

Native Speakerism in the EFL Classroom: Senior High School Students' Perceptions of an American Volunteer Teacher

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ABSTRACT

Volunteer native-speaker teachers are placed in Indonesian secondary schools through cooperation programs, yet how secondary students construct perceptions of native speakerism from this contact remains underexplored beyond higher-education research. This study aimed to examine how twelfth-grade students at a public senior high school in West Java perceived an American volunteer teacher's presence and positioned native English speakers as language models. A qualitative descriptive design was used, involving 27 questionnaire respondents and nine semi-structured interview participants, supported by classroom observation. Thematic analysis produced four themes: Teaching Experience, Emotional Response, Language Authenticity, and Learning Impact. Students perceived the volunteer's presence as novel and motivating, experienced anxiety that gradually gave way to confidence, associated native pronunciation with linguistic authenticity, and most interview participants shifted toward self-directed English learning through digital media. Sustained native-speaker contact can reshape secondary students' learning orientation and beliefs about language authenticity.

Keywords: *Native Speakerism, Students' Perceptions, EFL Classroom, Language Model, Volunteer Teacher*

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesian education policy has increasingly emphasized international collaboration as a strategy for strengthening twenty-first-century competencies, including the involvement of foreign personnel in classroom activities (Kemendikbudristek (2023)). Through cooperation schemes coordinated by (Kemenag, 2024) and long-running international programs such as the (Corps, 2024), native-speaker volunteers have been placed in secondary schools to support English instruction and promote educational internationalization. At the research site, an American volunteer had been integrated into English teaching across several twelfth-grade classes for approximately one year. During this period, the volunteer conducted independent instruction, participated in team-teaching with local teachers, and contributed to classroom assessment. This combination of instructional authority and native-speaker status created a distinctive learning environment in which students were exposed to sustained interaction with an English-speaking foreign teacher.

Sustained interaction with a native speaker may influence not only students' learning experiences but also their perceptions of English and its speakers. Native speakers are commonly associated with fluency, accurate pronunciation, and authentic language use; however, these associations are not simply linguistic facts but are also shaped by socially constructed beliefs. Holliday (2021) refers to this ideology as native speakerism, in which native speakers are positioned as the most legitimate representatives of English while non-native speakers may be implicitly perceived as less authoritative. This positioning is reinforced by historical and global discourses surrounding English, in which particular native-speaker varieties have frequently been treated as reference standards (Crystal, 2020). Thus, students' perceptions of native speakers need to be understood not merely as personal opinions but as perceptions potentially influenced by broader linguistic ideologies.

The concept of native speakerism is rooted in earlier discussions of the global status of English. [Kachru \(1985\)](#) model of World Englishes demonstrated the historical and sociolinguistic expansion of English across different contexts, while [\(Phillipson, 1992\)](#) critically examined the dominance of native-speaker norms through the concept of linguistic imperialism. Building on these perspectives, [Holliday \(2021\)](#) argues that native speakerism continues to reproduce assumptions about the superiority and legitimacy of native-speaker English. A recent systematic review by [\(Hiratsuka, 2024\)](#) further indicates that research on native speakerism has largely focused on its implications for native and non-native English teachers, including professional identity, employment, and perceived legitimacy. Comparatively less attention has been given to how learners themselves construct, negotiate, or resist native-speakerist beliefs through direct classroom interaction. This gap provides an important basis for examining students' perceptions in actual EFL classroom contexts.

The issue is particularly relevant in Indonesia, where English functions primarily as a foreign language rather than a second language. For many Indonesian students, exposure to native-speaker English is commonly mediated through social media, films, digital platforms, textbooks, or short-term educational programs rather than sustained face-to-face interaction. Consequently, the presence of a native-speaking volunteer teacher for approximately one year represents a relatively distinctive opportunity for students to experience native-speaker English directly within their everyday classroom environment. [Adalta & Arsyad \(2023\)](#) found that beliefs concerning native-speaker superiority continue to exist among Indonesian EFL learners and may influence how students evaluate English and their instructors. In such circumstances, sustained classroom interaction can become an important context in which students either reproduce existing assumptions about native speakers or develop more critical and flexible understandings of English and its users.

Students' perceptions are also shaped by how they select, organize, and interpret their classroom experiences. [Robbins \(2005\)](#) conceptualizes perception as an active process through which individuals select, organize, and interpret stimuli rather than simply receive information passively. Prior experiences, expectations, and social beliefs can therefore influence how students interpret encounters with a native-speaking teacher. For senior high school students, this process is particularly significant because adolescence represents an important period for the development of academic and linguistic identity [\(Amerstorfer & Frein von Münster-Kistner, 2021\)](#). Direct interaction with an American volunteer may provide students with a new linguistic and social reference point through which they evaluate their own English competence, pronunciation, confidence, and understanding of what constitutes "correct" or "authentic" English. Their perceptions may consequently reveal not only how they view the volunteer but also how they position themselves as English learners.

Several theoretical perspectives provide a basis for understanding these experiences. [Robbins \(2005\)](#) theory of perception explains how students interpret unfamiliar classroom stimuli, while [\(Krashen, 1985a\)](#) comprehensible input hypothesis suggests that interaction with a more proficient English speaker can provide meaningful language input when it is understandable to learners. [\(Vygotsky, 1978\)](#) Zone of Proximal Development further highlights the potential importance of interaction with a more knowledgeable interlocutor, particularly when learning is supported through appropriate scaffolding. In addition, [\(Horwitz et al., 1986\)](#) construct of foreign language classroom anxiety helps explain students' emotional responses to using English with a native speaker, while [\(Bandura, 1997\)](#) social learning theory emphasizes the role of observing and interacting with linguistic models. Together, these perspectives provide a multidimensional framework for examining how students interpret, emotionally respond to, and learn from sustained contact with a native-speaking teacher.

Despite the increasing involvement of native-speaker volunteers in Indonesian schools, empirical studies examining students' perceptions of sustained classroom interaction with a native-speaker teacher remain limited. Existing research has tended to examine university students' general attitudes toward native speakers [\(Adalta & Arsyad, 2023; Hakimian, 2024\)](#) or specific instructional issues involving secondary students, such as

corrective feedback and teacher evaluation (Prayogi & Widiyati, 2024; Wardana, 2023). Studies that closely examine how secondary school students construct meaning from prolonged, everyday interaction with one consistent native-speaker figure are still relatively scarce. This gap is important because students are the individuals who directly experience the interaction, hear the language used in authentic classroom situations, observe the teacher's instructional behavior, and develop impressions of native speakers through their daily learning experiences. Investigating these experiences can therefore provide a more learner-centered understanding of how native speakerism operates within school-based EFL education.

Accordingly, this study examines the perceptions of twelfth-grade students toward the presence of an American volunteer teacher and toward native English speakers as language models in English learning. Specifically, the study addresses two research questions: (1) How do twelfth-grade students perceive the presence of an American volunteer teacher in the English classroom? and (2) How do twelfth-grade students perceive native English speakers as language models in learning English? By centering students' lived experiences rather than institutional or policy perspectives, this study seeks to contribute a learner-centered account of how perceptions of native speakers are constructed within an Indonesian EFL secondary classroom. Theoretically, the study is expected to enrich discussions of native speakerism in school-based English language teaching, particularly by highlighting learners' meaning-making. Practically, the findings may help schools, local teachers, native-speaker volunteers, and students reflect on how international volunteer involvement is experienced in the classroom and how such programs can support English learning without unintentionally reinforcing assumptions of native-speaker superiority.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative descriptive design, an approach chosen for its capacity to provide a systematic, contextual account of a phenomenon based on participants' natural language rather than manipulated or numerically reduced data (Creswell, 2014; Sandelowski, 2000). This design suited the study's aim of exploring how students interpreted the presence of a native-speaker volunteer and constructed meaning through classroom interaction. The study was conducted at a public senior high school in West Java where an American volunteer teacher had been directly involved in English instruction for approximately one year. Participants were selected purposively rather than randomly, since the study required students with genuine, sustained exposure to the volunteer rather than a sample representative of the wider student population. Twenty-seven twelfth-grade students who had direct, sustained learning experience with the volunteer completed an open-ended questionnaire, with three students selected from each of the nine classes the volunteer taught, ensuring that every class the volunteer had contact with was represented in the data. Of these, nine students, one representing each class, were subsequently selected for semi-structured interviews using a criterion-based purposive strategy: the researcher reviewed all 27 questionnaire responses and selected the one response from each class that was clearest and richest in detail, so that the interview sample captured the widest possible range of experiences and perspectives across the participant group rather than the most convenient or most positive accounts. Participants were predominantly female (70.4%) and aged 17 to 18 years.

Table 1. Participant Demographic

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	19	70.4
Male	8	29.6
Age Range		
17-18	27	100
Participant Type		
Questionnaire participants	27	100
Interview participants	9	33.3

Table 1 summarizes the demographic profile of the participants in more detail. Female students formed the clear majority in both the questionnaire and interview groups, and all participants fell within the same narrow 17–18 age range typical of twelfth grade.

Instruments

Three instruments were used to support data triangulation: an open-ended questionnaire, a semi-structured interview guide, and observation. All three were built around four indicators, perception of the native speaker, language features, learning outcomes, and affective factors, grounded in (Robbins, 2005) theory of perception, (Bandura, 1997) social learning theory, (Vygotsky, 1978) social interaction theory, and (Horwitz et al., 1986) construct of language anxiety. The questionnaire, administered through Google Forms, asked students to respond in short words or phrases (e.g., three words describing the volunteer teacher). The interview guide used the same four indicators to probe more deeply into students' experiences (Kallio et al., 2016). Each indicator was operationalized through specific guiding questions, with sample items presented in Table 3. Follow-up probes were used flexibly within this structure to allow participants to elaborate beyond the initial question.

Table 2. Sample Interview Guiding Questions per Indicator

Indicator	Sample Guiding Question(s)
Perception of Native Speaker	"What is your opinion about having a native speaker teacher in English class?"
Language Features	"How does the native speaker teacher speak English in class?"
Learning Outcomes	"What do you learn from the native speaker teacher during English learning?"
Affective Factors (Anxiety and Confidence)	"How do you feel when speaking English with a native speaker?"

Observation, conducted naturalistically within the school environment, focused on the same four indicators to support consistency across instruments (Patton, 2015). All three instruments were reviewed by an expert validator prior to data collection to assess their clarity, relevance to the research indicators, and appropriateness for twelfth-grade respondents, and were revised accordingly based on the validator's feedback.

Procedures

Data were collected in three sequential stages. First, the questionnaire was distributed to the 27 selected students to obtain a broad overview of their perceptions. Second, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted in Indonesian with nine students, recorded with consent, and later transcribed and translated into English by the researcher to maintain consistency with the academic writing of this study; excerpts were in some cases condensed from multiple related responses by the same participant to represent that participant's perception more holistically. This manuscript draws on excerpts from both the originally reported dataset and the complete interview transcripts, all collected as part of the same data collection process described above. Third, naturalistic observation of student-volunteer interaction within the school environment was carried out throughout the data collection period to support triangulation.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun & Clarke (2006) six-phase thematic analysis: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Findings from the questionnaire, interviews, and observation were cross-checked against one another to strengthen the trustworthiness of the themes that emerged. Researcher positionality was also considered throughout the analysis, given the researcher's prior connection to the research site. The researcher had prior, limited familiarity with the school through an earlier teaching practicum involving tenth-grade classes only, which did not overlap with the twelfth-grade participants of this study, and had informal acquaintance with the volunteer teacher prior to

data collection; this familiarity is acknowledged as a potential source of bias that was addressed through triangulation rather than reliance on the researcher's personal impressions. The single-translator process used for interview excerpts is likewise acknowledged as a limitation, discussed further below.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students' Perceptions of the Volunteer Teacher's Presence (Research Question 1)

Thematic analysis of the questionnaire, interview, and observation data produced two themes for the first research question: Teaching Experience and Emotional Response. Under Teaching Experience, students consistently described learning with the volunteer teacher as new, enjoyable, interactive, and motivating, qualitatively different from conventional instruction. One student summarized the experience simply as “very new and interactive” (Participant 1, Questionnaire), while another elaborated that the exposure let her “see how English is actually spoken in real life,” a marked contrast to how she usually learned in class (Participant 3, Interview). Instructional variety was also noted: one participant observed that the volunteer “has many ideas in teaching so students do not get bored” (Participant 4, Questionnaire). A further account from the full interview transcripts sharpens this sense of authenticity: one participant contrasted the experience with prior listening materials, explaining that “it feels more real because I am learning directly from an actual native speaker, different from just learning through recordings” (Participant 8, Interview Transcript). Several students also reported that the classroom itself became more active, describing being “invited to talk directly in English” in ways that felt uncomfortable at first but became natural with repetition (Participant 9, Interview). Notably, enjoyment and challenge coexisted rather than one replacing the other, as reflected in one participant's description of the experience as “fun, but also challenging” (Participant 8, Interview), suggesting that students were engaging with communicative tasks that required genuine effort rather than passive novelty.

Table 3. Summary of themes across the two research questions

Research Question	Theme	Key Pattern
RQ1: Perceptions of the volunteer's presence	Teaching Experience	Learning with the volunteer described as new, interactive, and motivating, contrasted with conventional instruction
	Emotional Response	Nervousness and fear of judgment at the outset, progressively giving way to confidence
RQ2: Perceptions as language models	Language Authenticity	Pronunciation, accent, and fluency linked to correct or authentic English
	Learning Impact	Gains in speaking confidence, listening comprehension, pronunciation awareness, and reduced anxiety

Under Emotional Response, students reported nervousness, fear of negative judgment, and fear of incomprehension at the outset of their interaction with the volunteer, feelings that progressively gave way to confidence. One student admitted being “afraid of mispronouncing words and being laughed at” (Participant 6, Interview), while another described her initial state simply as “nervous, scared, and less confident” (Participant 21, Questionnaire). A third participant located the same anxiety in comprehension rather than production, worrying specifically about “not understanding when he responds back” (Participant 13, Questionnaire), indicating that students' anxiety had at least two distinct sources: being judged, and being unable to follow. This same early discomfort was voiced in more personal terms by another participant, who recalled being “afraid of saying something wrong and not being able to understand what he said back to me,” adding that the feeling only settled “as time went on” and interaction started to feel manageable (Participant 1, Interview).

Several students named the mixture of feelings directly rather than describing its components separately, with one summarizing the whole experience in three words, “challenged, enjoyable, and nervous” (Participant 9, Questionnaire), and another putting it just as plainly: “nervous but also happy” (Participant 8, Interview). Taken together, these accounts show that discomfort and enthusiasm were not felt one after another but at the same

time, in the same moment of speaking. The full interview transcripts capture how directly these two feelings could coexist in a single moment: one participant described it as “like my heart is racing, but I am excited at the same time”, explaining that he was “nervous because I am afraid of saying something wrong, but on the other hand happy because I get to interact directly with a native speaker”, adding that “chances like that do not come often” (Participant 8, Interview Transcript). A probing follow-up question in one transcript clarified an important nuance about the source of this fear: when asked whether the volunteer had ever actually judged him negatively, the same participant who reported fear of being laughed at clarified that “he has never judged anyone, he is kind, but the fear is still there, it is more my own worry, afraid of looking stupid in front of my friends” (Participant 6, Interview Transcript), suggesting that students' anxiety was rooted less in the volunteer's actual conduct than in peer-oriented self-consciousness. Despite this tension, students described the trajectory across the semester as moving from fear toward being “more confident than at the beginning, even though I am still sometimes shy to speak” (Participant 9, Interview). This progressive pattern was reported consistently across all nine interview participants, and observational data corroborated it, students were increasingly seen initiating rather than only responding to exchanges with the volunteer as the school year progressed.

These two themes can be read through [Robbins \(2005\)](#) theory of perception: because most students had little or no prior contact with a native speaker, the volunteer represented an unfamiliar stimulus that drew heightened attention and interpretive effort. The more communicative classroom dynamic aligns with [\(Krashen, 1985\)](#) comprehensible input hypothesis and [\(Vygotsky, 1978\)](#) Zone of Proximal Development, in which a more competent interlocutor scaffolds communicative opportunities learners could not generate alone, explaining why students described the experience as simultaneously more challenging and more meaningful. The coexistence of nervousness and enthusiasm mirrors [\(Horwitz et al., 1986\)](#) foreign language classroom anxiety construct, in which fear of negative evaluation and communication apprehension coexist with genuine willingness to communicate. The consistent reduction of anxiety over time is consistent with [\(Krashen, 1985\)](#) affective filter hypothesis and [\(Bandura, 1997\)](#) self-efficacy theory: repeated non-threatening success lowered the psychological barrier to communication and reinforced students' belief that interaction was achievable. This finding also extends [\(Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2014\)](#), who found that EFL students generally associate native speakers with engaging learning experiences, by suggesting that the quality of communicative interaction, not native-speaker status alone, is what drove students' motivation.

Students' Perceptions of Native English Speakers as Language Models (Research Question 2)

For the second research question, two themes emerged: Language Authenticity and Learning Impact. Under Language Authenticity, students repeatedly linked the volunteer's pronunciation, accent, and fluency to what they considered correct or authentic English. One participant described the speech as “fluent and clear without mispronunciation” (Participant 1, Questionnaire), while another noted that “the way he speaks is different” from any English she had heard in class before (Participant 18, Questionnaire). A third participant offered a more interpretive account, explaining that the volunteer's speech “sounds like the English used in movies or videos I usually watch” and reasoning that “that is how English is supposed to sound when it is used naturally” (Participant 5, Interview). This framing positions native-speaker English as the legitimate standard against which other varieties are implicitly measured, and it shows that students' media consumption outside school had already established a reference point that the volunteer then confirmed in a live, relational context. This same attentiveness to sound appeared in smaller, more concrete observations as well. One participant simply praised “her natural way of speaking” (Participant 5, Interview), while another noted that “the accent sounds different from what I am used to hearing” (Participant 7, Questionnaire), showing that students registered the volunteer's speech as distinct from classroom English even when they could not fully explain why. Speaking pace surfaced as a

related, more ambivalent observation: one participant admitted that “sometimes she speaks too fast” (Participant 9, Interview), a comment that reads less as a complaint than as evidence that students were listening closely enough to notice tempo, not only content. Observation supported this pattern: students were seen asking for clarification on unfamiliar pronunciations and occasionally attempting to replicate the volunteer's intonation, treating him as a live reference model rather than a distant one.

Under Learning Impact, students reported within-classroom gains, greater speaking confidence, improved listening comprehension, stronger pronunciation awareness, and reduced anxiety. One participant stated plainly, “I became more confident in speaking English” (Participant 2, Questionnaire), while another linked confidence directly to a changed relationship with error, explaining that she “became braver to speak even though I am still afraid of making mistakes” because she came to feel that “making mistakes did not mean I had failed” (Participant 7, Interview). This sense of gradual gain was echoed across several other responses that, taken alone, look like small remarks but together sketch a fuller picture of change: one participant reported that “my confidence grew and my listening ability improved” (Participant 5, Questionnaire), another noted becoming “more familiar with English pronunciation” (Participant 8, Interview), a third described feeling “more motivated to learn English” (Participant 12, Questionnaire), and a fourth found that “it became easier for me to understand conversations” (Participant 17, Questionnaire). One further participant tied the reduction in anxiety specifically to grammar, stating that she “became much braver to speak and not too worried about grammar anymore” (Participant 3, Questionnaire), suggesting that increased confidence loosened not only fear of speaking itself but also the narrower fear of making grammatical errors while doing so. Pronunciation awareness in particular carried a self-corrective dimension that the full transcripts make explicit: one participant recalled that “the way I used to say some words, I thought I already had it right, but it turned out my pronunciation was still wrong, so now I am more aware of details I never paid attention to before” (Participant 2, Interview Transcript). Beyond the classroom, a more striking pattern emerged: seven of the nine interview participants described a shift toward self-directed learning through digital media. One student explained that she “started watching English videos without subtitles more often” because she “wanted to get used to hearing the real pronunciation” (Participant 2, Interview), another reported that she now “often listen[s] to English songs and watch[es] videos to practice my listening” and pays close attention to native pronunciation “because I want to sound more natural” (Participant 7, Interview), while a third linked the change directly to the volunteer, saying that seeing him “speak naturally made me realize that there is a big difference between the English I know and real English” (Participant 9, Interview). The same participant who described her out-of-class listening practice located the change explicitly in her own motivation rather than in any external requirement, explaining in the full transcript that “there is a drive from within that was not there before” (Participant 7, Interview Transcript), a description that anticipates the motivational interpretation developed later in this discussion.

Before turning to theoretical interpretation, it is useful to position these findings against prior Indonesian EFL research. [Adalta & Arsyad, \(2023\)](#) and [Hakimian \(2024\)](#) examined native-speakerist beliefs among university students through general attitude measures, while [\(Prayogi & Widiyati, 2024; Wardana, 2023\)](#) investigated secondary students' perceptions within a narrower instructional scope such as corrective feedback and general teaching evaluation. The present study departs from this body of work in three respects: it focuses on senior high school students whose academic and linguistic identity is still forming, rather than university students whose beliefs about language authority are comparatively settled; it documents how native-speakerist beliefs are actively constructed through sustained direct interaction with one consistent native-speaker figure over an extended period, rather than measuring general attitudes toward an abstract category; and it identifies a behavioral consequence, the emergence of self-directed learning outside formal instruction, that has not been documented with comparable consistency in prior research on this topic.

These findings instantiate what [Holliday \(2021\)](#) theorizes as native speakerism: an ideological positioning of the native speaker as the sole authority on how English should sound, here shown to form organically through lived classroom contact rather than explicit instruction. The pattern is consistent with [\(Phillipson, 1992\)](#) account of how the global dominance of English-speaking countries in media and education creates conditions for learners to internalize native-speaker norms as natural, and it aligns with [\(Adalta & Arsyad, 2023; Hakimian, 2024\)](#) in documenting the persistence of native-speakerist belief among Indonesian and other EFL learners. Notably, this persistence stands in tension with World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca scholarship [\(Jenkins, 2007; Kachru, 1985\)](#), which argues that no single English variety holds greater legitimacy than others; the present findings suggest that, at the level of individual learner experience, this theoretical ideal has not yet reshaped students' actual beliefs.

The shift toward self-directed learning is the study's most theoretically significant finding. It is best explained through [Bandura \(1997\)](#) concept of observational learning, in which exposure to an aspirational linguistic model motivates learners to seek further exposure to similar models, and through [\(Dörnyei, 2001\)](#) ideal L2 self framework, in which the volunteer made an abstract aspiration toward English proficiency concrete and personally relevant. This finding extends [\(Prayogi & Widiyati, 2024; Wardana, 2023\)](#), who documented within-classroom benefits of native-speaker interaction but did not report a comparable shift in out-of-class learning behavior, suggesting that sustained direct contact with a native speaker in a secondary setting can produce motivational consequences that reach beyond the boundaries of formal instruction.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the volunteer's influence cannot be reduced to native-speaker status as a simple variable. What mattered was the combination of authentic communicative interaction, scaffolded self-efficacy gains, the embodied reinforcement of beliefs about linguistic authenticity, and the resulting motivational reorientation, a layered process of experience, interpretation, and identity formation [\(Norton, 2013\)](#) rather than a straightforward response to the volunteer's national origin.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how twelfth-grade students in an Indonesian public senior high school perceived an American volunteer teacher and positioned native English speakers as language models. Sustained interaction encouraged students to construct meaning from their experiences, often reinforcing beliefs about native speakers as authoritative models. This influence extended beyond the classroom, as seven of nine interview participants independently sought native-speaker English content through digital media. In this EFL context, where native-speaker contact is relatively rare, sustained exposure appeared to influence students' learning orientation, affective engagement, and self-perceptions as English users. However, the findings are limited by the single-school, single-volunteer context, reliance on self-reported data, and translation by one researcher without independent back-translation. Schools should therefore integrate volunteer participation with collaborative planning, reflection, and authentic communication. Students should also broaden their understanding of English as a global language. Future research should employ longitudinal and cross-site designs, include local teachers' perspectives, and use independent translation checks.

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