What sort of English teacher is best – native speaker or Thai? Uncovering subconscious attitudes

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When people ask for your opinion, do you always tell them what you truly think? Why not? Often, people don't speak their mind because they are afraid of hurting listeners' feeling, feel embarrassed about their thoughts, or most surprisingly, they do not even know what they think.

To uncover what people think subconsciously, psychologists have developed the Implicit Association Test (IAT), a test of subconscious beliefs and behaviors. The IAT is based on associations between the subconscious mind and decisions that people make in seconds. A test taker will be asked to do classification tasks where they match concepts and (positive and negative) attributes. Their response latency or time lag in answering is measured. Some tests focus on interesting social issues including Asian IAT – attitudes to Asians and Americans, Weight IAT - attitudes to fat and thin people, and Race IAT – attitudes to nationality and skin tones. Some other tests show gender stereotype based on social perceptions. For example, Gender-Career IAT reveals that people usually associate males with work and females with family and housework. Gender-Science IAT shows that people are more likely to link males and sciences, and females and liberal arts. Several IATs are available at https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html.

"Implicit attitudes towards native and non-native speaker teachers" (Watson Todd and Pojanapunya, 2009) is an interdisciplinary study which implemented the IAT method to research English language teaching in Thailand. To see how the IAT works, I would like you to try a paper-based IAT. In the table below, you will see a list of teachers' names in the middle column (Ajarn is 'Teacher' in Thai). The names represent a concept of nativeness with some of them representing Native English Speaking Teachers (NESTs) and the others representing non-Native English Speaking Teachers (non-NESTs), Thais in this case.

Now, classify the names into NESTs or non-NESTs by writing a check mark on the left or right column next to each name.

NESTs		Non-NESTs
	Ajarn Michael	
	Ajarn Teeradech	
	Ajarn Sofia	
	Ajarn Wipawan	
	Ajarn Julia	
	Ajarn Chokchai	
	Ajarn William	
	Ajarn Nipaporn	

Can you classify the names very quickly? That is because you have prior familiarity with Thai and non-Thai names. What you just did was to help you become familiar with how the test works.

Now, in the table below, you will see 2 more categories at the top of the left and right columns. In addition to the concepts of NESTs and non-NESTs, we now also have positive and negative attributes represented by positive and negative adjectives.

Again, classify names and words in the middle column into the left-right categories. Importantly, do it as fast as you can!

Section 1

NESTs or **Positive adjectives**		non-NESTs or **Negative adjectives**
	Ajarn Teeradech	
	Ajarn Sofia	
	Creative	
	Ajarn Wipawan	
	Passive	
	Ajarn Julia	
	Cheerless	
	Ajarn Chokchai	
	Ajarn William	
	Enjoyable	
	Ajarn Nipaporn	
	Dogmatic	
	Open-minded	

Do the same thing again in Section 2. Notice that the Positive and the Negative adjectives categories have been swapped around.

Section 2

NESTs or **Negative adjectives**		non-NESTs or **Positive adjectives**
	Passive	
	Enjoyable	
	Ajarn Sofia	
	Ajarn Wipawan	
	Open-mined	
	Ajarn Julia	
	Cheerless	
	Ajarn Chokchai	
	Ajarn William	
	Creative	
	Ajarn Teeradech	
	Ajarn Nipaporn	
	Dogmatic	

Was the flow different for matching words with categories in Sections 1 and 2? Do you feel that you classified words more quickly in Section 1 than 2? For example, if you put "Open-minded" under the category "Positive attitudes" when this is presented with "NESTs" more quickly than when it was presented with "non-NESTs". There might be a few seconds difference in completing the two tasks. The task you complete more quickly indicates your subconscious beliefs.

The real IAT used in this study is computer-based and consists of 2 sections. The first section is a questionnaire asking users to state their beliefs about NESTs and non-NESTs and the second is the IAT eliciting their subconscious beliefs. The online IAT is in Thai as we aimed to find out about Thai students' beliefs.

This study followed standard IAT rules in data collection. Thai students (participants of the study) were asked to do the classification tasks where they matched Names (concepts) with Positive/Negative adjectives (attributes) repeatedly. Response latency or the time that the students spent on the matching task was recorded. If they do Section 1 faster ("NESTs" presented together with "Positive adjectives" and "Non-NESTs" presented together with "Negative adjectives"), this shows that the students have a preference for NESTs. On the other hand, if they performed Section 2 better ("non-NESTs" presented with "Positive adjectives" and "NESTs" presented with "Negative adjectives"), it means that they subconsciously prefer non-NESTs over NESTs. A traditional questionnaire was also used to elicit an explicit attitude (which shows what people say they believe), and the results were compared with IAT results.

The idea of doing "Implicit attitudes towards native and non-native speaker teachers" research was from the general perception (as an explicit attitude) that NESTs are more socially accepted than non-NESTs because English is their mother tongue. Although the majority of English teachers in Thailand are Thais, it seems that most educational institutions employ at least a few native speakers. The study of attitudes towards native English speaking teachers and Thai teachers could, therefore, have an impact on English language teaching policy in Thailand, e.g. on decision making in employment of native English speakers and Thai teachers.

Here we come to the research results. What would you guess are the students' attitudes towards NESTs and non-NESTs collected from (1) the questionnaire (revealing an explicit attitude) and (2) the IAT part (revealing an implicit attitude)? Are they similar or different?

The questionnaire results show, not surprisingly, that students have a preference for NESTs. However, the IAT results show no real preference for NESTs or Thai teachers. What does this mean? If their beliefs are reflected in their behaviors, these results imply that the students will not behave differently in classes taught by either NESTs or Thai teachers. What does this current study mean for ELT in Thailand? Although it is undeniable that explicit attitudes, reflected from what people believe they think, highly influence social perceptions, the lack of a preference for NESTs or non-NESTs revealed by this study suggests that we should view teachers as individuals rather than as representatives of a group based on their native language.

This article is based on: Watson Todd, R. and Pojanapunya, P. (2009). Implicit attitudes towards native and non-native speaker teachers. System Vol. 37 Issue 1, pp. 23 – 33.