

# The Influence of Native and Non-Native English Teachers on Students' English Learning -- A Case Study of Trilingual Classes in Qinghai Minzu University

Jicuo Rong

Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture No. 1 Minzu High School, Hainan 813099, China.

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**Abstract:** It is important to analyze the role of teachers in students' English learning because they are quite influential. This paper mainly studies non-native and native English-speaking teachers' advantages of English teaching, teaching approaches and their attitude upon a teaching career. Meanwhile, it also comparatively and comprehensively analyzes both non-native and native English-speaking teachers' influence on Tibetan college students in learning English.

**Keywords:** Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers; Native English-Speaking Teachers; Tibetan College Students

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## 1. Introduction

According to the case study of trilingual classes of the College of Foreign Languages at Qinghai Nationalities University, we have learned that patient, experienced and responsible English teachers can make a huge difference in Tibetan students' life in learning English as a third language. Therefore, the main thrust of this paper is to explain the imperative role these teachers play in English education.

This paper mainly compares the teaching methods and teaching attitudes of native English-speaking teachers and non-native English-speaking teachers at Qinghai Nationalities University. I will comparatively and objectively analyze the influence of non-native and native English-speaking teachers on these students, and try to provide possible solutions to make full use of the advantages of both native and non-native English-speaking teachers.

The research questions are as followings:

- a. Can the availability of selecting courses cultivate students' interests?
- b. Can students make full use of teachers' resources to improve English level in an all-round way?
- c. Can students acquire a solid base in English with the help of non-native English -speaking teachers?

Interview, survey analysis and literature research methods are employed in this study.

## 2. Background information about teachers and Tibetan college students

### 2.1 About the Tibetan college students and their family background

There were 30 students in the 2013 trilingual class, including one student from ETP (ETP students were mostly from Rebgong county in Qinghai province and learned English systematically since middle school). These students had the English ability to communicate well and easily passed the CET - 4. Others could only make some easy dialogues. Four of them are self-financed students studying overseas now. One took the TOFEL and gained a scholarship. Relatively speaking, the students in this class were in good financial condition.

There were 38 students in the 2014 trilingual class, with one student from ETP. One of them went abroad. 88 percent of them hailed from rural places and their family financial circumstances were not good. 15 percent of them were in good financial condition.

There are 37 students in the 2015 trilingual class. Only one student has been abroad so far. I have learned that 92 percent of students' family circumstances are not good, which are not good enough to pay for costly tuitions to study overseas. There is no student in this class from ETP.

There are 30 students in the 2016 trilingual class. Regarding their English level, the majority has poor English and exhibited difficulty in communicating with foreign teachers. Others are able to make some easy English conversations. Their financial conditions are not ideal for studying abroad at their own expense. So far, only one of them has been abroad as an exchange student.

In high school, many, if not most Tibetan students in Qinghai Province did not take English seriously since the English score was not counted in the gross score of the CEE. But in some other Tibetan areas, such as in Sichuan Province, Yunnan Province and the Tibet

Autonomous Region, they somehow add the Tibetan and English scores half and half. Therefore, we would like to consider the Tibetan students who have formally learned English as a minority. A brief summary of the above is shown in the table below.

**Table 1 Students' Background Information**

Grade	Number	ETP students	Non-ETP	Study abroad
2013	30 students	1	29	4
2014	38 students	1	37	1
2015	37 students	0	37	1
2016	30 students	0	30	0

All in all, students chose the major without knowing much about it, and some of us made decisions randomly or they were made by others. It caused many of us start transforming the major and complaining. Many lost interest in English study. Most terribly, students behaved as if it were an obligation to learn English, so as to repay their three years of high school endeavors. None of us had an itinerary to study overseas after four years. Simply speaking, we were devoid of cleaned-cut plans.

According to my literary review, the students have got common attitude towards learning English in general, such as many of my classmates thought, English, as an internationally-used language, is utilitarian, but is hard to learn well. Moreover, learning English well is highly-demanding, so even though we chose this major, we did not have a clear idea of using English to find a job, compared with Chinese and Tibetan. This caused in a huge number of students are crazy about preparing for civil service and graduate school examinations without any specific goals in mind. Students tended to change their major as they were taking graduate exams.

## 2.2 About non-native and native English-speaking teachers

From 2011 to 2019, as the trilingual program was established, we have non-native English-speaking teachers including Chinese English teachers and Tibetan English teachers who have overseas learning experience and rich teaching experience to Tibetan college students. They are in charge of major courses, such as linguistics, cross-cultural communication, American literature and so forth.

Apart from non-native English-speaking teachers, we also have native English-speaking teachers in our College of Foreign Languages. We had Rich Aaronson's classes for three semesters and one semester with Sam Lin. Some other native English-speaking teachers were not charged with trilingual classes, so I would like to omit their information. Aaronson and Lin's background information are as followings.

Richard Aaronson, American. MBA in business in Kellogg school of management at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illionois. Regarding his teaching and working experience, he teaches English to students whose first language is not English. Acquired TESOL certificate to learn the method to do this, including students-centered teaching in Massachusetts, Vermont, and Xining.

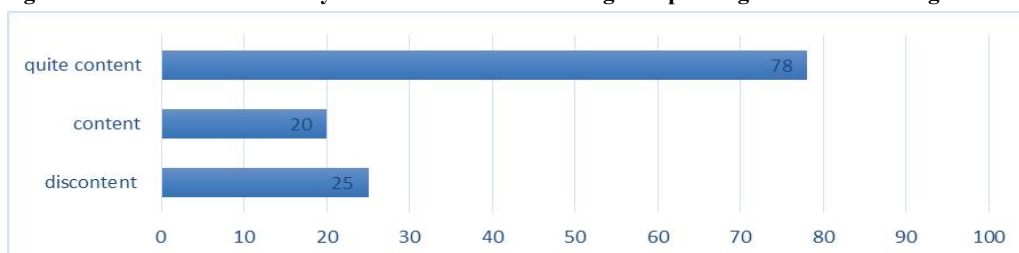
Sam Lin, Chinese-American. Anthropology at Texas A&M University. He worked as a student advisor and counselor, Rutgers University, NJ,USA. He has been teaching both Tibetan and Chinese students for two years at Qinghai Nationalities University.

## 3. Analysis of the influence between the native and non-native English-speaking teachers

### 3.1 Native English-speaking teachers' teaching approaches and attitudes towards teaching career

For native English-speaking teachers, English is their mother tongue, in other words, they acquired the language naturally from a very young age. Hence, the application of language and their understanding of culture are good. Thus, this is an advantageous factor that will award students' attention and preference for them.

**Figure 2 To what an extent are you satisfied with native English-speaking teachers' teaching attitude?**



In terms of their attitude towards their teachers' attitude, student satisfaction levels are displayed in the table above. 78 out of 100

students are quite content with native English-speaking teachers' teaching attitude and enthusiasm. 20 out of 100 students are content with it and 25 out of 100 are dissatisfied with it.

They also set high expectation for all students, did not give up underachievers, and made themselves available to students who need them by staying after school. They were accessible, enthusiastic and caring. Taking the free advanced English class as an example, it was a good way for students to share one's own culture in another language. Usually, there were many students from different grades in advanced English class so students can learn from each other. This was a club where one could exchange ideas and have deeper understanding through discussing.

However, according to my interviews, some students are not content with oral classes. The reason lies in the fact that the content is easy for students who have a high English level, for example, students from the ETP program. They no longer need to be cultivated as a primary school student. They hope to learn something academic and use English as a tool. This is also the reason why some students became gradually fed up with attending oral classes and considered it as hardly contributing to their English progress. Moreover, some students said that they were inclined to attend classes like linguistics, British and American literature, intercultural communication, extensive reading, college English and so forth, which were taught by non-native English-speaking teachers. Because non-native English speaking teachers are capable of teaching academic lessons in both Chinese and English, students can ask more explanations in Chinese if they do not understand or if they want to know the deeper meaning of it. More than that, bilingual teaching can greatly help students improve their translation skills, which is a unique advantage of non-native English-speaking teachers.

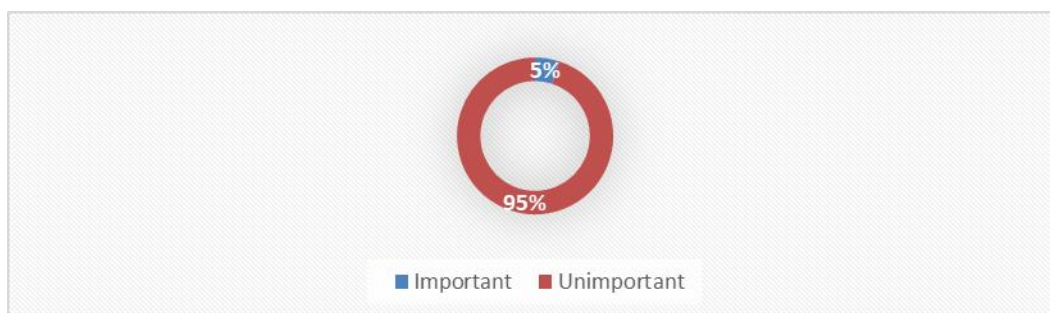
In terms of teaching methods, the native English-speaking teachers usually use the students-centered and communicative teaching method, and they are consistent in grading and returning work in a timely manner. Clear and written-out objectives give students a clear idea of what they will learn, what the assignments are and what the grading policy is.

Classes were usually well-organized by them with detailed plans that maximized the highest possibility of every single student's involvement. Start classes with warming-ups or idioms which vary from day to day, which arouse students' interests and willingness to get to know further information about various topics. Students were the facilitators in the class but not teachers. Teachers were in charge of giving guidance and motivation to students.

From the foreign teachers' perspective, it is not very important to pay much attention to scores and grammar to assess students' achievement by it, because they believe language is a real tool of communication. They hope that students can learn a language without much pressure, and they will give opportunities to make up for lost points caused by delayed task submissions, class leaves, lateness to classes, etc. The means of making up for lost points are attending English corners, writing short essays, sharing world news with the class and so on.

### 3.2 Non-native English-speaking teachers' teaching methods and attitudes towards teaching career

Figure 3 How important is it to focus on grades and grammar?



/But were these really helpful ways to improve students' English level without attaching importance on score and grammar? The answers vary from student to student as shown above.

To start with, non-native English-speaking teachers in my study focus on English accuracy such as teaching the International Phonetics Alphabet, grammar, listening, translating, reading and so forth. They usually use communicative, lecture and discussion teaching methods according to the nature of courses.

As my study result shown in the upper table, 95% of students surveyed viewed that it is important to focus on grades and grammar, which assists students' accuracy in English. Accuracy is essential in language learning, especially with students like us who are

required to obtain some certifications upon graduation and probably working as English language teachers in the future. Hence, it is an advantage to be trained by non-native English speaker teachers. Take these errors I have observed from students as examples:

- a) Students frequently misuse the word ‘funny’ instead of ‘fun’: “Dancing is very funny”, “My Losar was very funny”.
- b) Students often neglect /i:/ sound on the end of words: “interviewee” “referee”.
- c) The word ‘until’ being used instead of ‘at’: “Until 5 pm, we will finish our classes”.

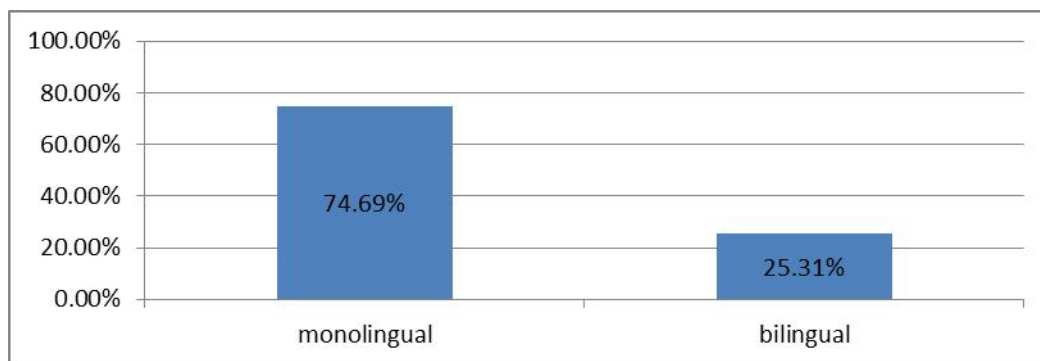
Mistakes like these may not stop understanding and expression, but they prevent students from writing correctly. And for this reason, having a strict non-native English-speaking teacher to correct mistakes is beneficial.

In terms of non-native English-speaking teachers’ teaching attitude upon teaching career, they had formed strong relationship with students and showed that they cared about them as their children. Non-native English-speaking teachers have got abundant experience in teaching English to Tibetan college students, so teachers usually are patient, experienced and helpful.

### 3.3 Comparative analysis of the influence on Tibetan college students

Non-native English teachers are capable of pushing students to form good habits, such as self-discipline, self-control and responsibility. According to my interview, 90 students out of 100 said that the non-native English teachers’ classes help students to be exposed to all sorts of English writing styles and accents that in the globalized world, what matters is the intelligibility of the speech acts rather than the perfect pronunciation of native speakers. Which also indicated in various examinations as CET-4 and CET-6 as well as MET-4 and MET-8.

**Figure 4 Which do you prefer in monolingual or bilingual teaching?**



According to my research above, it shows that 74.69% out of 100% college students prefer monolingual teaching because teachers not only hold classes entirely in English, but also can greatly help to improve conversational skills. However, in order to let students catch up on the meanings, the majority of non-native English-speaking teachers tended to give more explanations in shared languages or Sino-Tibetan code switching, for instance, Tibetan and Chinese. Students were accustomed to depending on teachers’ explanations rather than trying to understand on their own. It is just like a double-edged sword, which is pretty helpful to explain key points such as grammar or something related to academic. But we have to admit that it is an invisible hindrance that stops us from making progress in English. In addition, monolingual teaching environment does not mean that auxiliary language should be completely banned, as many studies have recently revealed the benefits and the necessity of using auxiliary languages in English teaching classes.

However, it is a vital part of learning English that students should try their best to become accustomed to a monolingual teaching environment so that teachers can reduce the frequency of giving explanation in a shared language.

Monolingual teaching seems not always the best approach. According to my study, 25.31% of students like bilingual teaching environment because they barely understand what teachers are saying if classes are held entirely in English, and this might account for students’ dislike of English.

All in all, the best teachers are the ones who are most dedicated and care about the students the most, regardless of whether they are native English speakers or not.

### 4. Possible solutions to make full use of the advantages of both non-native and native English-speaking teachers

Based on my research, interviews, and class observations, here are some possible solutions that might enhance the possibilities to take advantage of every opportunity to learn English.

## 4.1 Acquiring a solid base with the help of non-native English-Speaking teachers

On the one hand, students have to acquire a solid base in English with the help of non-native English-speaking teachers. This is also the target of the trilingual program since our college arranged classes which offer students opportunities to acquire a solid foundation, such as the International Phonetics Alphabet, extensive reading, linguistics and so forth.

On the other hand, due to people's intrinsic curiosity of being interested in something rare and new, students also hope to have more chances to communicate with native English speakers, especially in a context where exposure to English is limited to two or three periods of classes per week, and where chances to speak communicatively are also limited. Gass and Selinker refer to three primary sources of input for foreign language learners: "(a) teacher, (b) materials, and (c) other learners" (Gass and Selinker, 2001). In such contexts, native English-speaking teachers are the ones with whom Tibetan college students come into contact. Besides, English learners in such environments have limited interactional chances because we usually have English conversations between beginners in the classroom and the communication is often filled with errors and inaccuracies.

Furthermore, cultural indoctrination is something that is far more significant which is not only good for students' language acquisition but also broadens horizons as well. An example comes from students who had formed punctuality unconsciously, because students wanted to have effective communications with native English-speaking teachers. In other words, students do not want to offend teachers because of cultural differences, thus they have gradually become inclined to look up festivals and customs online so as to prevent us from offending teachers because of cultural connotation.

## 5. Conclusion

The study shows that the single most important factor which determines the quality of the education a student receives is the quality of her/his teachers. Because teachers are able to make a huge difference in the lives of young people.

Therefore, it is imperative to analyze the role of teachers in students' English learning. At the same time, however, we cannot blindly follow the view that all native English-speaking teachers are capable of helping students to learn English well. We should objectively compare both native English-speaking teachers and non-native English speaking teachers' influence on Tibetan college students in learning English.

It is my firm belief that with both of them working together, they can assist students in making great improvement in English learning of both communicative skills and exam-taking abilities.

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**About the author:** Jicuo Rong(1994.02-), female, Tibetan, Qinghai, High school teacher, undergraduate, Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture No. 1 Minzu High school