

## Original Paper

# We Should Not Hire Only Native English-Speaking Teachers

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### Abstract

*The preference for hiring native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) over their non-native-speaking counterparts remains deeply rooted in language education. This paper challenges the assumption that being a native speaker necessarily guarantees effective teaching ability. It explores the unique advantages that well-trained (NNESTs) bring to the classroom, including firsthand language-learning experience, greater empathy, cultural sensitivity, and more extensive structural knowledge of the English language. Drawing on real-life examples and research EFL/ESL contexts, this paper argues that a balanced approach, wherein both NESTs and NNESTs collaborate and complement each other's strengths, would engender to more optimal language learning outcomes. The analysis calls for a shift in hiring practices, with teaching qualifications and training valued over linguistic background alone.*

### Keywords

*Native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), English as a Second Language (ESL), language acquisition, teaching qualifications, cultural sensitivity, empathy, structural knowledge, hiring bias, educational policy*

### 1. Introduction

The hiring practices of English-language institutions and schools often reflect a strong bias toward native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), driven by the assumption that native fluency inherently makes an individual a better teacher. Many schools and language centers actively seek NESTs, often overlooking the qualifications and teaching experience of non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs). This orientation, however, is flawed. Speaking a language fluently does not guarantee effective teaching, with pedagogical training, cultural awareness, and empathy toward students' struggles being equally critical for language classroom success.

This assertion is supported by the fact that NNESTs have learned English as a second language themselves, conferring them a more comprehensive understanding of the learning process and the challenges that students face. I argue that NNESTs' firsthand language learning experience, greater patience, and deeper grammatical knowledge make them equally, if not more, effective teachers than NESTs. The real-life examples, logical analysis, and empirical evidence presented in this paper call for the adoption of more balanced hiring practices that value teaching qualifications over native fluency.

The real-life examples, logical analysis, and empirical evidence presented in this paper call for the adoption of more balanced hiring practices that value teaching qualifications over native fluency. These findings have important implications for both research and policy. From a research perspective, further investigation into the effectiveness of NNESTs in diverse classroom settings could strengthen the case for more inclusive hiring practices. On a policy level, language institutions and education policymakers should reconsider recruitment criteria to focus more on teaching ability and pedagogical expertise rather than native speaker status.

## **2. The Bias Toward Native English-Speaking Teachers**

I keep a close watch on the advertising campaigns launched by private schools, English language institutions, and several public schools in the months preceding each new academic year, and these advertisements clearly express a desire to attract and employ only NESTs. This trend is corroborated by Ruecker and Ives (2015), who reported that many institutions prioritize native speaker status over formal teaching qualifications, even when NNESTs have more relevant training and experience. Similarly, Kiczowski and Lowe (2021) contended that effective teaching depends more strongly on pedagogical skills and experience than on native fluency, challenging the preference for native English speakers in language teaching. This important issue is addressed in the following discussion, which demonstrates that the exclusive orientation toward native speakers remains firmly entrenched in practice and has gained momentum in language teaching. I begin by stating several facts and sharing some accounts of real-life incidents.

## **3. Real-Life Examples of Hiring Failures**

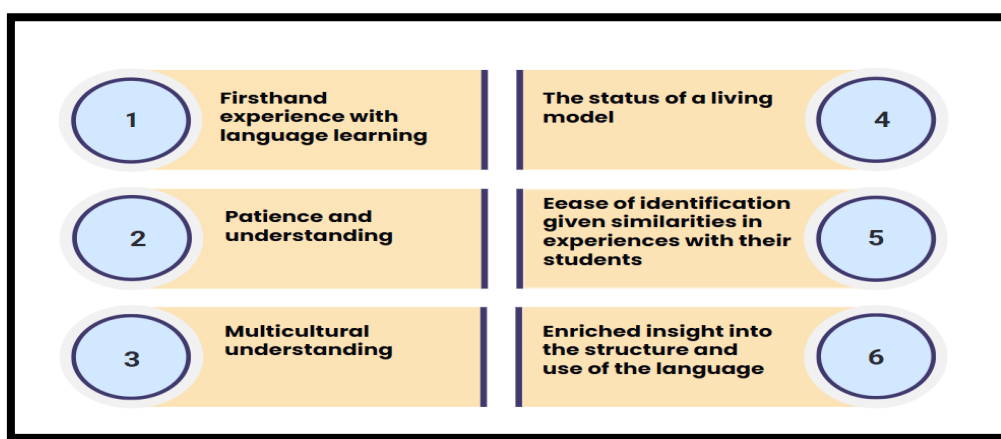
Two incidents that I have observed illustrate the consequences of hiring NESTs solely on the basis of their native speaker status. The first involves a government school that hired a number of native English speakers without examining their qualifications. The school assumed that native fluency would guarantee successful instruction. However, when students complained about their unsatisfactory performance, an investigation revealed that the teachers had no instructional experience or training. Some had previously worked as dog trainers in Chicago, a detail that underscored their lack of preparation for the classroom. The second occurrence revolves around a group of students at a private English language institution in a major city. The students reported that their instructors, who were primarily American and British nationals, had little to no teaching experience. Many of these individuals were in the country on

scholarships to study Arabic at local universities and took on part-time English teaching roles to supplement their incomes. While they were native speakers, their lack of qualifications and commitment to the profession resulted in poorly structured lessons and a lack of engagement in the classroom. As declared by one student, “We could tell they weren’t real teachers. They didn’t know how to explain grammar or help us improve.”

These examples highlight the risks of prioritizing native speaker status over teaching qualifications. Unfortunately, such hiring practices are common in many EFL/ESL contexts, particularly in regions with high demand for English education (Ruecker & Ives, 2015). There are also documented cases of negative outcomes for both students and institutions stemming from the employment of unqualified NESTs over qualified NNESTs (Ruecker & Ives, 2015; Fithriani, 2018; Kiczowski & Lowe, 2021; Yawan & Marhamah, 2024). By focusing on linguistic background rather than pedagogical expertise, schools are in danger of compromising the quality of education and failing to meet students’ needs.

#### 4. The Unique Strengths of Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers

It is important to look at some of the attributes of NNESTs that demonstrate the disadvantages of excluding them from teaching English as a foreign language. A key issue must first be considered: NNESTs possess significant characteristics that are unique to them. More specifically, trained NNESTs are, as shown in Figure 1, likely to exhibit six advantages over untrained NESTs: (1) firsthand experience with language learning, (2) patience and understanding, (3) multicultural understanding, (4) the status of a living model, (5) ease of identification given similarities in experiences with their students, and (6) enriched insight into the structure and use of the language.



**Figure 1. Six Advantages of Trained Nonnative English-Speaking Teachers Over Untrained Native Speakers**

#### *4.1 Firsthand Experience*

One of the most critical benefits of hiring NNESTs is their firsthand experience of the challenges confronting English language learners. This experiential comprehension allows these educators to better relate to their students' needs, struggles, and motivations and to grasp how to keep them on track. Consequently, NNESTs are often more adept at identifying and addressing these difficulties, as well as guiding students toward the use of effective learning strategies. Their personal experiences as language learners enable them to anticipate common obstacles and provide practical solutions tailored to the particular circumstances of each student.

Notably, NNESTs are trained to leverage their successful learning experiences to enhance their teaching efficacy, including the ability to help students maintain their motivation. As highlighted by Kiczowski and Lowe (2021), the personal experiences of NNESTs as language learners equip them with the capacity to anticipate and address common linguistic difficulties, such as grammar and pronunciation issues. This directly acquired knowledge often translates into more optimal and empathetic instructional approaches, enhancing the overall learning experience.

Furthermore, well-trained NNESTs serve not only as effective instructors but also as relatable role models for their students. Their hands-on experiences of learning English allow them to appreciate the hardships encountered by students and foster a supportive learning environment (Kurniawati & Rizki, 2018). This capacity to relate to students' experiences enhances the teacher-student connection, ultimately contributing to more effective language acquisition.

#### *4.2 Patience and Understanding*

A notable characteristic of NNESTs is their heightened patience with language learners. Drawing from their own experiences, these educators are predisposed to demonstrate greater tolerance of the mistakes that English learners make, recognizing and valuing the gradual process through which students acquire proficiency in the English language. This understanding stems from the fact that NNESTs have likely encountered similar challenges when learning English themselves (Selvi & Yazan, 2021). This empathy contributes to the creation of a supportive learning environment, which is essential to laying the groundwork for student success. In contrast, some NESTs may struggle to comprehend why certain linguistic structures or vocabulary bewilder their students, as these elements may appear straightforward and intuitive to them. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that this is not universal among NESTs, with many being highly empathetic and adept at addressing the diverse needs of their students.

#### *4.3 Multicultural Understanding*

Another considerable advantage carried by NNESTs is the broader cultural perspective that they bring to ESL/EFL classrooms compared with mainstream American or British teachers. NNESTs often possess a more profound appreciation for the diverse cultures represented in their classrooms, which enables them to cultivate richer cross-cultural knowledge among students. A survey conducted by Ruecker and Ives (2015) revealed that NNESTs are frequently more adept at integrating multicultural perspectives into their teaching, thereby enhancing students' cultural awareness and equipping them with the skills

necessary for effective global communication and cultural competence (Kurniawati & Rizki, 2018). This ability is particularly valuable in classrooms where students come from a range of cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, NNESTs' familiarity with both the culture to which the target language belongs and their students' local cultures allows them to bridge cultural gaps effectively, facilitating deeper intercultural understanding (Bayyurt, 2006).

#### *4.4 The Status as a Living Model*

The next characteristic is best understood through a discussion of claims related to the exclusive recruitment of NESTs. First, since NNESTs frequently make grammatical and pronunciation mistakes, they are unable to model the language in the best ways possible. By contrast, NESTs rarely commit errors and are therefore the most reliable exemplars of English language ability, justifying the belief that they should be the only ones allowed to teach it. These arguments fall apart upon closer inspection. Language educators and practitioners do not expect NNESTs to be at the same level as NESTs in all aspects of language. Indeed, an English teacher who makes an occasional grammatical, structural, or pronunciation error offers an advantage because learners see an imperfect living role model whose English ability is within their grasp. Learners realize that they can evolve into individuals resembling their teachers if they work hard to acquire English. Adara (2020) found that students often perceive NNESTs as more relatable and achievable role models, as their language proficiency represents a realistic goal for learners. This relatability can boost students' motivation and confidence in their own language-learning journey. Such a situation does not hold for NESTs, who may also have distinct accents that are difficult to emulate or may make and teach grammatical errors without realizing that their manner of speaking is, in fact, a non-standard variety of English.

#### *4.5 Ease of Identification*

The ease with which learners can identify with NNESTs paves the way for the cultivation of a natural rapport between them and their students. Learners often perceive such educators as relatable figures, which enhances their motivation to learn English. When students encounter difficulties or feel that mastering English is an insurmountable challenge, the presence of NNESTs serves as a tangible reminder that success is achievable, as their teachers have navigated similar linguistic challenges. NNESTs frequently share linguistic and cultural backgrounds with their students, which engenders a sense of solidarity and trust in the classroom (Chakma, 2020). This connection can significantly enhance students' engagement and willingness to participate. Pariyanto (2021) similarly argued that NNESTs' shared experiences with their students foster a deeper sense of trust and engagement, ultimately creating a more inclusive and motivational learning environment. The ability of NNESTs to establish strong identification and rapport with students represents a distinct advantage in EFL instruction.

#### *4.6 Enriched Insight into Language Structure*

Yet another remarkable strength of NNESTs is the rich insight that they have into the structure and usage of the English language compared with NESTs. A strong grasp of these linguistic elements is essential for effective language instruction, and NNESTs' understanding of them enhances the quality of their

teaching. Research has indicated that NNESTs, having studied the language formally, often possess a more thorough knowledge of grammar, usage, and punctuation than NESTs, who typically acquire these skills naturally. Through their formal studies, NNESTs have gained expertise in complex aspects of English, such as tenses, articles, and auxiliary verbs—areas that native speakers may use intuitively but rarely analyze or articulate with precision.

This explanation was further broken down by Önalán (2018), who elaborated that NNESTs frequently cultivate a more explicit understanding of English grammar, thus enabling them to explain complex structures more clearly. In the same vein, Zhang and Solarz (2022) asserted that NNESTs' meaningful grasp of the structure and use of English empower them to clarify complicated language patterns in a more precise and compelling manner for students. This analytical approach confers NNESTs a distinct advantage in helping learners navigate the intricacies of English.

## 5. Conclusion

The assumption that native speakers make more effective teachers is both flawed and restrictive. NNESTs bring unique and valuable skills to the classroom, including a deep understanding of the language learning process, patience, and cultural sensitivity. Empirical evidence and real-life examples demonstrate that well-trained NNESTs are often better equipped to meet students' educational needs than unqualified NESTs. To create a more inclusive and successful English education system, schools and institutions should shift their focus from linguistic background to teaching ability through concrete reforms. This can be achieved through blind hiring processes, the prioritization of teaching credentials, the establishment of collaborative endeavors between NESTs and NNESTs, and the delivery of professional development opportunities.

Stakeholders can ensure that teaching credentials are prioritized by implementing clear, standardized hiring criteria that emphasize professional qualifications over linguistic background. Establishing blind hiring processes—where applicants' linguistic backgrounds are concealed during the initial screening phase—can help reduce unconscious bias and ensure that hiring decisions are based on teaching ability and formal training. Additionally, providing hiring committees with training on equitable recruitment practices will reinforce the importance of credentials and demonstrate teaching effectiveness. Such training would help decision-makers focus on candidates' professional competence rather than their native speaker status, leading to more consistent and equitable hiring outcomes.

Creating a system explicitly dedicated to prioritizing credentials would further support equitable hiring. This system could take the form of a centralized certification database or an accreditation body that evaluates teaching qualifications and teaching performance based on objective criteria. Schools and institutions could use this resource to identify and verify well-qualified candidates while promoting consistency in hiring standards. Moreover, the system could serve as a platform for professional development, offering training programs and resources that reflect best practices in language teaching.

By establishing a structured and transparent system, institutions would be better positioned to attract and retain highly qualified teachers, regardless of their linguistic background.

Collaborative efforts between NESTs and NNESTs can also enhance the quality of language instruction by combining their respective strengths. Co-teaching models, where NNESTs provide grammatical and structural insights and NESTs offer conversational fluency and cultural context, would create a more balanced and effective learning environment. Peer observation and feedback sessions would allow teachers to learn from each other's techniques and adjust their methods, accordingly, fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Similarly, curriculum development workshops where NESTs and NNESTs collaborate to design balanced and culturally sensitive lesson plans would promote inclusivity and improve student engagement. Establishing mentoring programs, where experienced NNESTs and NESTs exchange strategies and support each other's professional growth, would further strengthen this collaborative environment and create a more unified teaching community.

Ensuring equitable hiring also requires targeted professional development initiatives. Teacher training programs that address both linguistic and pedagogical skills would ensure equal access to professional growth for NESTs and NNESTs alike. Implicit bias training for hiring managers and administrators would help reduce prejudice based on linguistic background, promoting a more objective evaluation process. Workshops on effective teaching strategies, highlighting the strengths of both NESTs and NNESTs, would foster mutual respect and collaboration in the classroom. Additionally, conferences and networking events encouraging cross-cultural understanding and professional exchange among language teachers would further strengthen the professional community and promote a more balanced teaching environment.

Although challenges such as institutional resistance or logistical barriers may arise, raising awareness among stakeholders and promoting equity in hiring practices can help overcome these obstacles. By focusing on teaching ability rather than linguistic background and fostering collaboration between NESTs and NNESTs, institutions can more effectively serve students and advance professionalism in English language teaching. Shifting the focus from nativeness to qualifications will not only improve educational outcomes—such as higher student proficiency, engagement, and success rates—but also create a more inclusive and equitable environment for teachers and learners alike. By valuing competence over nativeness, the field of English language teaching can move toward true equity, ensuring that every student has access to the highest quality instruction, regardless of their teacher's linguistic background.

### **About the Author**

Khalid Al-Seghayer is an accomplished Applied Linguistics scholar with over 20 years of experience in teaching, research, academic leadership, and translation. He holds a Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics from the University of Pittsburgh and has made significant contributions to the fields of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and second language reading. His expertise spans technology-enhanced

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