

# Fitting In and Fighting Out: Non-native teachers of English engaging in an Australian ESL environment

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## Abstract

*This study explores and problematises the various challenges six non-native English-Speaking Teachers (NNESTs) faced in the ESL teaching profession. The purpose of this study was to increase an in-depth understanding of non-native English speaking teachers in terms of their perceived and actual employability, students' perceptions of them, and the discriminatory practices they are often reported to be subjected to in the ESL industry in Australia. The number of international students studying ESL at Australian language centres has increased significantly in recent years and a concurrent increase in trained NNESTs seeking employment in these centres necessitates this study. The findings revealed that the participants still face challenges to some extent in the ESL teaching profession in Melbourne and their teaching approaches are impacted by their linguistic and educational experiences. The study also found that, contrary to popular belief, NNESTs do not use the so-called 'traditional' teaching approaches while teaching, despite their own learning of English through such approaches. As well, far from seeing it as a disadvantage, these teachers often utilise their non-native status as a positive source of inspiration to encourage 'non-native' students in the classroom.*

*As data in the study indicates, the participants' pedagogical approaches have been influenced by their past linguistic, educational, and cultural experiences, this understanding will help these programs become better attuned to teachers' experiences and backgrounds and encourage NNEST future teachers to examine their varied experiences in relation to theories of language acquisition, language teaching and curriculum design.*

**Keywords:** Native speakerism; non-native English speaking teacher; NNEST; English language teaching; ELT; English as a second language; ESL

## Introduction

Due to globalisation and attendant forces such as transnational migration, especially to the English-speaking West, the demand for English language learning and English language teaching in both second and foreign language contexts has increased tremendously. English has become the lingua franca of the world, to the extent that even as early as in 1997 Graddol declared that the number of second and foreign language speakers of English far exceeded the number of first language speakers of English (**Graddol, 1997**). This means that the English language is no longer 'the privilege of native speakers' (**Medgyes, 2001: 429**) and that native speakers have long lost the prerogative to control its standardisation.

Historically, native English speaking teachers (NESTs) have been preferred as teachers of the language, as they were perceived as 'ideal' or 'authentic'. It was also widely accepted that 'native-speaker' teachers represented a 'Western culture' from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology (**Holliday, 2006**). This resulted in a worldwide discrimination against English teachers whose first language was not English. As a result, even qualified non-native English speaking teachers were often considered as not 'good enough' by managers and administrators at language centres, and indeed often by their peers and even by the students. In the English language teaching (ELT) industry, it was accepted that NESTs were necessarily - by virtue of their first language status - better, and therefore students desired to be taught by them. Phillipson, (**2012**) described such widespread and unquestioned beliefs as 'myth' or 'fallacy'. Subsequent scholarly literature from the late 90s to the present have to an extent overturned such beliefs, especially as reflected in policies and recruiting and promotional materials. In practice, however, little has changed, as old beliefs about native speakerism persist, and this has serious implications on the employment and general acceptance of non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) especially in countries with high number of immigrants, such as Australia.

Many previous studies have problematised the definitions of native speakers and non-native speakers; some have claimed that NESTs and NNESTs are 'two different species', (**Arva and Medgyes, 2000**). However, very few studies have solely explored the issues of NNESTs in the adult ELT teaching profession in an Australian context and the kinds of challenges and experiences they go through that influence their teaching practices in the ESL classroom. This study addresses the following *questions*: What challenges do NNESTs experience in order to fit into the ELT industry in Australia? What are their self-perceptions as NNESTs? What expectations do students have of them? And, finally, are there barriers and obstacles on their way to employment?

## **Challenges Experienced by NNESTs**

In recent years an increasing number of non-native English speaking teachers have taken up teaching positions in English as a second (ESL) or English as a foreign (EFL) contexts (**Clark & Paran, 2007; Zhang and Zhan, 2014**). It has been found that teaching EFL or ESL could be a very challenging task for NNESTs because there are high expectations on their cultural and linguistic knowledge (**Moussu & Llurda, 2008**) of the English speaking country or the host country they are teaching, but also because NNESTs are not generally perceived to be as competent as their counterpart NESTs (**Kahmi-Stain, 1999**) as discussed above. As a result, NNESTs often face difficulty in finding teaching positions – and this problem is obviously exacerbated in English speaking countries (**Zhang & Zhan, 2014**).

It has long been reported in scholarly literature that in the language teaching industry, labelling teachers as ‘native’ speakers and ‘non-native’ speakers can have a significant impact on the overall teaching and learning process, the classroom culture as well as in administrative matters in teaching institutions. Many researchers have found that program administrators or managers generally give preference to hiring NESTs over NNESTs because there is a general perception that students do not want to be taught by non-native English teachers (**Mahboob, 2004**). According to Maum (**2002**), some NNESTs have reported that many of their students ‘resented’ being taught by non-native teachers until the teachers were able to prove that they were not any less effective as native speaker teachers. Indeed, many TESOL professionals believed that being a native speaker is a necessary qualification to teach English (**Thomas, 1999; Braine, 1999**). It is a sad reality therefore that these professional and many language institutions even advertise and ‘boast’ that they only hire native English speaker teachers (**Braine, 2004**). A study conducted by Selvi (**2010: 174**) investigated the extent to which native speakerism appears in job advertisements documented that in employing teachers, ‘native speakerism was more important than any relevant education background and sufficient teaching experience’.

However, the challenges that NNESTs often face are not just limited to such discriminatory hiring practices; they also often face challenges of credibility as professionals because of their racial, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds (**Amin, 1999; Thomas, 1999**). In her personal narratives, Thomas (**1999**) shared a confused and hurtful experience of feeling ‘unsure’ of her teaching abilities when her students commented in a teacher evaluation report that ‘we need native speaker teacher. It will be better’ (**1999: 10**). After reading such remarks she reported that was not only hurtful but also caused her lack of confidence in her credibility, as it

was directly pointed to her non-nativeness, rather than her teaching ability or qualifications. A more recent study conducted by Lasagabster and Sierra (2005) on students' perceptions of Native and Non-native teachers' in 76 universities in Europe to explore credibility issues that NNESTs face, showed that there is a stronger preference among students to have NESTs as teachers at all levels in the areas of vocabulary, speaking, listening, pronunciation, assessment and writing with 81.5% and 71% of students preferring a native speaker in pronunciation, speaking and vocabulary courses. In order to get a clearer picture, the next section will discuss the strong presence of native speakerism in the English Language Teaching Industry.

### **Native Speakerism and the Case of NNESTs in ELT**

The history of native-speakerism is not new; Phillipson (1992) pointed out that it existed since the period of British colonisation when English functioned as an imperial language in the former British colonies across the globe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to Mufwene (1994), 'it originates from the colonists' ideas and perceptions who considered people in colonised countries as incompetent speakers and illegitimate offspring of English' (*ibid*: 29), believing that there is only one, 'standard' English. In other words, only native speakers possessed standard English. How, then, do we define 'standard' English? Is it British or American? Or the English spoken by 'inner circle' (Kachru, 1985), or the 'other' Englishes spoken by the 'outer circle' (*ibid*) through colonisation by England or America, such as India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka (*ibid*). 'Standard English' (Arva & Medgyes, 2000) argued, is an 'idealization, an amalgam of beliefs and assumptions about rules and norms to which certain people attempt to adhere with variety degrees of success'.

There is no denying that the reductive binary of NESTs and NNESTs in terms of their relative competencies has been deeply established in the ELT industry. Indeed, in this field, it is still a prevalent belief that NESTs are the ideal English teachers - Phillipson termed this as the 'native speaker fallacy' in 1992. Twenty-five years later this professional discourse of the binary between native and non-native (Braine, 2010) still exists. As discussed, partly what compounds the problem is that many students themselves continue to show the desire to be taught mainly/only by native speaker teachers, with studies conducted in Japan, Korea, Saudi Arabia and in many other countries showing such tendencies. The term 'native speakerism' is political in nature, because it conveys an undertone of authority and assumed standardisation. It essentialises competence in language as a quality one is born with, and therefore closely aligns language competence with the biological category of 'race'. Research has shown that such ideology is 'harmful for the growth of the profession

because it shifts attention from teachers' professional knowledge and expertise to their linguistic status' (**Zhang & Zhan, 2014: 570**), and by extension, to their nationalities, ethnicities and races.

In recent years there has been an increase in scholarly research on issues related to NNESTs in ELT, (**Braine, 2010; Mahboob, 2010**) due to the increasing concern that NNESTs are not always given the credit they deserve. Most English teaching takes place in countries where English is either a second or a foreign language, thereby constituting the majority (nearly 80%) of the world's English. Braine, (**2010**) believes NNESTs began to make their voices heard in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century through various ELT organisations, for example the establishment of TESOL's Non-native Caucus in 1999 in the US gave NNESTs a platform to be vocal about their position. In the following sections, how students perceive their non-native English speaking teachers and how the NNESTs, on the other hand, perceive themselves will be discussed.

### **Student perceptions of NNESTs**

Although the number of NNESTs has increased in both ESL and EFL contexts all over the world, scholarly research reports that they are still not always given the credit they deserve (**Mahboob, 2004**). Research on the way they are perceived by their students is a relatively recent phenomenon. This could be due to the sensitive nature of the issue, because NNESTs were generally considered as 'unequal' in knowledge and performance to their NEST counterparts (**Braine, 2004**) or because most NNESTs work in public schools globally while the ELT industry has generally promoted private schools, and expensive textbooks for adult students.

Interests have shifted, and in the last 10-15 years there have been a few studies conducted on how students perceive their non-native English Speaker teachers across the globe, such as in Vietnam and Japan (**Walkinshaw & Hoang Duong, 2012**), in the United States (**Liang, 2002, Mahboob 2003**), in Hong Kong (**Cheung & Braine, 2007**), in United Kingdom (**Pacek, 2005**), in Europe (**Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005**) and so on. In the study by Walkinshaw and Duong, for example, students expressed a number of perceived advantages and disadvantages of both NESTs and NNESTs. Students viewed NESTs as models of correct pronunciation and language use but they also considered NESTs as being poor in explaining grammar and sometimes 'cultural differences' creating 'tensions'. On the other hand, students found classroom interaction with NNESTs was 'easier' because of the shared culture and NNESTs being relatively 'good in grammar' compared to their NEST counterparts.

A study with ESL learners in the United States conducted by Mahboob in 2003-2004 showed that a number of participants viewed that native speakers were better 'language models' when it comes to pronunciation. In line with Chomsky's (1965) notion of the 'ideal native speaker', they associated terms such as 'ideal' 'true' and 'correct' pronunciation of English, with NESTs. It is interesting that this study found that adult ESL learners wanted to imitate 'true' or 'correct' native-like pronunciation, whereas psycholinguistic evidence suggests that adult L2 learners will not achieve this (Mahboob, 2004). On the other hand, Liang (2002) investigated students' attitudes towards NNESTs at California State University where 76% of the participants stated that being 'interested, well prepared and being professional' were the major characteristics of effective teachers.

In yet another study by Benke and Medgyes (2005) on students' perceptions of native and non-native teachers, among 422 Hungarian learners of English, the overwhelming majority of the participants felt it was important that teachers are able to translate (84.4%), although this only applies in monolingual classes, and ideally both NEST and NNEST teachers should teach them (82%). In this case, only 5.9% participants voiced that they wished to be taught by NESTs.

From the above findings, it appears that English language learners in many countries in the world would not actually mind being taught by both NESTs and NNESTs. Despite, this it is still very common to see advertisements that promote programs run by 'only native speakers' in countries where English is taught as a second or foreign language, such as in Japan, Korea, China or in the Middle East (Ruecker & Ives, 2015).

Now that we have discussed how NNESTs are perceived by their students, it is also very important to know how NNESTs see *themselves* as English teachers. It is important for the NNESTs to have self-confidence in order to feel *equal* if not better to their counterpart, native speaker teachers.

### **NNESTs' Self-Perceptions**

As NNESTs constitute the majority of English teachers in the ELT field (Mahboob, 2004), it is important to investigate their self-perceptions. Research shows that teachers' self-image and beliefs directly influence how they teach and interact with students (Samimy & Brutt-Griffler, 1999). This becomes more important in environments where both NESTs and NNESTs teach together, as the two groups are constantly being compared, especially in relation to accent, grammar or vocabulary knowledge (Braine, 2010).

Numerous non-native English speaker teachers have written about their journeys and experiences as ESL or EFL professionals. Thomas (1999: 10) claims that 'NNESTs have to work twice as hard as their NEST colleagues, proving themselves as effective users of the language'. She explains that NNESTs face many situations where they have to establish 'credibility' as English teachers to be taken seriously by the colleagues and students, which sometimes can be unnerving, if not 'debilitating', and that can have significant impact of feeling inferior, lack of confidence and finally the ability to succeed.

Research on NNESTs' self-perceptions, professional characteristics and experiences of teaching English in diverse contexts highlight the strengths and gaps in NNESTs' knowledge and skills that might affect their qualifications and competence as ELT professionals. The question therefore arises - just because NESTs have 'perfect' pronunciation and 'perfect' grammar, does it automatically make them better teachers? Studies have suggested other factors that contribute to becoming a good or an effective English teacher, such as better preparedness (pedagogically), being sympathetic or showing empathy to students and, perhaps most importantly, having a 'professional attitude' towards the job they are doing.

An early study by Samimy and Brutt-Griffler in 1999 determined how 17 NNESTs graduates from countries such as Japan, Korea, China and Turkey, who were either pursuing a MA or PhD in TESOL in a university in the United States, perceived themselves as professionals in the field of English Language teaching. More than two-thirds of the participants admitted that their difficulties with language affected their teaching from 'a little' to 'very much'. They pointed out their counterpart NESTs were informal, fluent, accurate using different techniques, methods and approaches. They used more conversational English with subtle knowledge of the language, having communication skills as the main outcome of their students of their teaching. On the other hand, NNESTs were perceived as relying on textbooks but at the same time also being sensitive to the needs of the students, better empathising with students and keeping exam preparation as an important goal of their teaching. The differences, according to the participants, were mainly due to the sociocultural factors embedded in Western and Asian societies, such as, in Asian societies, classes are often not student-centred and collaborative activities with pair and group works are not always applied to increase students' participation, which are strongly emphasised in Western classrooms. However, the participants did not consider themselves as being inferior to the NESTs when it came to teaching practice.

A more recent study on the self-perceptions of NNESTs in Hong Kong was conducted by Cheung in 2002 with 22 University English teachers at six universities. The NNESTs revealed their strengths were the ability to empathise with students as fellow second language learners, a shared cultural background and the emphasis they placed on grammar. They believed teachers should be knowledgeable about the English language, able to make learning relevant and fun, be sensitive and responsive to students needs and be good at motivating students. Despite the above mentioned positivity and self-confidence that many NNESTs possess, in many countries they still face various challenges in finding employment.

### **Securing Employment**

Due to native speaker fallacy explained above, non-native teachers not only face challenges in seeking employment, professional credibility in workplace but also get challenged because of their accents (**Maum, 2002**). Maum's study describes how 'the issue of accent' has often been a cause of employment discrimination practices in the US and other countries – 'teachers with non-native accents were perceived as less qualified and less effective and were compared unfavourably with their native-English speaking colleagues' (**Maum, 2002, cited in Ulate, 2012**). In other words, non-native teachers who were born in a country such as India or Singapore are not considered as competent and credible, regardless of their competency level in English. This is intriguing, considering that in reality even native speakers have varied accents. For instance Australian accent is significantly different from the American or British, although in this case it is unlikely that they would be discriminated either by their employees or their students on the ground of how they speak - although there are occasional reports of US accents or British RP (Received Pronunciation) accents being favoured over other 'native' accents.

### **The Study Design**

Upon Ethics Approval from my university, an email was sent to the Directors of Studies (DOS) of seven English Language Centres in Melbourne to recruit participants. The seven were selected based on their large student numbers with a high number of teachers. Six DOSs provided the names of the six participants; the seventh centre did not have any Non-native English teachers among the teaching staff. The participants in this study were six NNESTs working in a number of adult ESL programs in Melbourne, Australia, teaching various courses ranging from General English (GE) courses from Pre-Intermediate to Advanced levels and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). These programs mainly serve international students, to assist them in succeeding in their studies and students who come to stay for a short time on either a tourist visa or a student visa. The



NNESTs represented six countries: China, East Timor, Bangladesh, Iran, Sri Lanka and Germany, and their ages ranged from 33 to 55. There were five male and one female participants, two of whom had a PhD degree, one in her second year of PhD and the rest had at least a Bachelor’s degree and an English teaching qualification, such as TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Language or CELTA (Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). None of the participants had to take the IELTS test to teach as long as they possessed ESL teaching qualification. Their experiences varied from two years to 30 years of teaching English in Melbourne. It is important to mention that all the participants had prior teaching experiences in their home countries or in other countries before they started teaching in Melbourne. All names in this study are pseudonyms to protect the participants’ identities.

*Table 1: Participants’ Profiles*

Name (Pseudonyms)	Age	Country of Origin	Education	ESL teaching qualification	Teaching experience
Huong	34	China	PhD student	CELTA	6 years in China, 2 years in Melbourne
Evan	32	East Timor, moved to Australia at 11	Bachelor Degree	CELTA	1 year in East Timor, 8 years in Melbourne
Shaheen	35	Bangladesh	PhD in English Literature	Master in TESOL	12 years in Bangladesh, 2 years in Australia
Ahmed	36	Iran	Studying Master in Education	CELTA	12 years in UK , Iran and Australia
Sumeet	55	Sri Lanka	Masters, IELTS Examiner Trainer	Master in TESOL	Taught in the UK, New Zealand and Australia since 1984
Ulrich	46	Germany	PhD in English Literature	Master in TESOL	5 years in Japan, 10 years in Melbourne

Since the goal of this study was to gain a deeper understanding about the NNESTs’ experience in the ELT industry in Melbourne, Australia, the research was conducted using a qualitative approach, as it is exploratory and descriptive in nature (Ary, 2010). A case study approach was adopted for this study, which explored the kinds of challenges and experiences these non-native English teachers of ESL and EFL in Melbourne faced. The interviews were semi-structured and each participant was interviewed once averaging 60 -75 minutes. All the interviews were conducted in English. All the interviews were transcribed and coded.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Once all data needed had been gathered, the interviews were transcribed and coded by listening to the recorded interviews multiple times. The data was then coded for themes which is a process where a researcher attaches ‘labels’ to segments of data that represent what each segment is about. This resulted in the three main themes guided by the research questions:

there were significant differences among the participants in terms of age, first language and teaching experience. However, they had one thing in common – they were all non-native teachers of English in an English speaking country.

Three major themes emerged from the data. The first theme is that the participants faced challenges in the three main areas that they related to their NNEST status: in securing employment, receiving negative attitude from students and feeling professionally insecure. The second theme is their understanding of the learners' struggle and seeing themselves a source of inspiration to students; while the final theme is NNESTs' dislike for the practice of the so called 'traditional' teaching methods.

*Finding 1: NNESTs still face challenges in terms of credibility, negative attitude from students and securing employment*

There is no denying that discrimination seems to be institutionalised in ELT field in Australia (**Pennycook 2004**). The data in this study confirm that NNESTs still face many challenges. The literature documents the challenges non-native English speaker teachers face range from feeling insecure as NNESTs (**Amin, 2001**), finding employment (**Braine, 2005; Zhang & Zhan, 2014**) or negative attitudes from students (**Amin, 2001; Mahboob, 2004**).

Three participants out of six reported experiencing challenges in different ways. Shaheen, a 35 year old man who emigrated to Melbourne three years ago at the time of the interview had 12 years of teaching experience in Bangladesh at a university, teaching ESL and EFL from Intermediate to Advanced level students. He had strong feelings with regard to his experiences of facing challenges and difficulties over the last two years of work experience in Melbourne. He strongly believed that:

*Because of my 'Indian' appearance I was not given a job, it took me more than six months to get the 'first break' ... also, my previous degree and job experience in my native country, Bangladesh were not counted when determining my teaching level and experience in Melbourne.*

Therefore, he had to first get a degree and was placed at the lowest pay scale due to his lack of teaching experience, although he had more than 12 years of prior teaching experience. Shaheen's above experiences echo Amin and Kubota's (2004) claim that NNESTs often face issues of credibility that challenge their teaching ability because of their racial, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, often overriding their professional qualifications and experiences. It is worth mentioning Shaheen scored 8.5 in IELTS to study Master in TESOL, whereas the requirement was 6.5. Shaheen's struggle of finding an 'ongoing or tenured job' could be attributed to what

Ellis (2016) wrote regarding NNESTs in Australia that they are considered as second-best to NESTs, contributing professional inferiority complex.

Evan's experiences of being challenged were slightly different. Evan was a 32 year old teacher who had been teaching in Melbourne for eight years. He came to Melbourne at the age of 11 with his parents. He held a Bachelor degree in Engineering and a CELTA. He seemed to be very passionate about teaching English and found it rewarding despite having some 'rough' experiences. Evan claimed that he was unaware of native speakerism when he first started teaching in Melbourne. However, three incidents made him 'aware' and 'self-conscious' about it – the realisation that he is perceived as someone who speaks with an accent, that he is *not* a native speaker of English. He gave three specific examples:

*The first time I encountered 'discrimination' was on the phone. I was told that because I spoke with a 'foreign accent' I would not be considered for the position I applied for or ahh . . . I don't know, maybe I'm not a native speaker?*

The second time was when he was told by a student that many students in class reacted negatively to having an Asian teacher with an accent. Thirdly, a Malaysian-born colleague told him because of her colour or Asian look she wasn't given work at many ELICOS Centres. It was interesting that Evan was told he had a foreign accent because he sounded just like a local Australian to the researcher as Evan completed both high school and a Bachelor degree in Engineering in Melbourne. Until he was told that he spoke with an accent, he considered himself a 'local', therefore unaware of 'native speakerism'. He believed it could be because of his 'Asian appearance' he was perceived as non-native, implying 'only white people' are native speakers.

Huong, a 34 year old Chinese female, had been teaching in Melbourne for two years. She came to Melbourne to study Masters in Education, decided to continue with a PhD and was in her second year of PhD at the time of the interview. Huong too, like Shaheen had to wait for several months to get her second job, although she had already had teaching experience in Melbourne.

*I suspect that it took me long to get the second job because I spoke with a 'slight Chinese accent' ... haha and I really think I got my first job because I was Chinese and because the majority of the students in that school were Chinese too ... (laughs) and my boss was also Chinese.*

Amin (2001) in her study on immigrant female ESL teachers in Canada found similar results as Huong, Canadian (native speakers) teachers were perceived to have an 'inner-circle' accent, therefore, students preferred them. She argued that 'accents, like race are socially organized' (*ibid*: 92),

which she described as linguistic demonstration of ‘nativism’ and another form of ‘racism’. It can be argued, in the light of the literature presented earlier, that when these institutions disregard NNESTs’ teaching experience, and discriminate against teachers who speak with an accent, they are indirectly espousing the belief that native speaker teachers are better qualified to teach the language based on their ‘birthright mentality’ (Thomas, 1999: 9). Within this mentality, a non-native teacher is measured against a native speaker teacher who has, by definition, acquired the target language as a birthright, and the non-native teacher is therefore essentially at a disadvantage.

It is important to note, however, that the other three participants, Sumeet, Ulrich and Ahmed did not have many difficulties finding employment in Melbourne. It could be argued that this was because all three of them spent a subsequent period of time in an English-speaking country: Sumeet completed his Bachelor degree in the UK, Ahmed finished his high school in the UK and Ulrich went to college in the US; and thus, it seemed they had more communicative and pragmatic competence in operating within an ESL context. A similar finding was reported by Reves and Medgyes (1994) in a study conducted on non-native teacher’s self-image on 216 participants from 10 countries. The study showed NNESTs who had spent longer periods in English-speaking countries, who had more ‘frequent contact’ with native speakers of English in their early years were ‘less insecure and less self –conscious’ (Medgyes, 1994: 364). However, all three of them were aware of other NNESTs who had similar experiences like Huong, Evan and Shaheen.

Many researchers argue that being a native speaker does not automatically imply the ability to teach more effectively (Mahboob, 2005; Braine, 2005). Conversely, there are many students and ESL professionals who still believe that native speakers enjoy some advantages over non-native speakers. For example, Huong and Evan both indicated that some of their students reacted negatively to having non-native, non-white English speaking teachers and they both felt some kind of resistance from the students. A student of Evan approached him after the lesson and admitted feeling ‘very disappointed’ to see a non-native teacher who was going to teach him for the next five weeks.

Huong on the other hand, was asked about her IELTS (English Language Testing System) score almost every time she had one-on-one lesson with her students.

*Students always ask me what I got in the IELTS test ... even individual scores, like what I got in writing or reading or speaking ... it's so frustrating because these students would never ask a native speaker teacher about their IELTS score because they do not have to prove their language ability.*

Being 'questioned' about her credibility seemed to have an impact on Huong's self-perception of herself. She admitted feeling 'inadequate or startled' by these questions at the beginning but she realised that whenever she revealed she had scored 8 in IELTS, students responses were 'positive with admiration'. However, the students' reactions in both cases show that they believed only native speakers could teach them competently and they would not have asked them for any credibility. Drawing from Chomsky's (1965) theory, 'the native speaker is regarded as the authority, model user and that he or she is the most 'ideal informant' who has an 'understandable advantage' in language teaching' (Canagarajah, 1999: 78). Therefore, the findings above concur with Fotovatian's (2015: 232) claim that 'in the field of TESOL, foreign educated ESL teachers in Australia are reported to experience additional challenges to enter this professional field shadowed by employers' preference to hire native speakers'.

*Finding 2: Understanding students' struggles better and NNESTs seeing themselves as sources of inspiration*

In second or foreign language teaching, it is often believed that language teachers who teach their first language have more advantages over teachers who are not a native to the language they teach. However, many scholars have argued that NNESTs can be successful and ideal ESL teachers because they have undergone the process of acquiring and learning English as a foreign or additional language themselves and therefore, they are better aware of their students' linguistic needs (Mahboob, 2004; Ma, 2012). Many NNESTs experiences of going through the process of learning English give them valuable insights into the ways English is learnt or taught (Ma, 2012; Kirkpatrick, 2010). In addition, in some EFL situations they also share the students' first language.

All the participants in this study believed that their teaching approaches were heavily influenced by their past learning experiences of the language. Ulrich and Evan can 'empathise' with their students' learning difficulties since they have been through the similar difficulties in acquiring the target language. In this regard, Sumeet explained:

*We as non-native English teachers probably know and understand many students' native language and culture and we can offer a variety of perspectives and we can use our experiences as a source of knowledge to teach and guide them.*

Huong also believes she can teach her Chinese students 'better than NESTs' because she can teach them how she herself became 'very good' in English and considers herself a 'successful example' to her students. Mahboob's study (2004) also provided evidence that 'good language teaching' is not exclusively the native speaker's domain. The students in Mahboob's study argued that NNESTs were more 'understanding' and 'empathetic' towards them and provided effective support that native teachers often fail to do so.

Mahboob (2004) further argued that in terms of NNESTs language teaching methodology, especially when it comes to teaching grammar, they do a much better job and fit into students' expectations as they were second language learners themselves. One of his participants explained why she believed NNESTs were more effective in teaching grammar – 'native speakers are not structure teachers and maybe they learn about grammar rules only when they start teaching ... they speak the language perfectly but they do not know the pain of learning grammar rules' (*ibid*: 134). Arva and Medgyes (2000) also indicated that NNESTs are more effective grammar teachers since they are 'explicitly aware' of grammar rules. In this study, all five participants except Sumeet stated that one of their main strengths was teaching grammar. Ahmed gives an example,

*When I do a listening exercise, I always do a pre-listening exercise because as soon as I look at some phrases or idioms or the sentence structure I realise that students are going to struggle with them. I tend to think a native speaker would probably go like ok, we are doing a listening, write the answers. So, you see I understand the grammar structure of the sentences and I can predict students would struggle.*

They all explained because of their own learning process and going through 'similar' experiences, it is easier for them to teach grammar and make it easier for the students to learn (Ellis, 2002). Ulrich believes he understands his students' struggles better compared to his NEST colleagues,

*As I had to learn the language myself I can understand what kind of 'mistakes' students make and 'why' they make them and it's easier to 'relate' them with my experience I believe... and sometimes my native-speaker colleagues ask me to explain certain grammar points because they are not sure how to explain them to students especially in advanced classes.*

For Huong because of her linguistic background and her 'grammatical knowledge', she can explain to the students 'what' and 'how' grammar structure works, particularly to Chinese students. She can also show 'examples' on the board about how she learnt and became better in English and by doing so she believes she becomes an 'example' or 'inspiration' to the students. Sometimes Huong deploys code-switching from English to Chinese as she believes students understand faster and better, particularly when she is teaching an advanced, complex grammar rule. Many studies have investigated how NNESTs use code-switching method to help their students during English lessons (**Lee & Chowdhury, 2018**) allowing them to use contrastive analysis with L1 to learn English in better ways. Evan explains 'how hard it is to learn a language, especially for adults', and uses the word 'pressure' to 'know' and 'how' to use the language in different contexts, which many students find 'frustrating'.

Sumeet, on the other hand, prefers teaching advanced level academic courses, such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) due to the fact that he is an IELTS examiner trainer with vast knowledge and experience of course designing and teacher training. He believes, because he has not taught General English (GE) courses for a long time, he feels rather 'uncomfortable' explaining grammar rules, therefore, prefers

All six participants believed they were a source of inspiration to their students. Huong, Ulrich and Ahmed often offered themselves as examples of 'success' when their students were frustrated or got disappointed with learning and with their progress. Huong says, 'if I can do it, so can you'. Ulrich admits students sometimes confided in him that they felt inspired that he, someone with a German accent, was teaching them English. Ellis's (2002) study on teaching from experiences of three ESL teachers in Australia revealed similar findings where all three participants felt they were 'role models' for their students and that they could inspire students to become better in English.

*Finding 3: NNESTs do not prefer or practice 'traditional' teaching approaches*

Many previous studies have shown that native and non-native teachers have distinctive teaching approaches (**see, for example, Medgeys, 1994; Arva & Medgeys, 2000; Maum, 2002**). These studies show native speaker teachers are relatively 'flexible' and 'informal' and they use different techniques and eclectic (although not random) methods whereas non-native teachers mainly 'rely' on 'textbooks', using so-called 'traditional' approaches focusing more on 'structured' lesson plans and 'teacher-centred' learning, for example a study conducted in Hungary by (**Arva & Medgeys, 2000**), where non-native teachers seemed to stick to textbooks, whereas, their counterparts used a wide range of materials and being

more tolerant towards students' mistakes. It also showed the local Hungarian teachers have good training in grammar but use 'traditional' pedagogies, whereas 'foreign' teachers are either not trained at all or have done CELTA or similar and use 'communicative' techniques that make the best of their fluency. The findings of this study did not 'corroborate' many of the previous findings. Evan and Ahmed prefer using authentic materials over textbooks. Ahmed calls himself a 'techno savvy' teacher:

*I always incorporate textbook materials with everyday available materials on the internet or something I would come across in the street. We need to understand in this technologically advanced day and age to teach effectively teachers must include internet in their lessons.*

In order to 'facilitate' this idea he has organised a few PD (Professional Development) sessions on 'including technology in ESL classes' for the other teachers at his workplace. Like Ahmed, Evan voiced the need of bringing 'interesting and diverse materials' into day-to-day teaching lessons.

*If we want to motivate our students to learn English, it is extremely important to know how our today's internet savvy, digital natives learn and therefore, we have to be innovative and use other available resources out there.*

On the other hand, Sumeet and Ulrich prefer using a variety of classroom activities and strategies, with the focus being on authentic communication skills. The primary objective is to help students improve their Listening and Speaking skills. They both use authentic materials such as audio visual materials, YouTube or other online videos to make learning more interactive and interesting. Sumeet prefers using newspaper articles, magazines to promote pair or group activities to discuss, ask questions, give opinion and so on. Ulrich believes 'role-plays', 'in-prompt fun activities' and 'games' work much better to engage students in improving conversational skills rather than heavily relying on textbooks or teacher-centred learning. These various strategies, they believe to 'engage' the learners have contributed in making the lessons 'fun, engaging and interesting'.

Despite being mostly taught in the traditional style (teacher centred, relying on textbooks) where teachers were the authority in the classroom, Shaheen and Huong showed that they wanted to make students' learning more meaningful and adapted new ways of teaching. The findings of this study thus refute previous findings where researchers argued that NNESTs' prefer traditional, teacher-centred approaches whereas NESTs were more flexible (Arva & Medgyes, 2000); the study conducted on five NESTs and five NNESTs in Hungary, showed compared to their



counterpart, NNESTs. Indeed, all of the participants rarely relied on textbooks and instead used authentic language materials to teach the target language.

## **Conclusion**

This study looked at six non-native English speaker teachers' experiences of teaching English and the challenges they faced in doing so in Melbourne. Specifically, the study investigated whether NNESTs face challenges in finding employment because of their non-native status, how students perceive NNESTs and how the NNESTs perceive themselves.

The participants in the study reflected on various aspects of the challenges they faced in the ESL teaching profession. As we have seen, three participants have clearly shown that despite the difficulties they experienced due to their NNEST status, they have utilised their past learning experiences positively to make them reflective, empowered and hardworking teachers in their teaching approaches.

Echoing Medgyes' (1994) previous findings, the participants felt that they were able to often predict and understand the difficulties their students' experiences while learning English to 'predict and anticipate linguistic difficulties of their students' and provide suitable teaching strategies to the students through their own experiences of learning English as a foreign language. Furthermore, the participants voiced that they were more empathetic towards their students' needs and challenges in learning a second language. This study found that these advantages served the participants well in the classroom, manifesting themselves in the implementation of teaching practices that they felt were appropriate and effective for their students.

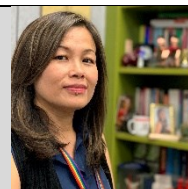
Throughout previous literature, it has been noted that NNESTs often feel insecure as they are often not considered as competent enough in English language teaching as their native English-speaking counterparts (**Kamhi-Stein, 2004**). However, there needs to be a new message that NNESTs can be *just as good* or even *better* as the findings of this study suggest.

It is important to note that although this study examined six NNESTs who have varied linguistic, cultural and educational backgrounds, there remain limitations. Firstly, it is questionable whether the findings could be generalised considering its relatively small sample size. Obviously, there is huge variation among NNESTs in terms of their experiences, challenges, and teaching approaches. As Kamhi-Stein (2004) noted, categorising NESTs and NNESTs with absolute characteristics may distort understanding of NNESTs and create harmful stereotypes. Thus, future research studies need to examine individual differences among NNESTs instead of simply grouping NNESTs into one homogenous group.

Secondly, this study did not investigate either how ESL students viewed these six teachers, or how their employers viewed the NNEST's teaching methods or competencies. A future study incorporating these three aspects might shed a better light on NNESTs' experiences in Australia. Finally, since participants in this study were from six countries only, investigating NNESTs from various other countries might be beneficial to explore whether English teachers from non-native English speaking background are being hired in a greater number. Studies need to also confirm if, as Llurda (2004) proposed, the perception of native speakers being the role model or the ideal teacher is decreasing while appreciation of non-native English speaking teachers is increasing worldwide, is true for Australia today. After all, teachers' - whether NEST or NNEST - should be hired based on competency regardless of experience, engagement and pedagogical knowledge rather than on their linguistic background.

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