

Preparing the Non-Native English-Speaking Teacher (NNEST) For the EFL Classroom: A Teacher Trainer Perspective

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Abstract

This article explores the attitudes of English language teacher trainers (ELTTs) toward how Non-Native English Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) should be prepared to succeed in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). A number of ELTTs were surveyed to share their opinions on the strengths and weaknesses of NNEST Trainees in respect of language, culture, and the use of modern teaching methodology. Then, the trainers compared and contrasted some aspects between native and non-native English-speaking teacher trainees. Finally, the results indicate certain aspects that NNESTs need to be more aware of and that native English speakers must also be trained before entering the EFL world.

Keywords: EFL, ELT, English as an International Language, Non-Native English Speaking Teachers NNEST, TESOL, World Englishes,

Introduction

A large number of students graduate from English departments around the world every year. During the years they spend at university, many of them aspire to become English language teachers. However, once they graduate, they realize that the job market is not as pleasant as they used to think of it. Although different countries and contexts may impose different circumstances and conditions, high paying English Language Teaching (ELT) jobs are reserved for NESTs in most cases. This leaves non-native English graduates disappointed that they are always looked at as inferior only because English is not their mother tongue. Recruiters disregard any training or qualification taken by NNESTs (Alshahrani, 2014).

Gurkan and Yuksel (2012) note that local teachers who were educated in the same setting can better understand their students' needs and the grammar of English whereas when it comes to issues of culture, pronunciation, speaking, and creativity, NESTs excel. For most of the items in Diaz's study (2015), students did not have a preference of NEST or NNEST over the other.

Teachers should be able to understand the background of their students to be able to help them to succeed. Therefore, NESTs must be trained to understand the culture of their students, which gives an advantage to local

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NNESTs. Villegas and Lucas (2007) state that “teachers need to know something about their students’ family makeup, immigration, history, favorite activities, concerns, and strengths. Teachers should also be aware of their students’ perceptions of the value of school knowledge” (p. 30).

As some English language classes are characterized by their diverse cultural backgrounds and most English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes are designed to teach people who may not even need to interact with native English speakers, Schnitzer (1995) suggests that an international view of the world must be adopted by English as an International Language (EIL) teachers regardless of whether they are native or non-native speakers (NSs or NNSs) of English. Mahboob (2010) considers that not knowing the culture of the EFL students is a disadvantage for NESTs. This claim is supported by Mikhaleva and Reginer (2014) who believe that “the parallel study of the native and target-language cultures [is] the most efficient way of encouraging personal development of a student in the process of language teaching” (p. 121).

Maum (2002) points out that both NEST and NNEST need to be trained and prepared. Ulate (2011) emphasizes the same point when she writes, “a good language teacher is neither native nor non-native, but that one that is professionally and personally prepared to perform the demanding task of educating others” (p. 56).

Yet, there are some weaknesses of NNESTs that cannot be denied. Merino (1997) gives pronunciation and vocabulary, among others, as two major deficiencies of NNESTs. He explains that, although NESTs may not know all the words in English, they have that intuitive feeling that tells them whether or not a word sounds authentically English. NNESTs, according to Merino, not only have a limited range of vocabulary, but also may use some words in wrong contexts, which subsequently leads to misunderstanding.

As for communication with EFL learners, much research such as that of Medgyes (2001) and Cakir & Demir (2013) shows that NNESTs can perform better in the sense that they understand the needs of their students, although they tend to be more traditionalists in their approach to teaching (Arva & Medgyes, 2000). Song and Del Castillo (2015) distinguish between US and non-US educated NNESTs. Their research shows that those who were educated outside of the US are affected by the absence of communicative language skills and consequently give more attention to grammatical accuracy.

Self-confidence in teaching English is another issue that previous research raised. In examining a NNEST, Reis (2011) argues that the level of confidence dropped as the main participant moved from teaching in his own country to teaching in the US. Akikawa (2010) used her lack of self-confidence in using the English language when she moved to the US to help her become more aware of language pragmatics and consequently a more conscious and effective teacher.

Most of the previous research that investigated attitudes toward NNESTs focused on students. The current study inquires ELTTs to explore their attitudes in regards to how linguistically and methodologically competent

NNESTs are, the areas of weaknesses of NNESTs, some of the areas in which NNESTs excel over NESTs, and whether or not NNESTs should receive special training.

Methodology

As ELTTs are experienced in dealing with and observing both NESTs and NNESTs, they can be a reliable source to gather information about both parties.

Data Collection

A survey was designed using 'www.surveymonkey.com' and its link was sent to ELTTs in my LinkedIn profile contact list. The survey had three main parts: (1) the demographic information, (2) perceptions of strengths and weaknesses of NESTs and NNESTs, and (3) suggestions for improvement. All of the questions were mandatory to answer in order to submit the survey.

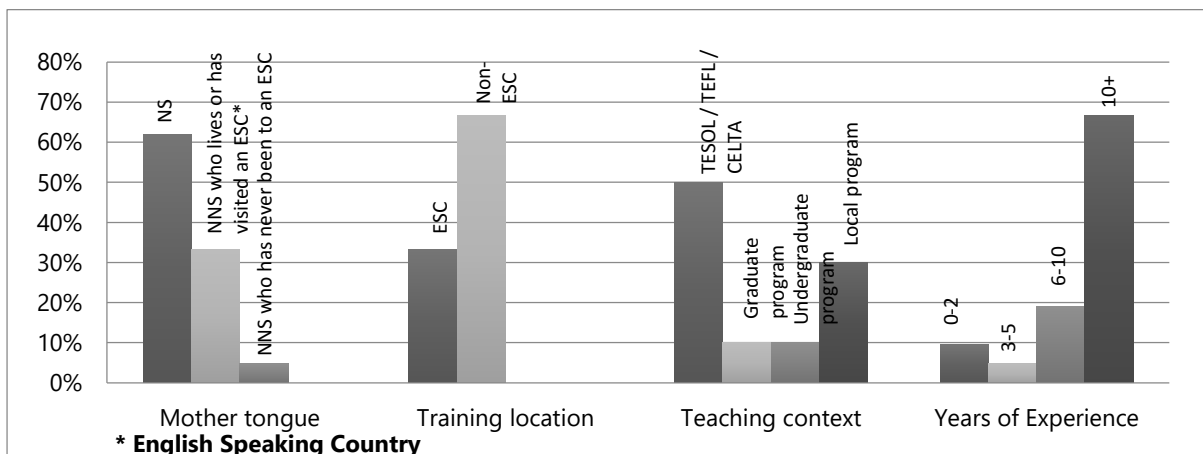
The second and third parts of the survey asked the ELTTs to rate their attitudes as (Agree / Agree to some extent / Disagree) with some questions in which respondents could comment on their choices. The very last question required that the respondents give a qualitative answer.

The data were collected between August and September 2015. Most of the trainers who were contacted showed eagerness to complete the survey on this topic.

Participants

Figure 1 summarizes the main characteristics of the participants in the research survey, showing that they are qualified and experienced well enough to give mature opinions.

Figure 1: Characteristics of Research Participants



The survey was sent to 42 ELTTs via 'www.linkedin.com' and as shown in Figure 1, 61.9% of the surveyed ELTTs are NSs and 33.33% are NNSs who live or have lived in an English speaking country. Almost two thirds of the participants train in non-English speaking countries and training contexts of the participants range from TESOL / TEFL / CELTA (50%), to graduate / undergraduate university programs (20%), and to other locally tailored courses / workshops (30%). TESOL, TEFL, CELTA, and most of the locally tailored training courses and workshops are more practical than courses taken in higher-education contexts, which lay some emphasis on the theoretical aspects of ELT. 66.67% of the participants have been working in the field for more than 10 years.

Because this study aims to benefit from the experience of ELTTs, it is clear how Figure 1 assures the diverse nature of the examined trainers in terms of experience with the English language, training location, type of courses they conduct, and number of years of involvement in the field.

Procedure and Data Analysis

Each participant received an e-mail asking them to complete the survey with a link to it. All the questions were marked as mandatory so that no question is left unanswered when the form is submitted.

The website on which the survey was designed "www.surveymonkey.com" collects the results and provides them as statistics and figures.

Results

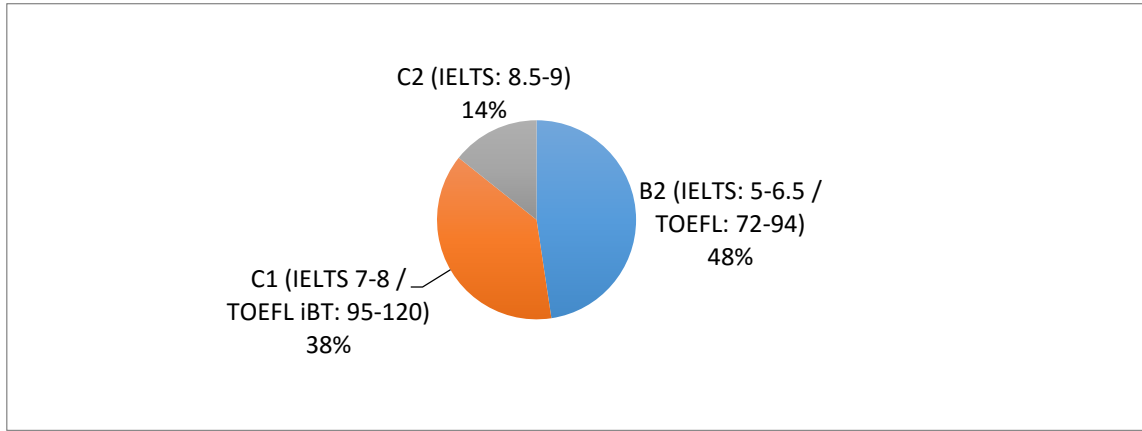
Required English Language Proficiency Level

As Figure 2 shows, nearly half of the surveyed ELTTs (48%) considered B2 level on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages scale as the appropriate level that NNETs require to teach EFL whereas 38% said that NNETs must possess a C1 level and only 14% went for the C2.

According to recent research, TOEFL scores of 72 up to 94 are considered equal to B2 level and 95 up to 120 are equal to C1 on the CEFR scale (Papageorgiou, Tannenbaum, Bridgeman, & Cho, 2015). As for the IELTS, the IELTS official website (www.ielts.org) clarifies that:

- B2 equals 5 – 6.5
- C1 equals 7 – 8
- C2 equals 8.5 – 9

Figure 2: Minimum English Language Proficiency Level for a NNEST from the Point of View of ELTTs



Attitudes toward Required Action for the NEST and the NNEST

The NNEST

The following table shows the attitudes of ELTTs toward the NNESTs’ knowledge of the English language, pronunciation, vocabulary, and the target culture.

Table 1: ELTTs’ Attitudes toward Areas that NNESTs Need to Improve

	Agree %	Agree to some extent %	Disagree %
Most NNEST Trainees need to work more on their knowledge of the English language.	47.62	28.57	23.81
Most NNEST Trainees need to work more on their pronunciation.	1.90	23.81	14.29
Most NNEST Trainees need to work more on their vocabulary.	47.62	38.10	14.29
Most NNEST Trainees need to work more on the target culture (American or British).	23.81	47.62	28.57

ELTTs shared their opinions about what they believe NNESTs should work harder on to succeed in their work. Table 1 shows that 47.62% of the participants agreed with the statement that ‘most NNEST Trainees need to work more on their knowledge of the English language’. As for pronunciation, the largest percentage of the examined ELTTs (61.90%) agreed with the statement that says ‘most NNEST Trainees need to work more on pronunciation’ and 23.81% of the participants agreed to some extent. More work on vocabulary received an agreement percentage

of 47.62. Around a quarter of the ELLTs (23.81%) agreed with the statement about exerting more effort on the target culture, whether American or British.

The NEST

A number of ELTTs (19.05%) thought of NESTs as better for TESOL jobs, and 38.10% agreed to some extent with this claim. Very few of the participants (9.52%) did not believe that NEST Trainees should learn about the culture of their learners and when asked about grammar, 28.57% agreed and 42.86% agreed to some extent that NEST Trainees need to work more on it.

The NNEST Trainee in the Classroom

Table 2 shows the percentages of responses of ELTTs to questions related to the NNEST Trainees in the classroom.

Table 2: The NNEST Trainees in the Classroom according to ELTTs

	Agree %	Agree to some extent %	Disagree %
Most NEST Trainees tend to use more modern ways in teaching English (e.g. technology, active learning, etc.).	38.10	9.52	52.38
Most NNEST Trainees tend to be traditionalists in their approaches to language because this is the way they learned it.	23.81	33.33	42.86
NNEST Trainees are less confident than NEST trainees.	14.29	33.33	52.38
The fear of being not linguistically proficient affects NNESTs teaching.	42.86	33.33	23.81
NEST Trainees are more comfortable in teaching English.	38.10	23.81	38.10

As shown in Table 2, the largest percentage of the examined ELTTs (52.38%) does not see that NNEST Trainees tend to use modern ways in ELT, while 38.10% of the trainers do not share the same opinion. 42.86% of the participants disagreed and 33.33% agreed to some extent with attributing the NNEST Trainees' use of traditional approaches in ELT to how they were educated. This stand was not supported by 23.81% of the trainers.

More than half of the trainers (52.38%) pointed out that NNEST Trainees are not less confident when compared with NEST Trainees. Yet, the fear of their competence in English affects the performance of these NNEST Trainees in the classroom according to 42.86% of the trainers; a stand with which 33.33% of the examined ELTTs agreed to

some extent and 23.81% disagreed. On the other hand, there was a balance between those who agreed and those who disagreed (38.10% each) with that NEST Trainees are more comfortable in ELT.

When asked whether special training courses should be designed for NNESTs, 47.62% disagreed with the idea, 38.10% agreed to some extent, and 14.29% agreed. Some of the surveyed ELTTs commented on this question. One of the respondents asserted that “adapting to the weaknesses and problems NNESTs have is the reason why we have so many different forms of English, which is causing so many problems with International communication” while another one said, “I believe that although NNESTs might not have the communicative language level that NESTs do, they are more in tune with how their trainees feel”, and a third respondent emphasizes that both NEST and NNEST should take the same course: “In my opinion If both NES and NNES are in a teacher training course the learning experience is enhanced. The NNESs are very often proficient in language learning so they bring their experience to the classroom”.

The great majority of the ELTTs (85.71%) agreed that employment of EFL teachers should be based on their qualifications and professional experience rather their first language while only 1 respondent (2.37%) disagreed. For this question, some respondents gave enlightening comments. For example, one of the ELTTs said: “I agree but all EFL teachers need to have a very high standard of spoken English with full Idiomatic knowledge of how real English is used”, another trainer explained that employment on the basis of qualification and experience is but the “request of NNSs [... whereas] managers want to meet their students' expectations to keep customers happy so they employ NSs”.

Finally, one of the trainers commented at the end of the survey saying:

(1) I've heard a saying along the lines of: "Scots speak Scottish English, Americans speak American English, Australians speak Australian English, what's wrong with Germans speaking German English?!?!". There are well over 50 legitimate varieties of English already, and there's no reason there can't be more. Be proud not of *your* English, but of your *variety* of English. That will lead to self-respect not just for you, but for all NNESTs. (2) It's rare for discrimination against NNESTs in places like the UK, Australia and New Zealand. It's common to find discrimination against NNESTs in places like China, Korea, and Vietnam. [... They should t]ake steps to educate (non-EFL trained) employers, education bureaus, parents, etc., in your home country. Be an advocate for equality and raise people's awareness of NNESTs' equal skill, qualifications and value.

In this comment, the trainer sheds light on the adoption of World Englishes as English has become an international language. He suggests that we should accept the fact that people speak varieties of English because there is no one ideal model of English spoken by all native English speakers. Moreover, the trainer highlights the fact that discrimination against NNESTs occurs mostly in non-English speaking countries.

Discussion

The results show clear trends toward the importance of improving NNEST Trainees' language skills, vocabulary, and pronunciation with less emphasis on the target culture. Thus, the largest group of trainers considers B2 on the CEFR language scale as the suitable level of English language proficiency for a NNEST to start the career of ELT whether with young or adult learners. Therefore, it is recommended that English departments around the world require an entry exam that assures the level of the applicant is adequate in the four skills of English and give more focus to improving the students' skills in small-sized classes. English departments in non-English speaking countries should take the responsibility of exposing their students to the English language by hosting interesting events or helping student travel to one of the English speaking countries. Students should graduate upon passing a proficiency exam that guarantees that they have reached a certain level that allows them to practice the profession of ELT.

Interestingly, a trend by the trainers shows that NEST Trainees also need to be trained on the culture of their students as well as on their English language grammar. The fact that someone speaks a language as a mother tongue does not necessarily imply that they master its grammar rules nor that they can teach these rules to EFL learners. So, ELTTs see gaps in both native and non-native teachers and consequently both need to be trained although most of them do not recommend separate training programs.

Because most previous academic research, such as that of Matsuda & Matsuda (2001), Selvi (2010), and Moussu & Llorca (2008), advocates a complementing and collaborative perspective between NESTs and NNESTs, I wondered about the ELTTs who chose to agree with the statement that "NEST Trainees are better for TESOL jobs", most of whom (75%) turned out to be training TESOL / TEFL / CELTA. As such, it is noticeable that their opinion is valuable because they deal with the practical side of ELT, rather than the theoretical side, which is taught in most higher-education contexts. This result intrigues further research in which only TESOL / TEFL / CELTA experienced native English speaking trainers are compared with their non-native counterparts.

It is interesting to note that against the students' perception in Arva and Medgyes' research (2001), almost half of the ELTTs do not attribute the traditional approach to ELT to the way NNESTs were educated. This also intrigues researching what could be the reasons that NNESTs are traditional language teachers. However, any research in this respect should keep in mind whether or not non-traditional approaches are effective with the specific nature of the students under-examination.

The findings of the study also denote that NNESTs should have more confidence in their abilities. Previous research (Lee, 2004; Kamhi-Stein, Aagard, Ching, Paik, & Sasser, 2001; Chang, 2012) emphasizes how NNESTs can be role models for their students and therefore they should use their experience as English language learners to their favor.

Finally, employers in English-speaking countries, as one of the respondents mentioned, do understand the role that NNESTs can play and that is why it is less common to see language-based discrimination in hiring English

language teachers in these countries. On the other hand, the respondent remarked that NESTs are used for marketing purposes more than for pedagogical or linguistic ends in non-English speaking countries. This may help to explain why the vast majority of the trainers believed that the employment of English language teachers should be based on the qualifications and experience of the teacher rather than on the native language.

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