.  
1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Uncertain 4. Agree 5. Strongly agree
- Filipino English teachers have good English teaching skills.  
1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Uncertain 4. Agree 5. Strongly agree

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