

“We’ve Got Some Non-natives Here Who You Wouldn’t Even Notice That They’re Non-natives”: Teachers’ Views on Speakerhood

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Abstract—In the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), divisions and essentialization are inherently embedded, calling for an urgent need to address the issues of inequity and favouritism on the basis of speakerhood status in diverse teaching contexts. The persistent use of the terms, native and non-native English-speaking teachers (NESTs/NNESTs), has polarized our understanding of English teachers without leaving a room for fluid identities and thus has created an essentialized binaries of Self and Other in many contexts. This world-wide view of English teachers, despite receiving a huge amount of criticism, still exists. This paper will allow English teachers from diverse socio-linguistic backgrounds to address these issues and to reflect on their experiences as English teachers in the Saudi context.

Index Terms—Dichotomy, English teachers, NESTs/NNESTs discourses, Saudi Arabia

I. INTRODUCTION

The literature has criticised the binary categorisation of English teachers as either NESTs or NNESTs for the way in which it essentialises and homogenises the Native and Non-Native Speakers (NS/NNS) identities, giving privilege and superiority to the NS category and, at the same time, turning NNS teachers into victims. The TESOL industry, however, appears to persist in upholding the image of an “idealised NS”, typically imagined as Caucasian and monolingual [1]. This is clearly seen in the discourses of bias against NNESTs and non-white NES in textbooks and job advertisements [2].

This study will explore if this typical image of the NS was also reflected in the teachers’ experiences in the Saudi Preparatory Year Programs (PYPs). It will also explore whether the teachers’ Self/Other representations were influenced by their orientation towards the NS fallacy, which co-exists with unequal power relations in TESOL. It presents the answer to the following research question: What do the participants think of the NS/NNS ideologies?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A significant body of research has shown that the discourses of colonialism, including that of the superior “Self” and inferior “Other”, continue to prevail in TESOL

and underpin the dichotomisation of English teachers into native and non-native speakers. These discourses of English native speakerism (i.e., the belief that NESs are the source of “Western culture” and therefore the perfect fit for English teaching) [3] and the native speaker fallacy (i.e., the belief that NESTs are better than NNESTs in teaching English) [4] are long-established in the TESOL sector, privileging NESTs and marginalizing NNESTs. These discourses have provoked a debate in the field from different aspects, including teachers’ competence [5], students’ preferences [6]; and NS norms [7]. The over-reliance of such oversimplified categories has resulted into discrimination in job advertisement and recruitment [8]. According to Selvi [9], defining teaching practices and competencies based on contested and static binary of NEST/NNEST is considered “reductionist and simplistic ways to construe teaching competencies with little or no consideration of the situated, historical, glocal and transformative facets of their identities” (p. 17). Rather, teachers in general need to be identified by employers and institutions based on their teaching skills and experience rather than their NS status, and this is the key to an egalitarian profession.

The teacher identity is an ongoing process of individuals’ construction of themselves and how they are being perceived as teachers in their teaching context [10]. It is shaped by their practical and discursive engagement in respect to multiple factors such as race, ethnicity, religion and other sociocultural premises [11]. Jane Danielewicz [12], in her book *Teaching Selves*, argues that being a teacher is not simply taking on a role, but it is the construction of an identity as a teacher. She associates identity with “our understanding of who we are and who we think other people are” (p. 10). Moreover, the ways in which English teachers interpret themselves and are recognised by others are often influenced by the discourse of “native speakerism”, which confers a sense of superiority or inferiority on them based on their nationalities, colours and accents [7]. However, the conceptualisation of the English teachers’ identities is potentially more complex than the simplified self-image of NESTs and NNESTs as other factors embedded in the teachers’ context, such as students, parents, colleagues and school systems, act as influential elements in the construction of teachers’ identities [13]. English teachers might internalise these factors “as part of their self-identification” or resist them “as they come into conflict ... with teachers’ personal values, role models, and previous experiences” [11]. That is, they might resist the subject position offered to them within a specific discourse to form a “counter-discourse” that helps them take up powerful subject positions rather than their previous marginal ones [14]. In fact, whichever meaning or

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discourse individuals want to express in a certain encounter is influenced by how their identity is being constructed and reconstructed. This process of identity negotiation and positioning can allow English teachers to assert their own identities as English language educators by moving between different discourses and social encounters. By doing so, the discourses individuals make are the medium in which their identities are shaped and their positions are selected.

Alshammari [15] has highlighted the necessity of moving towards capturing the diversity of contexts in which teachers from various linguistic, socio-cultural, and national backgrounds negotiate their identities as TESOL professionals. This line of scholarship lies within the NNEST movement [16], which supports the empowerment of NNESTs and challenges the dominant discourses. It emphasizes that there is no clear-cut division between the NESTs/ NNESTs categories and therefore increasing awareness of how complex decontextualized constructs play out through discourses, teaching practices and job policies may develop an inclusive ground for “multilingualism, multiethnicism, and multiculturalism” [9]. Contributing to the critical research within the NNEST movement and responding to the need for contextualised studies, this paper seeks to allow English teachers from different linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds working in the Saudi PYP context to reflect on the discourses of native-speakerism and the NS fallacy.

III. RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS, SETTING AND METHODS

15 English teachers working in two University foundation programs known as the Preparatory Year Programs (PYPs) were recruited. These teachers belong to three groups based on their speakerhood status: 5 native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), 5 non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) from overseas (i.e., non-Saudi NNESTs), and 5 Saudi NNESTs (i.e., local English teachers). They were selected purposively to represent the diverse population of English language teachers in Saudi Arabia and to explore the impact of their cultural identities on their teaching experience in the context of the study. Pseudonyms were used when reporting the participants' answers to ensure their anonymity.

In qualitative research, interviews are considered one of the most significant tools for gathering diverse perspectives on a phenomenon as they allow researchers to glean insights into participants' thoughts, perceptions and experiences through listening to their stories and interacting with them [17]. Given the fact that the current research aimed to capture a complex and detailed picture of the participants' experiences of teaching in the Saudi PYPs, semi-structured interviews served its purpose well. The interviews were conducted in English and only one of the interviewees used some Arabic phrases which I had to translate into English.

The purpose of this question was to allow the teachers to take a critical stance on the issues haunting their current job in particular and the TESOL profession in general.

IV. RESULTS

A. Questioning the Fallacy

This section reports the teachers' answers to the research question. It presents the teachers' expressed opinions regarding the contested assumption that NSs are the source of the English language and thus the “ideal” English teachers, the NS fallacy discussed by Philipson [4]. All the teachers disagreed with this NS myth and stated that being a NS does not guarantee being an ideal language teacher. Interestingly, the teachers used different arguments to question the NS fallacy and this section looks at these arguments in turn.

The first argument is related to competence to teach one's first language. Five teachers (two Saudis and three NNESTs from overseas) justified their answers by applying the assumption to their mother tongue and their (in)ability to teach it. Noor, a NNEST, for example, said “I'm a native speaker of Arabic, but it doesn't mean that I can teach Arabic well...Even being a native, it does not qualify a person to become a teacher of that language”. Similarly, another NNEST (Sofie) believed, “Speaking is one thing and being able to explain things is another”, and therefore she was not sure about her ability to teach her mother tongue as she stated:

“My native language is [a European language] and I taught [my mother tongue] last year but then realised, being a native speaker of it and being a very good English teacher, does not make me necessarily a very good [mother tongue] grammar teacher.”

Sharing NNEST status, these teachers contested the dominant discourses through emphasising the difference between the taken-for-granted first language competence and their fitness to teach their first language.

The others (five NESTs, three Saudis and two NNESTs from overseas) expressed their disagreement based on their definition of a “good English teacher”. These teachers reported that there are other factors that are of greater importance to the teachers' professional identity than NS status. Some teachers, for example, supported the belief that qualifications are what count, not NS status. According to Salma, a Saudi teacher, “There are some native teachers, but they're not qualified at all to teach this language even if it's their mother tongue”. Likewise, the answer of Lubnah (a NNESTs) was, “No, no, no, because in my experience proved me that the opposite [of the assumption that NESTs are better than NNESTs], but if you are a qualified person - whether you're native or non-native - you can be in a good job. It doesn't depend on the nationality”. The two answers suggest that the teachers believed that qualifications are more important than NS status. In support of their point of view about the importance of academic credentials in the teachers' profiles, Fatimah, a NEST, stated:

“Obviously the better qualified you are the better it is. If you have - if you can offer more that's definitely going to give more to the student. Yeah, if you have - obviously this is the thing not - very few people study Bachelors in Linguistics but then there are colleges... where they only recruit people that have specialised in linguistics. I think definitely the

better your speciality is of course you can offer more.”

With a different perspective on the value of qualifications, Tracy, a NEST, answered:

“I disagree a bit [with the belief that NSs are ideal teachers] only because I feel that you don’t have to be a native speaker to be an excellent English teacher. I do believe depending on what your level of study - as in how long you’ve been exposed to English.”

She recognised the importance of the qualifications in relation to the linguistic ability of English teachers. In her answer, qualifications show how teachers are exposed to English, their linguistic competence.

However, there seemed to be disagreement about the value of qualifications for NESTs. For instance, Farzanah, a NEST reported that qualifications were not enough if NESTs did not have the right command of English:

“I have seen native speakers who have the right qualifications but don’t have the right output in terms of speaking or writing English properly. Sometimes we’d be exchanging simple emails and I’ll be thinking, God she’s a teacher and if this is the email I’m getting in writing, what are her students receiving?”

The quote above does not align with the arguments about qualifications and challenges the linguistic competence of some NESTs. Similarly, Reem, a Saudi teacher, argued that the notion of the NESTs as ideal was “not necessarily” true, and “It [was] not fair in a certain way because some native speakers [were] not that good enough, because they [had] these qualifications but in classrooms they [were] not as good as some non-native teachers”. From her perspective, teaching ability was the deciding factor of a “good English teacher” as she stated, “I think the evaluation should be in the classroom itself, how to deal with the students, how to teach skills, because you’re teaching skills, how to teach skills appropriately”. Based on the participants’ answers mentioned above, what defines a “good English teacher” is not NS status; nor competence in English, alone; nor qualifications, alone. Rather, it is the combination of credentials, linguistic abilities and teaching skills.

The teachers in the previous paragraph reported the reasons why they rejected the fallacy, and what they thought were the necessary attributes of a good language teacher. Some of the teachers did, however, associate those qualities with one of the two groups, NSs or NNSs. One of the qualities is linguistic competence. For example, one NS (Tracy) believed that NNESTs were sometimes not good for the students, “depending on what [the students’] level of study [was and] how long [they]’ve been exposed to English”. From her point of view, NESTs and NNESTs were different in terms of linguistic competence as she narrated that:

“I have watched other teachers who are not native speakers teach. What happens is, depending on their level of strength, if they’re not an exceptionally strong speaker, as they’re speaking they’re leaving out - they’re dropping articles, they’re mixing up subjects and verbs. It’s just something that happens

naturally as a non-native speaker because you’re sort of processing and speaking at the same time and you’re not one of the stronger speakers. I feel that for students, especially who are learning, it’s a bit of a disadvantage because if you’re constantly hearing English being spoken to you incorrectly, you are processing it that way. On the other hand I have heard non-native speakers who are exceptional and they speak better than me. I just think it depends on the level and strength of the non-native speaker.”

Based on her experience, while there were some NNSs who were not a good resource for their students, she also knew NNSs who spoke better than her. There is, however, an opposition between “something that happens naturally as a non-native speaker” and being an “exceptional” non-native speaker. Her answer suggests that NNESTs are more likely to be linguistically incompetent, challenging the NNESTs’ English proficiency and their credibility as English language (teaching) professionals. Salma (a Saudi teacher) expressed agreement with her in the sense that only a minority of NNESTs could have high English competence as she stated, “Some Saudi teachers...are like native but they understand the students and their mistakes and why they’re doing their mistakes because of our Arabic language”. Her answer demonstrates that NESs are the benchmark of English linguistic competence and being “native-like” should be the ultimate goal of NNESTs. She also introduced another factor (shared mother tongue) which will be discussed later in this section. Another NEST (Farzanah) thought that NNESTs were able to reach high standards of proficiency like NESTs through studying in Inner Circle countries:

“They [NNESTs] can [have native-like standards of English], that’s what I’m saying. If the non-native was there and they’re working on themselves and they’re really - I mean we’ve got some non-natives here who you wouldn’t even notice that they’re non-natives. But then that meant that they went to England, they went to America, they’re really invested in learning English.”

This excerpt emphasises the teacher’s perception that some NNESTs can be “surprisingly” highly proficient as a result of studying in an English-speaking country such as the US and the UK. This also supports the notion that there is one gold standard and that NNSs need to be as close to being NS as possible. Other teachers highlighted the linguistic accuracy of NSs. Farzanah, for instance, believed in the NS myth insofar as it was related to “the output of the language, the correct output of the language”. She believed that NESTs were the “correct” source of English knowledge. Similarly, Alexandra, a NEST, in response to the question about the advantage of being a NS in ELT, articulated “I think it matters. Yeah, it adds. It helps, you know?”. She paraphrased her answer three times to attach more significance to the NS identity as an English teacher, supporting their professional status as teachers, because their speakerhood status helps them meet the English language requirements.

Teaching qualifications are essential job requirements for English teachers and these credentials, based on some of the teachers’ perceptions, were often lacking in the NESTs’ profiles. Noor (a NNEST), for example, pointed out the

importance of teaching qualifications and strongly argued that being an English teacher was different from being a linguistic model:

“Being a native language or a native speaker actually, is like well I know the language. Yes, I can speak it perfectly. But when I teach it, can I deliver it? Can I really be or connect to the students and their needs? We take it for granted. Now, I have my niece who is like four years old now okay. She’s about to turn five. We take it for granted that they should pick up the language from us, the Arabic language. But we’re not teaching them. I don’t sit with her and teach her how to speak proper Arabic. This is the case with the native speakers. They take it for granted that the students would pick it up from them. That’s—in my opinion I think that that’s totally different, than studying how to teach a language.”

In her quote, there is a clear othering of the NESTs as being merely privileged by their innate linguistic competence. Her answer supports the misconception that NESTs are employed due to “the primary basis of being a ‘native speaker’” [18] rather than being qualified professionals.

Sharing the students’ linguistic and social background is another important quality that often lines up with the teachers’ perceptions of NNESTs. In a quote mentioned earlier, Salma (a Saudi teacher) thought local teachers could understand the students’ difficulties and help them overcome these issues because they shared the students’ first language. Her answer overlooks the case of NESTs who share the students’ mother tongue as well. Sofie (a NNEST) also provided an essentialised view of NESTs as monolinguals and believed that they did not “know another language than their own”. In her answer, she failed to account for cases like those of the teachers in this study who are NESTs and bilinguals; three of them actually speak Arabic (two Muslims: Fatimah and Farzanah, one non-Muslim: Quin). Maha (a Saudi teacher) stated, “But I think we [Saudis] are able to understand our students more than native speakers who can deliver the language to them. We understand the cultural aspects of these students”. As a Saudi teacher, she viewed the cultural background and the social values shared with her students as an advantage that allowed her to understand the students better than NESTs [5]. This perspective was shared by another Saudi teacher (Reem):

“Some students need Saudi teachers because the Saudi teachers understand their mentality. How do they think, how they process the information, how they acquire the language, in contrast with the native speaker teacher...I understand my students more than the native speaker understand the Saudi students. So I think my students - for my students - they prefer me rather than the native speakers. Also when they move to the second semester, the teacher’s changed so they came to me sometimes and teacher please come back to teach us. For my students, I’m not talking about the other teachers.”

Reem asserted that sharing the socio-linguistic background of the students in the case of Saudi teachers could develop mutual understanding between the teacher and students. However, some of the native speakers did share some cultural

values with the students, or at least religious values such as Muslim NESTs like Fatimah and Farzanah.

Sharing the students’ language was not always perceived as an advantage. Tiffany, a NEST, stated:

“As far as non-native speakers are concerned, in my experience at University A I find that they teach English in Arabic. That’s the problem because the girls, when they move from example from a non-native teacher to a native teacher, I can see the difference.”

She believed that NNESTs used Arabic as a medium of instruction to teach English, making a point about the assumed disadvantage of sharing the mother tongue with the students. Falling in the trap of simplistic categorisation, she conceptualised all NNESTs as Arabic speakers in her teaching context, and this was not the case as Sofia, a NNEST who does not speak Arabic.

Some participants reported differences between NESTs and NNESTs in terms of knowledge about English; some teachers thought NNESTs have better knowledge of the language while others reported anyone could have that knowledge. Alexandra (a NEST) highlighted these differences between NESTs and NNESTs in her statement:

“I think we have more advantage[s] of it [English], just speaking more so naturally. But the - as far as the grammar, I find the foreigners - the non-natives - they know the grammar more in depth. Because this is what they study more so, than communication with speaking or writing.”

She perceived both groups as different and having strengths and weaknesses. She also stated that the notion that NSs are the ideal teachers was “not true” due to these differences:

“Because native teachers - we have it naturally, so sometimes the stuff that foreigners might say that we don’t catch or whatever - or they find it difficult, or something strange to what they might put together. It might be simple to us, you know? I think non-natives know what the language is and what the differences are in there, more so. Natives - we learn what the non-natives have difficulty with sequencing together, as far as word collocation and stuff like that.”

Self-ness and Other-ness are well presented in her answer. She referred to NNESTs repeatedly as “foreigners” and “you guys” while indexing NESTs as “we” and “us”, creating a Self/Other dichotomy. In contrast with the NSs’ innate communicative skills, NNESTs, from her point of view, were more knowledgeable and effective in teaching grammar due to their own engagement in language learning. This perspective is compatible with that of other studies in the literature (e.g. [5], [19]). However, she also mentioned, “Anyone can teach grammar and stuff like this, but the flow of it [English], the pattern of it, the speech of it. Yeah, it [being a NS] does matter. Because we [natives] know it naturally, and it comes out natural”. Her use of “but” produces a contrast between two statements. The first one is that “anyone can teach grammar” which is about the metalinguistic knowledge of English that is attainable for

“anyone”, challenging the professional status of NNESTs as not being the only experts in teaching grammar. The second one is about the productive skills, “the flow of it [English], the pattern of it, the speech of it”, that NESTs have “naturally”. According to Sarah (a NNEST), “sometimes non-native teachers find answers or answer students’ questions more accurately or more specifically than native speakers” because “they study specifically more about the language, about the grammar of the language”. Another NEST (Tiffany) also supported the argument about NNESTs as effective grammar teachers:

“I didn’t know all the technical terms. That is why I went to study. I can use the language, because I’m a native speaker. We can use the language, but sometimes we don’t know all the nitty gritty...we just take it for granted... I must say non-natives have a deeper understanding of the grammar than we do.”

She believed that NNESTs understood the grammatical rules better than NESTs whereas NESTs could use them. However, according to her, this grammatical knowledge was limited to explaining the rules without applying them to their language use:

“[NNESTs are] only speaking for exam purposes and they understand the grammar, they can do the grammar, but they can’t apply it in English writing. Because most of the teaching is taking place in an Arabic context. That’s my personal experience.”

Her quote seems to suggest a deficiency in the NNESTs’ grammatical competence.

Because of the associations of different traits with NS or NNS, some teachers talked about different roles for NS and NNS teachers. Since they would not argue that one group was always the ideal teacher for all students, there were different ideal teachers. For instance, Sarah (as an Arab NNEST) believed that choosing between NESTs and NNESTs depends on the level of students and the subject being taught:

“I think the natives and non-natives both have positives and negatives. Native speakers, they know more about the life there, the culture, blah blah blah. So in speaking, of course...for advanced levels, by the way. For beginners? No. I really recommend non-native speakers...Even if you don’t speak with them in Arabic, but still, you can understand them. So you can help them more. As a native speaker, she may not understand what they need. So advanced levels, of course. Their English is really good, so they need somebody to build up - to help them improve their levels, to be a little bit higher. For grammatical rules, as non-natives, we took them all our life. This is grammar, this is blah blah blah. You have to know the names, blah blah blah. As native speakers, they didn’t take it. They just learned it as a first language, as we learned Arabic. So when you teach grammar.... I think non-natives are better at teaching grammar. You mentioned writing. Well writing, it also depends. Again, I recommend native speakers in the higher levels... But with beginners? No.”

She reported that both groups of teachers have strengths

and weaknesses. Having said that, NESTs, from her perspective, perform well in speaking and writing and are recommended for advanced students “because really, they help students to polish their English, to make it better” while NNESTs are good at grammar and suitable for low-level students “because [they] can understand what they [low-level students] mean” in the sense that they share the same first language. Her answer fails to include NESTs who affiliate themselves with the Arabic speaking community and excludes the non-Saudis and non-Arabs from the NNEST category because they do not share the students’ first language. Moreover, her answer suggests that NNESTs cannot have high levels of competence and that the productive competence of NESTs cannot be challenged. Yet in her answer, she was also limiting NSs based on the assumption of their inability to have any grammatical knowledge. Similarly, one NEST (Fatimah) believed that NSs are needed for advanced students:

“You’re asking me whether I think native speakers are better, tutors of English, if you were to ask me about the whole of the preparatory year program I would say for the Levels A and B for humanities and science it’s not a problem. Anyone can teach what’s required. If you’re talking about this Category Level C we’re only talking about between, maybe one to two percent of the whole of the first year, then these students have been exposed to so much more language-wise, culture-wise and they come in. They can produce five paragraph essays; maybe they were raised in a different culture. I think for this category of student definitely native speakers are what’s needed.”

From the excerpt above, Fatimah was assertive about the high competence of NESTs as she believed that “definitely native speakers are what’s needed” for the highly proficient students. In addition, she contributed to the subordination of NNESTs by saying “for the Levels A and B for humanities and science it’s not a problem. Anyone can teach what’s required”. “Anyone” in this context includes people who are not NESs, suggesting that “anyone” can teach the content taught by NNESTs, undermining their professional status. She also challenged the linguistic competence of NNESTs by saying:

“I would probably say that generally speaking maybe for the 4500 students here that are in Category A and B and in humanities and also in the science. Perhaps it’s not so important to be a native speaker because English, the books that are covered are quite - you know they’re not as advanced.”

Her answer suggests that NNESTs are less competent in English language, better assigned to courses which people believe require no specialist skills and therefore, presumably, less able to teach across a range of levels compared to NESTs. Fatimah described proficient students as being more exposed to the English culture and language and as being “different to other Saudi students”. She also perceived these students as NSs:

“If you go into the Level C category which I teach and have done for the last four years [Arabic] then you have students, many of them are native speakers,

many of them have been exposed to cultures abroad. They will have taken their GCSEs; maybe they went to very good schools.”

She also believed that these students would necessarily be better served by NESTs rather than NNESTs:

“If you’re a native speaker, language is connected to culture isn’t it? Culture in the sense that the idioms that are used, the phrases, the expressions, humour even. All of these things come into the class as well as being a teacher and a role model and all of these things. That’s one aspect of the culture. If you’ve lived in a different culture then obviously you bring in a different aspect of the language which again would only appeal to a certain category. Right?”

She described the cultural knowledge of the English language as an exclusive merit of NSs compared to NNESTs. Her answers suggest the positive Self-image of NSs and the negative Other-image of NNESTs, creating a clear-cut distinction between the two groups. Her answer contests the distinction when she called the high-level Saudi students NSs of English. She reported that children of Saudi parents, born in the UK and/or schooled in the UK, could be native speakers of English, bilingual NSs of English. These students seemed to be further examples of people who challenged the NS/NNS distinction. In the literature review, many researchers [9] called for the shift to multilingualism in language teaching as a result of globalisation and the expansion of English in the world, which this study has also proved. Therefore, monolingualism cannot be the norm and the focus in ELT.

Throughout Fatimah’s interview, it was evident that Self and Other image coincided with NESTs and NNESTs categories in terms of linguistic, cultural and professional differences. She tried hard not to support the NEST/NNEST distinctions due to her awareness of the sensitivity of this issue, but there was an indication that NSs were superior to NNESTs in English teaching:

“I’m not saying all of them [students]; I’m saying in every class [in Level C] maybe there’s five or six. They’ve had more exposure so culturally maybe there’s more of a fit. Also in terms of the language level they produce. I’m not saying that if you’re a native that you can produce more language than a non-native but how could I put this because I have to be careful obviously. It’s good; you’ve asked a good question.”

Despite her resistance to promote the binary NS/NNS classification, Fatimah insisted on the role of NS status in English teaching in her answer, “The question was about native [speakers as the ideal English teachers] and I think it’s wrong but I think there is an element”. Her answer to “Would you prefer a native speaker who has a Bachelor’s in Business or a NNS who has a Master in TESOL, which one is suitable for the job?” was:

“For the category that I teach specifically? Oh, I would definitely say the native...I would definitely, for a Category Level C student that has maybe already been raised abroad, maybe her parents are physicians and she’s been exposed to so much

already, pronunciation is really key for instance. Respectfully sometimes you do find when you’re working with non-natives... you do find that sometimes when you sit and you’re sharing ideas there are differences.”

She favoured NSs with no English teaching qualification over NNESTs with an adequate English teaching qualification to serve high-level students. The way in which she compared qualified NNESTs with less qualified NESTs showed prejudice based on NS status and challenged NNESTs’ teaching competence. She also reported that NESTs and NNESTs were different and this “maybe has nothing to do with whether it’s native and only Allah knows because this is something again, it’s very recently come up and could be to do with knowledge of science even. You do find differences, differences in contexts, differences in meaning”. From her point of view, differences were not only linguistically- and socioculturally- based but might also be related to the knowledge of science, which may promote the image of elite educated NSs and the second-rate NNSs. The NNEST image she had was shaped by her social and professional relations with these NNEST teachers as her answer to whether or not NNESTs can teach high-level classes was as below:

“If you can teach the language الحمد لله [praise be to Allah] if you can but from my experience here and الله إن شاء الله [God willing] I’m being truthful, in the sight of Allah, nobody that’s a non-native will ever step foot inside a Level C medical category. That’s my personal observation.”

The way she constructed her opinion using repetition such as “if you can” and exaggeration such as “being truthful, nobody, ever” emphasise her point about the questionable ability of NNESTs to teach an advanced level. In addition, she believed that NNESTs were not confident enough to teach high level students and the reasons for this, from her perspective, were:

“I think it’s a lot of work; it’s so much preparation you have to put in. For instance the other day we did the first year project. Now the outcome of the project was the student would give a presentation but at one stage they write descriptions. Now obviously these girls they write a lot, they will write 240 words...and obviously you have to give feedback... I think perception about the students’ perception about how much work is involved, fear of maybe the class, the dynamics. Fear of not being able to deliver. These are just ideas but it would be really good I’d be so interested to find out.”

Through emphasising her empowering identity as a NEST and distrusting the NNESTs’ pedagogical efficacy, she unwittingly supported the NEST/NNEST dichotomy.

However, some teachers disagreed with this point of view regarding the inability of NNESTs to teach high-level students. For example, Noor (a NNEST) said:

“There are teachers [NNESTs] here who are doing their PhD. They are, I think, I believe that they are more than qualified to teach higher level of students. Even if these students are let’s say are IELTS 7.5.

They still learn from a teacher who is doing her PhD in English language.”

According to Noor, assigning NESTs to advanced students and NNESTs to beginner-level students was “a big division” and “discrimination”. She emphasised that if the teacher was highly qualified, she could teach high English levels, despite being a non-native. She also indicated, however, “A lot of higher levels of English here for example, they are given to native speakers. Just because they’re native”. She described the NEST identity as being based on birth. In her answer, she reported that recruiters or university employers maintained the easy fixed birth-right category of NSs by favouring them “just because they’re native” and disregarding all possible identity options derived from teaching competence, academic achievement and professional expertise.

To summarise, the participants’ answers demonstrated that NESs were seen as the benchmark of English linguistic and cultural competence, but not necessarily perceived as ideal English teachers. All the study participants argued against the NS fallacy, contesting the idealisation of the NS as the ideal English teacher. These teachers agreed on the image of “a good English teacher” as defined by their teaching skills, qualifications and linguistic competence (both communicative and grammatical knowledge). However, the participants attached different qualities to the NEST/NNEST identities. Some believed these two categories of English teachers needed different roles in ELT based on their strengths. However, the way these teachers defined the NS/NNS identities was influenced by the discourses of the NS fallacy and, specifically, by the notion of NSs as the gold standard of written and spoken English.

The disempowering effects of the NS fallacy and of myths that are associated with it, or indeed used to contest it, were manifested in their representation of the unequal comparison between NESTs and NNESTs through treating them as two exclusive opposite categories. For example, some participants described NESTs as monolinguals while more than half of the NEST group in this study spoke the students’ first language to some extent; some also thought the NNESTs were all Arabic speakers, which was not true either. Based on the data mentioned above, the NEST/ NNEST identities were represented by the teachers as two opposite categories using “they” and “we” with more emphasis on the positive image of the Self and the inferior Other. For instance, the argument made about which category, NESTs or NNESTs, is suitable to teach high level students was tackled from two different perspectives. From the perspective of NNESTs (e.g., Noor), it is a matter of qualifications (in the form of degrees, certification). According to NESTs (e.g., Fatimah), it is a matter of linguistic and cultural competence to which their place of birth gives them direct access. The teaching ability of NESTs, as presented in the data analysis, was more likely to be challenged – by the teachers - on the grounds of their qualifications while the teaching ability of NNESTs was more likely to be challenged on the basis of their linguistic and sociolinguistic abilities. Although there were those who praised the “Other” group or who admitted the weaknesses of their own, no one actually contested the easy division into NEST and NNEST.

V. DISCUSSION

All the teachers, regardless of their speakerhood status, explicitly rejected the NS fallacy, arguing that being a NS does not guarantee being an ideal language teacher. Some NNESTs contested the dominant discourses through emphasising the difference between the taken-for-granted first language competence and their lack of fitness to teach their own first language. Some teachers listed other factors and qualities that they considered of greater importance to the teachers’ professional identity than speakerhood status. However, these qualities would often resonate with the stereotypical, “perceived” characteristics easily linked with NS/NNS and reported in other studies in the literature. In other words, these categories influence participants’ discourses and the ways in which they construct Self/Other identities. For example, NESTs might be seen as linguistically competent but less able to build rapport with students while NNESTs might be seen as bad models for pronunciation but good at teaching grammar. These views are compatible with other studies (e.g, Ref. [5, 19]). Some participants also said there was no one ideal teacher, but there might be teachers better suited to different students or subjects. They believed that both NESTs and NNESTs have strengths and weaknesses: NESTs perform well in speaking (see in Ref. [20, 21]) and writing and are recommended for advanced students while NNESTs, best suited to teaching grammar [22] are suitable for low-level students as they share the same first language. This belief fails to include NESTs who speak Arabic and excludes non-Saudis and non-Arabs from the NNEST category because they do not share the students’ first language. It also suggests that NNESTs cannot have high levels of competence and that the competence of NESTs cannot be challenged whereas the study gave evidence of teachers who perceived otherwise (e.g. Farzanah and Alexandra (NESTs); Noor, a NNEST). The different perceived values associated with each category might recommend or limit either group of teachers, create a distinction between NESTs and NNESTs and lead to discriminatory practices in the teachers’ professional lives.

Based on the data analysis, the teaching ability of NESTs was more likely to be challenged on the grounds of their qualifications and professional standing while the teaching ability of NNESTs was more likely to be challenged on the basis of their linguistic and sociolinguistic abilities. In some of the NNESTs’ answers, there is a clear othering of the NESTs as being privileged merely by their innate linguistic competence, failing to acknowledge their professional identity. This perspective supports the misconception that NESTs are employed due to “the primary basis of being a ‘native speaker’” [18] rather than being qualified professionals. The study provides many examples of this misconception and examples about qualified expert NESTs. However, one NEST (Fatimah) in the study believed she was hired due to her nativeness, disregarding all her other qualities derived from teaching competence, academic achievement and professional expertise. She also explicitly expressed her preference for underqualified NSs over NNESTs with a proper English teaching qualification to work with high-level students. The way in which she compared qualified NNESTs with less qualified NESTs suggested prejudice based on NS status and challenged

NNESTs' teaching competence. She also reported that NESTs and NNESTs were different and this distinction was not only linguistic- and sociocultural-based but might also be related to the knowledge of science, which may promote the image of elite educated NSs and second-rate NNSs [1]. Regarding the linguistic competence which the NNS is presumed to lack, some participants (e.g., Salma, Noor) expressed their belief that NNS can in fact attain the same level of linguistic competence. Nevertheless, if we contest the NS fallacy by saying that NNS can be native-like, we fundamentally are not contesting the fallacy. We are still acknowledging the superiority of one model. Therefore, the belief that native-like competence is a predictor of, or that it can guarantee "good teaching practice", needs to be reconceptualised as it serves to strengthen the dichotomisation between the "superior" NESTs and "inferior" NNESTs in the TESOL profession.

VI. CONCLUSION

The findings indicated that all the teacher-participants, regardless of their NS status, explicitly rejected the NS fallacy and gave different reasons for contesting it. The teachers defined the qualities of a good English teacher beyond the NS/NNS dichotomy. They believed that the professional identity of English teachers depends on the teachers' linguistic abilities, teaching skills and academic credentials. However, these qualities would often be aligned with the stereotypical, "imagined" characteristics typically associated with NSs/NNSs. Despite the fact that the fallacy was rejected, these categories influence participants' discourses and the ways in which they construct their identities. Based on the teachers' perceptions, speakerhood status has resulted in discrimination and bias in terms of job recruitment, security and payment among them. However, other aspects, beyond the linguistic-bound NS/NNS emerged. The findings indicated that the binary NEST/NNEST classification is a Self/Other dichotomy, which, based on the NESTs' interview data, serves to marginalise "the Other" in the creation of the superior "Self-image" of idealised NESTs, and based on the NNESTs' answers, creates an opposition between the victims (highly-qualified NNESTs) and oppressors (less-qualified NESTs; idealised NSs).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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