

Program Administrators' Perspectives on the Recruitment of Native and Non-native English Speaking Teachers

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Abstract

The present study aimed to investigate how administrators of foreign language schools prioritize their criteria for recruiting English language instructors and specifically what importance they place on an instructor's being a native English speaker. To that end, the participants were invited to consider not only Turkish teachers of English as the non-native group but also the foreign teachers coming from different nationalities whose native languages were not English. Data were collected by means of a questionnaire completed by the administrators of foreign language schools at three state and four foundation (non-profit) universities located in İstanbul, Turkey.

Results of the study indicated that although there was a consensus on teaching demonstration, teaching experience and educational background as the most important criteria, different practices regarding recruitment of non-native English-speaking teachers were reported.

Keywords: native English-speaking teachers; non-native English-speaking teachers; teacher recruitment; recruitment criteria

Introduction

The scholars in the field of English language teaching have reached a consensus on certain points regarding the position of English among other languages in the world: “the fastest growing language in the world” (Mahboob, 2005), “a lingua franca” (Seidlhofer, 2006), and “a global language” (Crystal, 2012). English is spoken all over the world and not restricted to

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one country or nation; therefore, it is the language of international communication, politics, trade, and education as well as being the official or national language of a considerable number of countries. As it is a language prevalent all over the world, the number of non-native speakers exceeds the number of native speakers by a ratio of three to one (Crystal, 2012), which challenges the ownership of English (Widdowson, 1994) and makes the definition of the term “native speaker of English” controversial.

As English has been recognized as an international language, it is hard to make a distinction between native and non-native speakers of it linguistically; “it happens to be nonetheless socially present” (Moussu&Llurda, 2008, p. 316). This reflects itself as a discrimination against non-native speakers, and causes “native speaker fallacy” (Phillipson, 1992). This fallacy which portrays native speakers as better teachers is acutely observed in educational settings. However, there is a significant number of studies that focus on the dichotomy of native versus non-native teachers of English and literature reports on different advantages of both groups in teaching. While native English speaking teachers (NESTs hereafter) have better command in vocabulary, idioms, colloquialisms, and slang” (Lasagabaster& Manuel-Sierra, 2005; Reves&Medgyes, 1994), and in oral communication skills (Pacek, 2005), non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs hereafter) are better in dealing with learning difficulties of students and feeling empathy for their students, having had a second language learning experience (McNeill, 2005).

This misconception of native speakerism leads to “unprofessional favoritism” (Medgyes, 2001) in teacher recruitment practices even though only 20% of English language teachers in the world are native speakers (Canagarajah, 2005). Employability of NNESTs is questioned because of their accent and credibility (Maum, 2002) and it has motivated the present research to investigate whether the status of applicants as native speaker or non – native speaker affects their employment opportunities.

The studies conducted on recruitment processes of NESTs and NNESTs can be classified regarding the context they have been carried out in based on Kachru’s Three Circles of English Model. Mahboob (2003), the first researcher studying the employment issue of NNESTs empirically, investigated the hiring processes of 122 college-level intensive English program administrators in the US – an Inner Circle setting. Data were collected by means of a questionnaire in which the participants were asked to rate the given hiring criteria in terms of importance. Results showed that teaching experience, educational experience, and recommendation criteria were among the top criteria and followed by being a native speaker criterion. Moreover, it was concluded that there was a negative correlation between the importance assigned to being a native speaker as a criterion and the employment chances of the NNESTs since the administrators who valued the criterion more had fewer NNESTs than NESTs in their programs.

In a similar context, Mahboob, Uhrig, Newman and Hartford (2004) examined the hiring processes of 118 college-level English program administrators in the US, by asking them to rank a list of criteria for hiring language teachers. The findings suggested that the administrators

mostly value teaching experience followed by educational experience and recommendations rather than being a native speaker. However, NNESTs had a very low proportion of employability in the given setting.

Moussu (2006) investigated the hiring practices and beliefs of the administrators at college-level Intensive English programs also in the US. According to the participating administrators, NNESTs' lower self-esteem, poor self-confidence, grammar-focused approach, and foreign accent were shortcomings while their pedagogical skills, understanding of students' difficulties, and high expectations were among their strengths. Additionally, the administrators noted that in terms of teaching NNESTs could become as good as native speakers. While being a native speaker was not necessarily a criterion in their hiring process, they emphasized the need for linguistic readiness and international experience in addition to teaching experience.

One of the earliest studies on the issue of NNESTs' employability conducted in the UK – another Inner Circle setting – was done by Medgyes (1992). During his presentation in a conference held in the UK in 1991, Medgyes wanted nearly 60 ELT specialists to imagine themselves as the principal of a commercial ELT school in Britain and asked them to state how they would employ instructors by choosing one of the following options: (a) only native speakers, even if they were not qualified EFL teachers, (b) native-speaking EFL teachers, but if hard pressed I would choose a qualified non-native rather than a native without EFL qualifications, and (c) the native/non – native issue would not be a selection criterion (provided the NNEST was a highly proficient speaker of English). Results showed that while none of the respondents agreed that they would employ only native speakers, even if they were not qualified EFL teachers, around 40 of them stated that they would employ NNESTs, but if hard pressed they would choose a qualified non-native rather than a native without EFL qualifications and the rest claimed that the native/non-native issue would not be a selection criterion (provided the NNEST was a highly proficient speaker of English). The researcher reported that because of insufficient time, he could not ask for justification of their choices.

In the UK, the first empirical study on the employability issue of NNESTs was conducted by Clark and Paran (2007). They worked with 90 employers of ELT instructors at private language schools, universities and further education institutions. At the end of the study, they concluded that the employers valued teaching qualifications, performance in job interviews, and teaching experience the most. When employing native speakers was an option, a large majority of respondents considered it either moderately or particularly important.

Helal (2008) worked with six program administrators of further education colleges in the UK to investigate their hiring practices of English teachers. Findings of the questionnaire and interviews showed that (i) the most important criterion in the employment of English teachers was their teaching qualification, (ii) native speakerism was not a significant factor in hiring practices, (iii) and accents of teachers were legitimate as long as they were intelligible to students.

Zhang and Zhan (2014) conducted a similar study in Canada with six NNESTs and six administrators to examine ESL program administrators' perception of the criteria to be used in hiring NNESTs. Teaching skills and language proficiency were regarded as the most important components by administrators while they were identified as major challenges by NNESTs.

Unlike the previously cited studies in which participants were asked direct questions and thus had plenty of room for 'idealist' answers, Alenazi (2014) utilized a more indirect research methodology to elicit information on hiring practices. He conducted a study with 56 recruitment committee members for hiring EFL teachers at Saudi higher education institutions to answer whether they prioritize NESTs to teach in their institutions even if NNESTs are more qualified. In addition to asking them to rank a set of criteria (academic qualification, accent, nationality, being a native speaker and teaching experience) according to their importance in the recruitment process, the researcher also included a listening task in which the participants were required to listen to five different applicants' recordings. The participants were asked to state whether the applicants were native speakers of English, how qualified they were, and predict which nationality they might be, and then the participants were asked to rank all the applicants according to whom they would hire first. Along similar lines with the previous research, the participants reported that they valued academic qualification and teaching experience most. The findings of this study revealed, however, that NNESTs were less favorable since the recruiters assigned more importance to criterion of being a native speaker. The findings of the listening task showed that when asked indirectly, the participants valued native speakership most and stated they would employ NESTs even if there were more qualified NNESTs among the applicants.

In Turkey, employment opportunities offered to NESTs and NNESTs is an issue mostly discussed informally. As an Expanding Circle country, Turkey is an EFL setting popular among NESTs and the prevailing understanding of the target in ELT (i.e. native speaker-like performance) has fueled this popularity, which sometimes leads to questionable recruitment of English teachers. Given the situation, there is only one study investigating this issue of employability in Turkey. Tatar (2019) focused on the recruitment processes of local (Turkish) and expatriate teachers of English and collected data from administrators of 94 private primary and high schools in Istanbul by means of a questionnaire. Results showed that although being a native speaker of English was reported as one of the least important criteria by all administrators, it was attached more importance by the administrators from schools that employed both expatriate and local teachers.

Motivated by the significance of the problem in the Turkish setting and the insufficient body of research focusing on the issue, the present study problematizes the recruitment practices of NESTs and NNESTs in the Turkish setting, particularly at the tertiary level. The absence of an established and systematic mechanism for the employment of "foreign" English language teachers further supports the need for such research. Insight into the rationale for a preference towards a NEST or a NNEST will reveal the underlying native speakerism or lack thereof that

is strongly operational in the recruitment processes. Therefore, in order to address how the recruitment decisions are made when there are both NEST and NNEST applicants and explore the impact of various factors governing the process as well as investigating the overall impact of native speakerism on the process, the present study has formulated two interrelated research questions:

1. What are the administrators' priorities in the selection criteria for recruiting English language teachers?
2. What are the administrators' opinions regarding NEST and NNEST applicants?

Method

Participants and Setting

The data were collected in the 2018-2019 academic year from administrators of foreign language schools at three state and four foundation (non-profit) universities located in İstanbul, Turkey. These foreign language schools offer English language courses to their students who are required to pass English proficiency exam before they start to receive English medium instruction in their major departments. Demographics of the participating foreign language schools are given in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographics of the Participating Institutions

Name of the university	Total number of students	Ratio of international students	Total number of instructors	Number of NS instructors	Nationality of NS instructors	Nationality of NNS instructors
A	2400	15%	120	7	American, British, Canadian	Turkish (107), Persian (1), Russian (1), Azerbaijani (1), Jordanian (1)
B	2010	0,5%	117	2	British	Turkish (110), Russian (2), Dutch (1), Georgian (1), German (1)
C	750	1%	52	5	American, British	Turkish (46), Polish (1)
D	3000	10%	130	7	American, British	Turkish (121), Colombian (1), Romanian (1)
E	150	1%	20	2	American, British	Turkish (17) Russian (1)

F	2580	1%	200	2	British	Turkish (184), Persian (1), Greek (2), Albanian (1)
G	3200	6%	92	12	American, British	Turkish (78), Armenian (1), Greek (1)

7 administrators participated in the study. Average age of the administrators was 45. Five of the administrators held PhD degree while the other two graduated from a master's program. The average experience of the participants in the field of education was 23 years. While two of them had experience for more than 10 years as an administrator, the others had 5-10 years of experience. Three of the administrators were familiar with the concept of World Englishes through courses, seminars, and research articles on the issue, however the rest of them were not.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for the study were collected by means of a questionnaire consisting of three parts: (i) demographic information, (ii) criteria for job applications and statements related to native and non-native instructors adapted from Alenazi (2014), and (iii) open ended questions. The first part of the questionnaire included personal demographics such as the participants' age, academic degrees, experience in the field of education as an administrator, and institutional demographics such as total number of students, ratio of international students, total number of instructors, number of NS and NNS instructors and their nationalities. The second part was adapted from the original questionnaire and consisted of (i) seven criteria scored on 6-point likert-type scale ranging from X (not applicable) to 5 (very important) and (ii) eight statements rated on 5-point likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The seven criteria given the participants to be ranked in the order of importance were; accent, nationality, educational background, native speakership, teaching experience, teachings demonstration, and recommendation. The participants had place to provide their comments on the criteria and the statements, if any. The third part of the questionnaire included four open-ended questions for further opinions.

The procedure was organized according to the preferences of the administrators. Some of them preferred face-to-face interviews and made comments on the points while completing the written questionnaire. Whereas, some administrators completed the questionnaire with open – and closed-ended parts and sent it via email. When the interview sessions were held, they were conducted in English and voice recorded with the participants' permission.

Descriptive statistics were applied to analyze the quantitative data coming from the likert-type scale items on the questionnaire. On the other hand, qualitative data obtained from responses to open-ended questions and comments of the closed-ended items were analyzed

by means of pattern coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Miles and Huberman (1994) identified three stages for qualitative data analysis: Data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The researchers, working collaboratively with another English instructor of the department, reduced the oral/written comments into smaller units to examine the emerging themes of answers in order to have accurate and reliable data.

Results

After collecting demographic information of the participants and their institutions, they were asked whether they were the only decision makers in the recruitment process or there was a committee for hiring instructors. All of the participants stated that their institutions had a recruitment committee mostly consisting of foreign language school administrator, vice administrator, testing, curriculum, and level coordinators. For foundation universities, the rectorate was also among the decision makers.

When asked to indicate how important the following criteria were for them in recruitment processes, the participants responded as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2
Recruitment Criteria

Criterion	Not applicable (f)	Not important at all (f)	Relatively unimportant (f)	Somewhat important (f)	Moderately important (f)	Very important (f)	Mean
Teaching demonstration	-	-	-	-	2	5	4,71
Teaching experience	-	-	-	-	3	4	4,57
Educational background	-	-	-	1	1	5	4,57
Accent	-	-	-	2	2	3	4,14
Recommendation	-	-	1	5	-	1	3,14
Being a native speaker	-	2	3	-	2	-	2,28
Nationality	-	2	4	1	-	-	1,85

*f=frequency

Giving a 'teaching demonstration' was considered the most important criterion, followed by 'teaching experience' and 'educational background' as most of the participants reported them to be very important. One of the participants explained that she assigned so much importance to the 'teaching demonstration' because it allowed her to see not only theoretical knowledge but also practical teaching skills of the applicant instructor. Although 'nationality' and 'being a native speaker' were the least important criteria according to administrators, 'accent' was regarded moderately important as most of the administrators emphasized that the instructor should have a 'clear' and 'intelligible' accent.

For the next part, the participants were asked to rate the statements according to their level of agreement. The findings are shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Opinion Statements

Statement	Mean
6. I usually employ non-native speakers because native speakers are hard to attract.	4,00
1. Native and non-native speakers may have the same teaching abilities.	3,57
2. Non-native speakers can understand and deal with the learning difficulties of my students better than native speakers.	2,85
8. The students in my department prefer to be taught by English native speakers.	2,57
3. I prefer non-native speakers over native speakers to teach in my department.	2,42
4. I prefer native speakers over non-native speakers to teach in my department.	1,71
5. If I could, I would employ English native speakers only.	1,57
7. I prefer to employ native speakers to teach in my department even if their qualification level is lower than that of non-native speakers.	1,42

The sixth statement received the highest rating among the others and revealed that almost all of the participants agreed that it was hard to attract native speaker instructors to work for them. To explain the reasons, one of the participants stated: “It was already difficult to meet their expectations related to salary and workload, now with the current political tensions it is even harder to convince them to work with us”.

According to the responses to the first statement, the majority of the participants agreed that NESTs and NNESTs may have the same teaching abilities. They claimed that teaching skills were independent of being a native speaker but rather related to their educational background, personality, and dedication to the profession.

For the second statement which argued that NNESTs could deal with difficulties of students better than NESTs, most of the participants were not sure because it would depend on each individual teacher’s approach. One participant explained why he was not sure by saying:

Non-native speakers, if they are Turkish, may understand the difficulties of the students since they had the same learning experience with English. However, native speakers as well can show some empathy for the students only if they have learned a foreign language, Turkish or any other. That is why I always ask native speaker candidates whether they know any other languages or not, as I believe that it is an advantage for student learning.

Most of the participants did not seem to be sure about the 8th statement which claimed that students preferred to be taught by NESTs. One of them explained his opinion by saying:

The feedback we get from students reveal that they enjoy being taught by native speakers at the very beginning but especially towards the end of the academic year they seem to appreciate NNESTs more since they benefit from them more in terms of grammar explanations and detailed constructive feedback on writing tasks.

The third, fourth, and fifth statements were all about administrators' preferences for employing NESTs or NNESTs, and the majority of them disagreed on preferring one over the other – that is, viewing one superior to the other. One of the participants summarized why it did not matter as follows:

It does not matter to me whether the instructors are native or non – native as long as they are qualified, motivated, and open to professional development. The only reason I would like to have instructors from different countries in my team is to create an international and multicultural learning and teaching environment. It is not only advantageous for students but also for the staff, and it goes in line with the philosophy of our university encouraging diversity.

Most of the participants strongly disagreed with the seventh statement “I prefer to employ native speakers to teach in my department even if their qualification level is lower than that of non-native speakers”, as being a native speaker was not their priority but teaching qualification mattered most. They further added that being a native speaker did not guarantee sufficient teaching skills.

For the last part of the questionnaire, the participants were asked to answer four open-ended questions for further opinions. When they were asked whether they had any other criteria such as specialized experience, knowledge, or academic qualifications, they all mentioned similar expectations and underlined the importance of “showing effort and spending time for professional and self-development”, “having teaching experience in the higher education, especially in the context of Turkey”, “dedication to the work itself”, and “good command of IT skills”. Moreover, it was found out that CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults) and DELTA (Diploma in Teaching English to Speakers of Other) certificates were preferred by administrators and regarded as a plus when compared to others who do not have any of these.

The next open-ended question asked whether the administrators looked for any specific personal traits or attitude during the recruitment process. Key concepts commonly mentioned by the administrators were “patience”, “perseverance”, “enthusiasm”, “motivation”, “attainment”, “professionalism”, “positivity”, “good rapport with students”, “being a good team worker”, and possessing “a sense of belonging to the institution”.

When asked whether there was any nationality they favored in recruitment, none of the administrators specified any nationality as privileged; however, they mentioned that they tended to hire candidates from nationalities which they used to work with and appreciated.

In response to the last question, the administrators claimed that they did not prioritize native-like proficiency or being a native speaker in recruitment process, as the excerpt below illustrates:

We definitely look for a firm educational background and proficiency in English but not in terms of native-like pronunciation or accent but having good command of language and being accurate and fluent enough to set a good example for students.

Finally, it is worth noting that despite not providing her reasons, one of the participants reported that she would prefer to recruit NESTs if she were to choose between two candidates with very similar educational backgrounds and comparable teaching qualifications.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study investigated the administrators' priorities in the selection criteria for recruiting English language teachers. Teaching experience and educational background were reported to be among the most important criteria, which is in line with the findings of Mahboob (2003), Clark and Paran (2007), and Alenazi (2014). Although those studies were conducted in different countries (i.e. the US, the UK, and Saudi Arabia respectively), the similarity of their educational settings (i.e. tertiary level) may have led to similar findings. The participants' strong disagreement with the statement: "I prefer to employ native speakers to teach in my department even if their qualification level is lower than that of non-native speakers" confirms that teaching qualifications matter more than being a native speaker. In addition to teaching qualifications, educational background and recommendation were the most valued criteria in the previous research (e.g. Alenazi, 2014; Mahboob, 2003; Moussu, 2006; Zhang & Zhan, 2014). While the most valued criterion in the recruitment process was found to be teaching demonstration in the present study, this criterion was not included in most of the previous studies or appeared to be one of the least valued criterion. According to the administrators in this study, teaching qualifications and experience were listed as mostly used and dependable criteria, however, without a practical application, those qualifications did not seem to be enough on their own and not necessarily a certain indicator of best teaching practices. This finding of the present study may imply that the administrators wanted to see evidence of practical teaching skills in addition to the theoretical knowledge of candidate instructors.

When specifically focused on the extent to which administrators of foreign language schools place importance on an instructor's being a native English speaker, and the findings revealed that being a native speaker was among the least important criteria. The participants underlined the importance of intelligibility and reported that rather than looking for native speakership, accent, or a specific nationality, they would expect understandable and clear use of language from candidate instructors, which is consistent with the findings of Helal (2008). Even though the participants did not value being a native speaker as a significant criterion, they might have a tendency to favor native speaker instructors, as one of them reported she would prefer a native speaker over a NNEST when both candidates have the same qualifications. This finding is consistent with the results of another study (Alenazi, 2014) focusing on a similar educational setting in another expanding circle country. This similarity may imply that although

the administrators in these two expanding circle countries (i.e. Turkey and Saudi Arabia) are well aware of the importance of the teaching qualifications and experience, they seem to be somehow still under the effect of “native speaker fallacy” and more inclined to choose native speaker teachers to work with. Therefore, it may be concluded their conceptual understanding of World Englishes is not totally reflected in their practices which may be due to long held beliefs and practices of employing native speakers for better results.

As concluded, different perspectives regarding the recruitment process for “foreign” English language teachers were available in different institutions. This result could have a direct implication for policy makers. As it is the case for English language teachers with a Turkish nationality, some official regulations based on objective criteria could be made by the Council of Higher Education regarding the recruitment process of “foreign” English language teachers. With the help of such an established and systematic mechanism, the recruitment processes could be more transparent and reliable. In addition to such systematicity in the process, the administrators need support with clear cut guidelines regarding an approach to replace native speakerism – one that is based on the current understanding of English as a global lingua franca and a renewed conceptualization of its ownership.

The present study has some limitations in terms of number of participants and the location of institutions. So, further studies might be conducted with a larger sample located in different parts of the country, rather than focusing on one big city, to have more generalizable results. Additionally, data in this study were collected by means of questions inquiring about their perceptions of their institutional recruitment processes, which may have provoked idealist answers from the administrators. In order to provide insights about possible practices, further research might adopt more indirect data collection methods such as asking the participants to watch teaching demonstration recordings of various applicants from different nationalities, with different accents, varying educational backgrounds/ experience and state whom they would hire justifying their choices.

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