

## **"Don't Lose Your Accent!": American Students and Their Foreign-born Non-native-speaker College Instructors**

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### **Abstract**

This study focuses on American students' rapport with their foreign-born non-native-speaker college instructors (FNCI) and the impact of such rapport on student evaluation of FNCI's teaching effectiveness. Forty nine university students who had experiences interacting with FNCI's were individually interviewed. Qualitative analyses of these interviews show that students had high expectations for positive relationships with their FNCI's; they also believed that FNCI's relating behaviors and/or activities both in and outside of classrooms contribute equally to their rapport with students, and that FNCI's with positive rapport are often more favorably evaluated.

A substantial amount of research has been done for the purpose of improving college instructors' performances in American classrooms. Chief concerns in this research area included identifying elements, qualities, characteristics, traits and behaviors of effective classroom teachers (for comprehensive reviews, see Brophy & Good, 1974; Good, Biddle, & Brophy, 1975; Kash & Borich, 1978; Brophy, 1979; Brophy & Good, 1986; Good & Brophy, 1987; Nussbaum, 1992). Research has consistently demonstrated that teachers' ability to establish positive rapport with their student is central to their teaching effectiveness (e.g., Brophy & Good, 1974; Barker, 1982; Lowman, 1984). However, this body of research, albeit fruitful and compelling, has been obscured, according to Nussbaum (1992), by researchers' excessive subscription to the "process-product paradigm." In addition, a great majority of this research was conducted primarily with homogeneous samples of native-born, native-speaker caucasian college instructors. Thus, applicability of

findings generated by these research to foreign-born college instructors who speak English as a second language (non-native speaker) is highly limited and, perhaps, of little value.

As the number of foreign-born, non-native-speaker college instructors (FNCI) keeps increasing on American campuses, the task of enhancing their performances becomes more imperative and urgent. In the past, although some research has been done on international teaching assistants (ITA) with foci on their adaptation to and management of the American classrooms (e.g., Franck & Desousa, 1982; Vom Saal, 1987; Rubin & Smith, 1990; Nyquist, Abbott, Wulff, & Sprague, 1991; Ross & Krider, 1992), there is basically a void in research on the foreign-born, non-native-speaker college instructors. When ITAs turn into FNCIs, their duties and functions as independent college instructors differ substantially from those they had as ITAs because of higher standards and expectations from campus constituents. In regard to teaching, for instance, students expect and demand more from their professors than from their professors' teaching assistants. Therefore, as independent college instructors, there are some special challenges facing FNCIs. It is thus of high interest and significance for researchers to study FNCIs' campus performances. Because, research on this group of college instructors will, on the one hand, contribute to the cultivation of a much overlooked research area; findings from such research will, on the other hand, directly benefit FNCIs and their students on American campuses.

Primarily due to paucity of research on this important topic, an immediate concern of this researcher is to make a preliminary investigation of the situation with an intent to discover the most pertinent factors that contribute to FNCIs' positive rapport with their students. Since students are the primary providers of FNCIs' teaching evaluations, it is meaningful and perhaps more sense-making to interview American students who have been taught by FNCIs. Also, as an initial step, it may be more informative and fruitful to focus on FNCIs teaching in humanities and social sciences because they often encounter greater challenges in teaching their students owing to (1) their culture-rich subjects, and (2) their lack of a subject-related scientific language, a common given in natural science disciplines such as math and physics.

A second concern of this study is to approach student rapport with their FNCIs from an intercultural perspective. Fundamentally, considering FNCIs as professors teaching in a culture other than their own and using English as a second language, their rapport with American students is intercultural in nature. Furthermore, American students' expectations on rapport with FNCIs and their subsequent evaluations of FNCIs' teaching effectiveness are also subject to influences of American cultural values pertinent to teaching and learning.

For purposes of developing research questions for the current investigation, the remainder of this paper will first review research on instructors' relating

activities that contribute to positive rapport with students. Then, the method of the study is specified before research results are presented. The paper will end with a discussion on implications and limitations of the findings.

### **Research on Relating to Students as College Instructors**

As noted earlier, little research has been done on the foreign-born non-native-speaker college instructors and/or their practice of relating to their American students. For the purpose of this paper, relevant studies in the literature are selected for review, and research questions are then developed based upon this selective review.

The importance of relating to students as college instructors has been noticed by many scholars. For example, Joseph Lowman (1984) believed that "the quality of instruction results from a college teacher's skill at creating both intellectual excitement and positive rapport in students, the kinds of emotions and relationships that motivate them to do their best work (p.10)." Out of this perception, Lowman (1984) further proposed a two dimensional model of excellence in teaching which included the dimensions of (1) intellectual excitement, and (2) interpersonal rapport. The first dimension of this model encompasses instructors' in-class presentation skills such as clarity; the second dimension, of more importance, includes teachers' efforts to establish positive relationships with their students both in and outside of the classrooms. An important characteristic of this second dimension is its mutual impact upon the students and the teachers, that is, enjoyment of teaching and learning, to a large extent, is contingent upon the quality of this relationship-the rapport between the instructor and his or her students.

Seldin (1984) found that communicating effectively with students was a key factor in good teaching. Seldin (1984), by surveying 410 academic deans, discovered that subjects believed the following five characteristics essential to effective teaching: The teacher

- (1) is well prepared for class,
- (2) motivates students to do their best,
- (3) communicates effectively to the level of the students,
- (4) demonstrates comprehensive subject knowledge, and
- (5) treats students with respect.

It is worth noting that three out of these five characteristics (i.e. 2, 3, and 5) call for the educators' skills to relate positively to their students while the other two require the teachers' tactics for presentation.

Seldin's research (1984) also revealed that students themselves, when asked to describe their effective college teachers, came up with a similar list of the qualities of competent instructors. These qualities include: The teacher

- (1) is a dynamic and energetic person,
- (2) explains clearly,

- (3) has an interesting style of presentation,
- (4) seems to enjoy teaching,
- (5) has a genuine interest in, and is friendly toward students,
- (6) encourages class discussions, and
- (7) discusses points of view other than his or her own.

Obviously, students have placed much more weight on personal and interpersonal qualities of the instructor as contrast against their in-class presentation skills. It is apparent that teacher-student rapport meant a lot more to the students, and it was highly valued by them as well.

Furthermore, research on effective teacher behaviors consistently demonstrated that educators' capability to relate positively to their students significantly contributes to the effectiveness of the college instructors. The most frequently examined concepts in this area include, among others, the teachers' use of "self-disclosure," "narratives," and "verbal and nonverbal immediacy." For instance, Sorensen (1989) demonstrated that teacher self-disclosure influenced student perceptions of the "teacher-learner relationships." Results further indicated that teachers who made positive disclosures, such as, "I care about my students", could increase student affective learning. These teachers were perceived as more immediate and, therefore, more effective by their students.

Gorham (1988) found that college teachers' verbal immediate behaviors, such as, the use of humor, self-disclosure and utilization of words like "we," "us," "our," while referring to the class and their willingness to converse with students before, after, or outside of class were related to student learning. As also suggested by Bradac, Bowers, and Courtright (1979), senders' verbal immediacy is associated with receivers' perceptions of senders' competence and good character. Moreover, Wheelless (1976) found that self-disclosure is related with interpersonal solidarity; higher levels of self-disclosure meant higher levels of interpersonal solidarity relations.

Research on teacher's nonverbal immediacy, however, found instructors' immediate behaviors produce in students higher levels of affect for the teacher, the course content, as well as the school (Andersen, 1979). Results show that teachers utilizing nonverbal immediate behaviors such as smiling, head nods, open body positions, touching, etc. are generally perceived by students as having amiable attitudes toward their students which is related to students' perceptions of the warmth, enthusiasm and friendliness of the instructors (Andersen, 1979; Chaiken *et al.*, 1978; Plax *et al.*, 1986). Meanwhile, Richmond, Gorham and McCroskey (1987) found that teachers' nonverbal immediacy behaviors were positively associated with students' affective and perceived cognitive learning. Thus, given the different characteristics of FNICIs, it is important for the present study to gain knowledge about FNICIs' relating behaviors and/or activities as perceived by the students:

RQ 1: What relating behaviors and/or activities contribute the most to FNCIs' positive rapport with their students?

Furthermore, Andersen and Andersen (1982) once cautioned educators that teacher immediacy cues were perceived positive "only if student attitudes toward the teacher are neutral or positive (p. 114)." Andersen's caution implies that students' predispositions, such as their attitudes toward their teachers, may have a role to play in their perceptions and subsequent evaluations of their instructors. Hence, students' predispositions, such as their attitudes to and perceptions of FNCIs, are important factors to ascertain:

RQ 2: What are American students' predispositions toward their FNCIs?

Interestingly though, studies on teachers' immediate behavior in multicultural classroom settings discovered that students of diverse cultural backgrounds reported having various expectations and criteria for teacher verbal and nonverbal immediate behaviors (e.g., Powell & Harville, 1990; Sanders & Wiseman, 1990). Studies show that student expectations and criteria influence their evaluations of teachers' effectiveness. It seems logical, based upon findings of these research, to assume that American students will have different expectations and criteria for their FNCIs. Thus, student expectations on rapport with FNCIs should be determined:

RQ 3: What are American students' expectations on rapport with FNCIs as compared with those they have for native-born caucasian teachers?

A more interesting and worthy point in Powell and Harville's (1990) study is the demonstration of a positive relationship between instructors' verbal and nonverbal immediacy and student perceived teacher clarity. It appears clear that student evaluation on teachers' presentation skills may also be influenced by their perception of the teachers' level of immediacy with them, which, to a certain extent, refers to their "interpersonal rapport" (Lowman, 1984) with the teachers. Therefore, the fourth research question probes into the possible influences of students' rapport with FNCIs on their subsequent evaluations of FNCIs' teaching effectiveness:

RQ 4: Does perceived rapport with FNCIs influence students' evaluation of FNCIs' teaching effectiveness?

## **Method**

### **The Interviewees**

Forty-nine American University students who had experiences interacting with FNCI's volunteered to participate in this research. Interviewees included 21 male and 28 female junior and senior undergraduate students from a northwest American university. Students in this group aged between 22 to 25 and were from an upper-division undergraduate communication research methods class whose participation in the project earned them three bonus scores toward their course grades (with 100 scores equals an "A" grade for the course). Interviewees were all native-born Caucasian males and females who readily identified themselves as members of American mainstream Caucasian culture.

### **The Interviewer**

In order to avoid potential complication caused by perceptions of differences in race, status, nationality and/or ethnicity, a native-born, native-speaker of English, Caucasian undergraduate female research assistant was chosen and trained to conduct the interviews with a structured interview questionnaire. Before each and every interview, the interviewer introduced to the student herself, the project (including clarifications of relevant terms such as "FNCI"), and the option for the interviewee not to answer any and all of the questions asked. In addition, interviewees were assured of the confidentiality of information provided. Length of each interview varied from 15 to 30 minutes depending upon interviewees' willingness to talk at the time. Also, with consent of the interviewees, interviews were all tape-recorded, which were then transcribed into field notes for purpose of analysis.

### **The Interview Protocol**

The interview questionnaire had two parts. Part one was a list of questions that appeared on a sheet of paper soliciting interviewees' demographic information, such as gender and age, class standing, such as juniors or seniors, and number of FNCI's they had over the past four years. For the first part of the questionnaire, interviewees were asked to fill in their answers. The second part of the questionnaire consisted of seven open-ended questions asking students to describe their past experiences with FNCI's, and to recall, to the best of their knowledge, the teaching evaluations they had done for the FNCI's. Two exemplary questions from this part of the questionnaire were as follows: "Please describe your previous experiences with foreign-born, non-native-speaker (speaking English as a second language) college instructors." "Specifically, what do you think are the most

important behaviors and/or activities contributing to foreign-born non-native-speakers' rapport with their students?"

## Results

### FNCIs' Relational Behaviors/Activities

In regard to FNCIs' relational behaviors and activities that contribute the most to positive rapport with students, interviewees believed FNCIs' verbal and nonverbal behaviors in and outside of the classrooms were equally important because all those behaviors contributed to the whole image of the non-native instructor. The following excerpts are representative comments offered by the interviewees:

"Hmm ... It's important because interactions between teachers and us include activities in class and those outside of it as well."

"True, you may expect to see the teachers in class. But, outside of the classroom, you could see a lot of them unexpectedly. Their attitudes towards you on these occasions are also very important. I would say they are no less important than the ones you see in your classroom."

"For non-natives [FNCIs], their communication with their students in and outside of the classroom means the same to us students. They are both important for the teacher-student relationship, I think."

"My thinking is that you see them a lot outside of the classroom, such as, in their offices and elsewhere on campus. You picture the teacher in both places, in and outside the classroom. So, you evaluate the teacher as a whole person instead of just the person you see in the classroom."

In sum, interviewees, considered the following five categories of FNCIs' relational behaviors and/or activities as the most important contributors to positive rapport with students (ranked from highest to lowest by frequency of mentioning in interviews):

- (1) "caring" and "open-minded" attitude,
- (2) receptiveness to student criticism,
- (3) accessibility,
- (4) knowledge of the American culture, and
- (5) willingness to share with students knowledge of their own cultures.

### **Student Predispositions toward FNCI**

All interviewees expressed that they welcomed the FNCI in their universities and colleges for the many benefits they gained as a result. Students interviewed also held the opinion that the foreignness of their non-native instructors was most obvious in their first few encounters with their first non-native teacher.

They described these first meetings with FNCI as experiencing an uncertain situation in which they often became fearful and worrisome. However, as FNCI demonstrate their competence, and as students come to know their teachers better, feelings of uncertainty will gradually be alleviated, or substantially reduced, and confidence in instructors will thus be gained and gradually increased. For example, an interviewee described in detail her first experience with a foreign-born, non-native-speaker professor:

"The first time you saw a non-native teacher in front of you, you would say to yourself: Oh, no, a foreign instructor in this class!! Then, you would worry whether the teacher would do a good job. How about the accent? Could I understand him? What if he is a jerk, and so on. After that, if you find it was not as bad as you had thought, you then would relax, and try to follow the lecture and talk to others about it. Gradually, you will regain your confidence in the instructor, and the foreignness of him or her will fade. After having had several of them, I now tend to forget about the foreign part of these instructors. Their accent doesn't matter that much any more to me. I guess after a while you get used to it, and you know how to follow them well."

### **Student Expectations on Rapport with FNCI**

Thirty-eight of the students interviewed had experiences of being taught by more than one FNCI (in humanity and social science classes) with 11 of them exposed to five FNCI within the past four years. The FNCI described by this group of students were all teaching courses either in social sciences or humanities. All interviewees but one described their college experiences with FNCI as "fine," "positive," "rewarding," "beneficial," "learned a lot," and "good and solid."

The one student, however, described her experience with an FNCI as: "Overall, it's okay. Could be better, though." She regarded her FNCI as "ego-centric" who "always brought in a lot of outside issues into the classroom." "A great deal of these issues are racial-related, had nothing to do with the course content. That was bad."

Seven of the interviewees believed that good rapport with students "is important for any instructors; native or non-native doesn't matter." The rest of the students, however, considered having positive relationships with students was more important for FNCI as compared with their native-born caucasian professors

because "We normally expect them to be nicer." Other representative student comments are:

"Since they can not teach the same as the native teachers do because they are different, for example, the accents they have, they must make it up by relating to us better. And, you enjoy that."

"What do you expect? A non-native who is not approachable? Can you image that?!"

"I believe it's [good rapport with students] more important with non-native teachers because of the perceptual obstacles."

### **Student Evaluations on FNCIs' Teaching**

Interviewees tended to associate FNCIs' teaching effectiveness with the quality of rapport they had with the students. Several of them similarly commented, "It must be related. The enthusiasm they have, I guess, comes from their affection for both the students and the subjects they teach." Interviewees shared the view that FNCIs who related well with students often taught their subjects very well. For instance, interviewees reported:

"I guess people who don't know how to relate to students do not understand how to communicate. And, believe me, they don't teach as nearly well."

"The non-native teachers I had in the past all had very good rapport with their students. I think they were good teachers."

"Feelings are mutual. If they like us and respect us, we will, in turn, like them- and the subjects. In the end, we both benefit. We end up in learning a whole lot more."

Students recalled that they evaluated FNCIs who related well with them as being more effective teachers. All interviewees except two stated that the non-native teachers they considered as more effective, knowledgeable and taught well had received positive feedback from them. Exemplary comments, for instance, are:

"They deserve good comments. In the past, I remember I evaluated the non-native teachers very positively. I liked them, and they liked us. We enjoyed each other. I feel I must tell the teacher."

"When you liked the teacher, you wanted to say something in your evaluation. If you didn't like them, you wanted to tell them, too."

Interviewees further explained:

"It only seems fair when someone treats you well and you evaluate the person favorably. It reflects the kind of relationships between you and them."

"It's not a matter of evaluating them positively, rather, it's a matter of giving that person what you think he or she is. I think maintaining good rapport with their students is counted as part of their good teaching, you know."

"Yes, I evaluate them favorably because they are good teachers. They are more friendly, open, and very respectful. Once, I remember I wrote in 'Don't lose your accent; that's my favorite part,' for my non-native prof."

## **Discussions**

This study set off with the intent to explore American students' rapport with their foreign-born, non-native-speaker college instructors and the influences of such rapport upon their evaluations of FNCIs' teaching. What follows are discussions on limitations and implications of the findings.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although findings of this study are valuable and bear significant importance to FNCIs' future practice in relating to their students, the study has two limitations. First, the reliance on students' recall of their past experiences with FNCIs may lead to gathering of impressionistic information, or omission of important information; secondly, as information was collected from among undergraduate students only, applicabilities of findings are limited to FNCIs teaching graduate students.

### **Implications of the Findings**

Interviews with 49 university undergraduates who had experiences in interacting with FNCIs demonstrate that their expectations on rapport with FNCIs differ from those they have for their native-born, native-speaker, caucasian college instructors. Students normally anticipate a better relationship with their FNCIs as compared with what they may establish with their native instructors. Interviewees reported that they apprehended the foreignness of their FNCIs the most in the beginning few meetings with their non-native teachers. As time goes by, however, this apprehension of the instructors' non-nativeness gradually disappears when

students become familiar with the non-native teachers. The process of getting to know the instructor is often accelerated by the instructors' demonstration of an open, amiable attitude toward students and his or her exhibition of knowledge on the subject matter taught.

However, because of this perceived foreignness of the FNCIs and other accompanying factors, such as their accent, ethnic appearances, and etc., students admitted they would normally seek for other compensations such as a more rewarding learning experience enhanced mostly by better student-teacher "interpersonal rapport" (Lowman, 1984). Students' high level of expectations on rapport with their FNCIs may have come from the notion of getting something compensatory for their FNCIs' foreignness, accents and other such less-desirable characteristics.

Consistent with findings on native-born college instructors in the research literature (for example, Brophy & Good, 1974; Lowman, 1984; Sorensen, 1989), interviewees in this study believed that FNCIs' rapport with students influenced students' evaluations of their teaching effectiveness. Students recalled from their past experiences with FNCIs and reported that they often associated the quality of FNCIs' teaching with the strength of their rapport with students. Most students tend to regard FNCIs' maintenance of a good student-teacher relationship as an indispensable and inseparable part of their teaching assignment because, "no good rapport, no effective communication, and ineffective communication means bad teaching."

This finding seems to confirm Powell and Harville's (1990) previous discovery that students' perceptions of instructors' presentation skills are, in fact, influenced by their relationships with the teacher. Indeed, findings of this study show that students' evaluation of their teachers are, on most occasions, being influenced by the quality of their rapport with non-native instructors because it appears unlikely for them to separate the two distinctively. Or, perhaps, simply because of the complexity of such work like teaching, it becomes inevitable for students to associate their learning in college with the strength of rapport they have with their instructors. Although others in the field may disagree, it seems quite clear that, pragmatically, effective FNCIs must regard maintaining positive relationships with their students as the first and foremost priority in accomplishing their teaching effectiveness in American classrooms.

This study also discovered that, in order to maintain good rapport with their students, FNCIs must pay attention to their attitudes and behaviors both in and outside of the classrooms. Teaching, in this particular sense, is by no means limited to performances in the classrooms. Teaching for the FNCIs obviously includes even such activities as the department's annual picnic with its majors/minors. In addition to their open, caring attitudes and behaviors toward their students and students' learning, FNCIs' attitudes towards criticisms from students were also regarded as

one of the most important contributors to teaching effectiveness. Students believe that FNCIs who openly solicit criticisms or show their willingness to learn aspects of the English language from their students stand for better relationships with their students. American students, for instance, appreciate those FNCIs who make a clear effort in overcoming their weaknesses in using the English language regardless of their actual progress in learning. In this context, admitting imperfection becomes a proactive strategy for FNCIs to make a good impression. To certain degree, this strategy of self-disclosure helps in reducing students' level of uncertainty toward their non-native instructors.

Other important contributing factors to the effectiveness of FNCIs are their understanding of the American culture and their willingness to share knowledge of their own cultures with students. The significance of understanding one's host culture, as consistently demonstrated by intercultural communication studies (e.g., Dodd, 1998; Chen & Starosta, 1998; Gudykunst & Kim, 1984), cannot be overemphasized for FNCIs because of the intercultural nature of their interactions with American students.

In order to be competent and effective, it is crucial for FNCIs to acquire a deep understanding of the American culture with which they are then able to compare and contrast their own cultures with that of their students. It is clear that comparisons of the cultures has much of an appeal to the American students who believe in the insights of the information thus provided by the FNCIs. The meaning of such an intercultural sharing in the classroom is perhaps two-fold: First, it will increase mutual understanding between the teacher and his or her students, and, second, it will also serve the students' interest of getting something compensatory from their non-native instructors. Therefore, FNCIs' ability to demonstrate a solid understanding of their host culture (American culture) and their ability to compare and contrast the cultures are central to FNCIs' effectiveness with their American students. In addition to being just a competent communicator in the American classroom (Rubin & Geezel, 1986), FNCIs must learn to become competent intercultural communicators on campuses as well.

### **For Future Research**

Insights revealed in interviews with the American students are also informative for future research on FNCIs. Awaiting future research to unpack are important issues such as the degree to which students' teaching evaluations are affected by their perceived strength of rapport with FNCIs, the co-relations between students' predispositions, the likelihood of positive teacher-student rapport establishment, and the effects of self-disclosure and other immediate behaviors on perceived likability of FNCIs. Furthermore, the interactive nature of FNCIs' rapport with their students calls for future research to focus on successful and unsuccessful

FNCIs. Information provided by FNCIs can then be compared and contrasted with that rendered by the students.

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