Native English-speaking Teachers (NESTs) in the Minority: How Do Three NESTs at a University in Türkiye Perceive Their Professional Identities?

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Research Article

Native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) in the minority: How do three NESTs at a university in Türkiye perceive their professional identities?

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Abstract

This research paper explored the experiences of three NESTs working at a Turkish university dominated by local ELT practitioners. In-depth interviews with the participants combined with lesson observations were implemented with an aim to gain a deeper understanding into how their professional identities were affected by their working conditions and how they adapted to being the only native English-speaking teachers at their university. The findings showed that the participants' sense of responsibility and pressure to fit an idealized model of a NEST negatively affected their professional identities. The participants devised several strategies to adapt to their working environment such as modifying cultural content to accommodate for their students' monocultural background. In addition, their working conditions hindered their ability to establish close ties with their professional community. Further studies in this area can implement a longitudinal design to explore how a similar working context affects the long-term development of NESTs' professional identities.

Note(s)
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» This paper is part of a PhD study.

Author(s)' statements on ethics and conflict of interest
Ethics statement: I hereby declare that research/publication ethics and citing principles have been considered in all the stages of the study. I take full responsibility for the content of the paper in case of dispute.
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Introduction

The debate over nativeness in ELT can be traced back to the 1980s with its understanding gradually transforming from a more narrow perspective related to the first language learned (Cook, 1999) to a much wider and inclusive understanding aimed at defying political and social factors influencing nativeness (Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 2001). Together with the definition, qualities traditionally associated with NESTs such as authenticity and pedagogical superiority have also been questioned. Native speakers were perceived as having ownership over their native language which legitimized them to make judgements about its authenticity and grammaticality (Davies, 2003). However, Rivers and Ross (2013) observed that this ideology extended mostly to White, male teachers from the inner-circle which aggravated the marginalization of teachers who identified themselves as native-speakers but did not fit this model. In contrast to the idealized view of nativeness, the current discourse on NESTs seemed to be dominated by the critique of the past ideologies and discussions of the native-speaker myth (Breckenridge, 2010).

Teacher identity is believed to have a major impact on deepening our understanding of language learning and teaching (Ko & Kim, 2021). Acknowledging the importance of researching teacher identity as well as the interplay between nativeness and identity formation, researchers sought to explore how the ideology of native-speakerism impacts NNESTs' teacher identity (Chun, 2014; Doerr, 2009; Medgyes, 2001), leaving the issue of NESTs' identity understudied (Breckenridge, 2010; Ko & Kim, 2021, Tajeddin & Adeh, 2016). Aneja (2016) called for researchers to move away from fueling the dichotomous relationship between NESTs and NNESTs, and turn their attention to "developing identity-driven approaches to understanding their individual experiences" (p. 573). Breckenridge (2010) voiced the need to study the influence of an idealized NEST model on actual NESTs, predicting that it can be detrimental for their professional identities. Ko and Kim (2021) reiterated the call for more research on NEST identity and stressed the importance of examining "individual NESTs' professional identities separately to illuminate both shared and unique aspects of their identity through multiple data sources" (p.9). The aim of this study is to answer these calls and add to the understanding of NESTs' professional identity by exploring experiences of three NESTs working at a state university in Türkiye.

Literature Review

Many researchers began to study the impact of nativeness and native-speaker ideologies on NESTs' professional identities (Ko & Kim, 2021; Simon-Maeda, 2004; Trent, 2016). Breckenridge (2010) narrated her own experience as well as the stories of two other NESTs working in Korea and shed light on a number of factors that exerted a negative influence on their identity formation. She found that NESTs were objectified and treated as resources rather than legitimate professionals. Similar findings were presented by Lawrence and Nagashima (2019) in their duoethnographical study of their teaching experiences in Japan. Both participants felt objectified by their students, proving that the status of a native-speaker can have a dehumanizing effect on NESTs.

The importance of establishing a friendly classroom atmosphere with an aim to create a friendly rapport with students is a common theme in studies on NEST identity (Breckenridge, 2010; Guo et al., 2021; Ko & Kim, 2021). This goal was shared by two NESTs teaching in Korea (Ko & Kim, 2021). The teachers believed that a comfortable and informal atmosphere was a vital

component in encouraging their students to speak. However, in contrast to the widely held belief in NESTs' ability to teach speaking skills, Liddicoat (2016) examined data from online chat rooms and discovered that their status can actually deter learners from speaking out of fear of embarrassment. The relationship between NESTs and their students was also researched by Guo et al. (2021) whose multiple case-study of four NESTs working in China proved that a strong relationship with students strengthened the participants' teacher identity despite cultural differences and challenges connected with a lack of supportive community.

One challenge explored in many research studies on NEST identity is alienation from the local community of practice. Lankveld et al. (2017) identified a sense of connectedness as having a reinforcing effect on professional identity. Unfortunately, extant literature on NEST identity strongly indicates that different linguistic and cultural backgrounds often cause NESTs to feel alienated. Samimy (2008) described the experience of an American preservice teacher joining a seminar dominated by NNESTs. Despite a strong desire to be accepted as a legitimate member of the community, Samimy's participant was initially ostracized and openly criticized for joining the seminar. Furthermore, an idealized view of NESTs as excellent teachers can cause school administrations to limit the amount of professional support and development opportunities available to them (Jeon, 2009). Yim and Ahn (2018) explored the stories of four NESTs working in South Korea. They observed that entering a community of local ELT practitioners was particularly difficult for inexperienced NESTs whose teacher identity was not validated or recognized. Nevertheless, even experienced NESTs with well-established professional identities can struggle to achieve a sense of belonging in their new communities of practice (Charles, 2019; Howard, 2019; Kim, 2012).

Another issue that is central to the current study is the concept of professional identity. In reflection of the multifaceted and complex nature of professional identity, it has been defined in various ways and with an emphasis on different aspects of its understanding (Beijaard et al., 2004). There are several conceptualizations of professional identity that are important for this study. First of all, the researcher adopted Gee's (2000) view of identity as an "interpretive system" (p.107). Gee viewed identity as a performance in which "people have to talk the right talk, walk the right walk, behave as if they believe and value the right things'' (Gee, 2014, p.24). This understanding of identity will be instrumental in exploring the relation between the NEST status with its ingrained expectations and norms and identity development. What is more, since the participants of the study are in the extreme minority compared to local ELT teachers, Wenger's (1998) emphasis on the role of community in identity formation will be conducive to the exploration of the role of working environment in the development of professional identity. In addition, in accordance with Wenger's belief in the salient connection between identity and practice, one of the researcher's aims was to observe how NEST identity manifests itself in the participants' teaching practice. Finally, since the NEST status was externally assigned to the participants of the study based on their cultural background, the concept of ascription of identity will also be drawn upon by the researcher (Day et al., 2006).

Drawing from Gee's (2000) conceptualization of identity as being recognized as "a kind of person" (p. 99) and Day's et al. (2016) ascription of identity, the current study sought to gain a deeper insight into the potential impact of the NEST status on the participants' professional identities. Finally, adopting Wenger's (1998) understanding of the intrinsic connection between identity, community and practice, the researcher aims to gain an insight into the interplay

between the participants' working environment, their classroom practice and their professional identities. The current study was guided by the following research questions:

1.   How do three NESTs at a state university in Türkiye perceive themselves as ELT practitioners?
2.   How do they adapt to teaching in a monocultural working environment?
3.   How is their classroom practice shaped by their professional identities?

Methodology

Research context

All participants were employed at a preparatory school of a state university in Türkiye (Table 1). At the time of this study the university employed 42 Turkish teachers of English and 3 NESTs who were also the participants of the study. Barbara and Susana' responsibilities included teaching general English to students at different proficiency levels ranging from A2 to B2. Apart from his teaching responsibilities, Mohammad was also a member of the testing workgroup at the university and his role was to proofread all exams before they were distributed to students. According to the educational system at the university, language skills at the preparatory school were taught in an integrated way, which meant that the participants were responsible for teaching all skills to their students. The university organizes approximately two obligatory team-building activities every year, usually at the end of the academic year. The activities included staff picnics and dinners. All participants could speak Turkish to a varied extent. Barbara and Mohammad described their knowledge of Turkish as limited whilst Susana was an advanced speaker of Turkish.

Table 1. Information about the participants (pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identities)

	Barbara	Mohammad	Susana
Nationality	British	British (born to Iranian parents)	American
Education	PhD in ELT	PhD in Linguistics (in progress)	MA in ELT
Teaching experience	15 years, including 6 years in Türkiye	12 years, including 3 years in Türkiye	8 years, including 5 years in Türkiye

Data collection

The qualitative approach to research was adopted by the researcher owing to its focus on exploring individual experiences of participants and the idiosyncratic differences between their perceptions of their realities (Heigham & Croker, 2009). The qualitative approach is commonly used in identity studies as it facilitates a deeper understanding of how participants perceive their professional identity in a given context (Breckenridge, 2010; Mannes, 2020; Yim & Ahn, 2018).

The data for this study were collected over a period of one month and consisted of three stages. In the first stage, the researcher interviewed the participants to gain a more general understanding of their professional identities and working context. Each interview lasted for about 60 minutes. In the second phase of data collection, the researcher observed three hours of the participants' lessons at the university. Finally, data collected in the first interview and during class observations were used as prompts in follow-up interviews which lasted about 45 minutes. In the follow-up interviews, the participants had an opportunity to share their own thoughts on the lessons observed by the researcher. The choice of interviews as a data collection tool was guided by the belief that they allow the participants to share their experiences in a detailed and unconstrained manner. Data collection process was enriched by lesson observations in accordance with the assumption that classroom practice is strongly connected to professional identity (Breckenridge, 2010).

Data analysis

Data from all stages of data collection was analyzed in an iterative fashion with the researcher moving back and forward between the data and contrasting codes emerging from interviews and observations (Heigham & Croker, 2009). The interviews were transcribed and read several times in order to identify emergent codes. Data gathered from interviews were compared and contrasted with the researcher's observation notes in order to ensure data triangulation (Ko & Kim, 2021). Research questions were frequently referred to in order to guide the researcher in the coding process (Patton, 2002). The codes were then grouped into more general categories. Finally, a cross-case analysis of the participants' experiences was conducted and the data were organized around broader themes.

Trustworthiness

The credibility of the current study was established through member checking and data triangulation. The participants were presented with the transcripts from their interviews and given an opportunity to add or change any passages. In addition, capitalizing on the participants background in ELT research, they were also able to comment on the codes identified by the researcher. This ensured reliability of data in both data collection and analysis (Rallis & Rossman, 2009). The use of two different methods of data collection increased the reliability of the participants' accounts as their perceptions of their professional identities were contrasted with actual classroom practices observed by the researcher (Ko & Kim, 2021). Finally, allowing the participants to reflect on the observed teaching practices during follow-up interviews allowed the researcher to collect and analyze information about motivations behind the participants' behavior in class.

Findings

NEST status

Barbara identified herself as a NEST, and she felt that her students expected her to conduct her classes in a specific way that they associated with foreign English instructors. Some of these expectations were even explicitly stated by her students. For example, as soon as she entered the class, a few of the students stood up and exclaimed in excitement: "Teacher, what game are we going to play today?". What followed was a vocabulary-oriented lesson with three

different collaborative, fun activities with the students being fully engaged and active. Although expectations of having fun in class were in line with her own teaching philosophy, Barbara revealed that she felt pressure to deliver "the same quality of teaching" in every lesson. She felt that her NEST status combined with her actual teaching practice created a reputation that she had to maintain in order not to disappoint her students. The pressure was intensified by the fact that she was one of very few NESTs teaching at the university.

> *They want me to be different, they expect me to have a different teaching style, more relaxed, full of fun and engaging activities. Sometimes it's hard to keep up with this reputation because, you know, students talk. They talk about me with other students and the reputation spreads. Even when I have a bad day, I need to be consistent. Who else is going to do it here?* (Barbara, I2)

Mohammad's mixed cultural background had a strong impact on his identity as a native speaker of English. Due to him identifying as a Muslim as well as his foreign-sounding name, dark hair and dark skin, he felt that he could not fully identify himself as a British person, even though he was a British citizen. He was also aware of the fact that the combination of his British accent and his "foreign" appearance confused a lot of his students.

> *They see my name and they start wondering. If my name was Tom Smith, whatever, typical British appearance it would be different. There is a conflict. You are not fully British.* (Mohammad, I1)

Susana described her NEST status as both a benefit and a challenge. She found that her students had an "elevated perception of Westerners" and they were curious about her life in America. Unlike Mohammad, she did not refrain from teaching culture and familiarizing her students with American traditions and customs. On the contrary, she considered her culture to be a powerful motivating tool she could use in her classes. However, she was also aware of the fact that her "elevated status" as "a NEST from the West" might create a distance between her and her students and even discourage them from learning English. In order to minimize the negative effects of the NEST status on her students, she actively tried to "bring her status down"

> *I also think when they look at something in western culture, western countries, something elevated, they also see the English language as something unachievable.* (Susana, I2)

Susana developed two strategies of lowering her status that she found to be effective in her classes. The first strategy was to show genuine interest in her students' cultural background. Her goal was to show her students that their culture is not inferior to hers and their life experiences are not less meaningful just because they were not born in the West. For example, in the lesson observed by the researcher, the class discussion came to the topic of football and she asked multiple questions to her students about Turkish footballers, Turkish football league etc. Another strategy was using Turkish in class. In contrast to Barbara who repeatedly used a few Turkish words with an intention to add humor to her lessons, Susana often spoke full

sentences in Turkish during her lessons. She felt that using Turkish was not something her students would expect from a NEST and, as a result, they ceased to see her as an "outsider".

> *So the minute a Turkish word comes out of my mouth, I break all the breaks, gone.*
> *I am Turkish in their eyes and they start to feel comfortable. It's just kind of a card*
> *I have in my pocket that I can pull out.* (Susana, I2)

Teacher roles

Barbara felt that placing importance on speaking skills was intrinsically connected to her status as a NEST. Although this expectation was not overtly stated by her students, she felt that as a NEST, her role is to "activate" her students to speak in class. During the observed lessons, she asked many open-ended questions to her students and devoted the majority of her lesson time to speaking activities. However, she realized that her desire to activate her students in speaking activities was hindered by the students' passive nature.

> *In the classroom context I feel like the students are really dependent on the*
> *teacher. They come with the idea that the teacher should do everything and they*
> *just sit there and do absolutely nothing. And I worked to change that. It was one*
> *of my focus areas of teaching Turkish students.* (Barbara, I1)

In parallel to Barbara's views, Susana also emphasized teaching speaking skills as a core value in her teaching philosophy. She perceived speaking as the most important skill when learning a foreign language and she saw this belief as an essential difference between herself and local teachers who, in her opinion, failed to "push" their students to speak in their classes. As a result, she felt that her responsibility was to "push" the students even more in order to compensate for the lack of effort of local ELT practitioners.

> *I think that language is more about speaking than anything else. I push speaking*
> *all the time. If I keep doing what other teachers have done, their speaking is always*
> *going to be the worst.* (Susana, I1)

Susana felt that since she was "different" from local teachers, both in the sense of her linguistic background and teaching philosophy, her role at the university was to "bring difference". The difference she wanted to make in her students' lives was not only to boost their speaking skills, but also to teach them how to think critically and express themselves.

Mohammad displayed a strong confidence in his role as a vocabulary teacher. Echoing Susana's opinion, he felt that as a NEST, his role is to offer something different to his students, something that cannot be found in local ELT teachers' classrooms. According to him, the difference he could bring was providing his students with deeper vocabulary knowledge. He emphasized the role of context in mastering English vocabulary, and he strongly felt that only a native speaker of English can access information about authentic, contextual use of words. He described contextual vocabulary teaching not in terms of a choice made by him as a teacher, but as a responsibility of every NEST, in particular those who teach at educational institutions dominated by local ELT practitioners. He strongly believed that being a NEST, especially in a

monocultural environment, came with a set of clearly formulated expectations and norms, one of such expectations being authentic and contextual vocabulary teaching.

> *I am feeling I am having to do more explaining about the context and certain semantic issues to them. I feel there is more pressure on me to live up to the expectations of a NEST. What does a native speaker bring? There is a use. There are certain things that native speakers know in terms of contextual use of language that is not really found anywhere easily. I feel sometimes it's kind of a pressure to live up to that, make a real difference.* (Mohammad, I1)

Relationship with students

Since her role as an activator was a crucial building block of her NEST identity, Barbara displayed persistence and determination in changing her students' attitudes towards learning. She felt that, although engaging students in speaking activities can be challenging in all teaching contexts, it was particularly demanding in Türkiye due to the reliance on teacher-centered classroom practices which she noticed when observing her local colleagues' lessons. Instead of imitating their practices, Barbara decided to maximize her efforts and felt it was her "responsibility" as a NEST to change the teacher-student dynamics her students were used to.

Similarly to Barbara, Mohammad also voiced difficulties with activating his students. The lack of responsiveness and engagement on the part of his students could also be observed by the researcher. When discussing art in class, he chose to explain several words that were not presented in the textbook. Despite his efforts, students did not even choose to note down any of the words in their notebooks. He received a similar indifferent reaction from his class when talking about the role of art in people's lives. Students remained silent and only one person attempted to answer one of his questions. When asked about this situation in the follow-up interview, Mohammad traced his students' lack of engagement back to the educational system in Türkiye and its overreliance on analytical thinking skills and assessment.

> *They seem to demand a lot more but in terms of how to pass an exam or a test, that's where their mind is most of the time. Many of them are not taught to speak, they are taught to learn structures.* (Mohammad, I2)

Mohammad believed the way he taught was much more informal and flexible than what his students were used to. Similarly, not sticking to the order of activities or adapting textbook content was not in line with the more "teacher-centered" and "systematic" approach to language learning they experienced in Türkiye. As a result, he felt different from local teachers both in what he taught and how he taught.

> *I have noticed the way Turkish lecturers teach and the way I teach is different. Turkish students expect, a kind of, quite a systematic, traditional approach to learning, "here you have this exercise, now we will do this, we will go over this, here's a quick overview and get to work". My approach is much less formal, and they seem to be taken aback by this.* (Mohammad, I2)

Difficulties in activating students were also experienced by Susana. She described her students as being "programmed" not to question anything, focused on receiving information instead of producing something. When asked about the reasons for the apparent lack of creativity she observed among her students in the follow-up interview, she attributed it to the educational system. Looking back, she perceived her struggle with achieving her teaching goals in Türkiye as a maturing experience which pushed her to develop her creativity.

> *When you ask them a question and ask them "what do you think about that?" they say "nobody has ever asked me to think about it". It seems like they were just programmed to do something, match up a formula and do an equation or something.* (Susana, I2)

> *I think it develops me. I have to practice different ways of engaging students. Now I am so good at coming up with exercises, I am a genius. I didn't even know I could do that.* (Susana, I2)

However, in contrast to her desire to teach "differently", Susana's class bore a lot of characteristic features of a teacher-centered lesson. The amount of time students were engaged in speaking was limited and the majority of the lesson was spent on carefully following pages in the textbook, without adding any extra content (vocabulary- or culture-related). When asked about this apparent discrepancy between her teaching philosophy and the actual classroom practice in the follow-up interview, she stated that she was constrained by the assessment system at the university. She feared that if she departed from the textbook, she might miss an important word or structure that could be given in final exams.

Adapting to a monocultural teaching context

During the interviews, Barbara emphasized the importance of having fun in class. She felt that such an entertaining aspect was deeply ingrained not only in her teaching practice, but also her personality. She reported that the fun element came natural to her and her students when she taught in an international context. However, upon coming to Türkiye, she quickly realized that her humor was not understood by Turkish students. Since the fun element was such an integral part of her identity, she chose not to abandon it, but adapted it to the new context. Barbara developed her knowledge of Turkish culture and customs by watching Turkish TV and listening to how her students communicate and what they talk about. Her knowledge of Turkish, though limited as she described it herself, also played a vital role in introducing a fun element to her classes. A few strategically used Turkish words amused her students and became a stable part of her classroom routine.

> *So, I started implementing Turkish-related things in English classes. Even if they are very small Turkish words. For example if a student gets something I explained wrong, I would just go like; "Ayıp (shame), come on, we have just explained that". It became like my brand word or something.* (Barbara, I1)

Apart from being an "entertainer" and an "activator", Barbara saw herself as a "facilitator". As a "facilitator" she felt that her role as a teacher is to make learning easy for her

students. This was one of the reasons, apart from the fun aspect, why she chose not to use the students' textbook to teach a vocabulary lesson and opted for group activities instead. She believed her students would be able to help each other and work together to brainstorm target vocabulary. What is more, Barbara's role of a "facilitator" extended to cultural content. Having taught Turkish students for many years, she developed an insider's knowledge of what cultural content is and isn't appropriate or effective in her teaching context. Topics that were perfectly understood by her international students, failed to engage her Turkish students. As a "facilitator" she felt responsible for identifying and modifying cultural content presented in the textbook in order to maximize students' engagement and give them opportunities to express their opinions in class. One such example was the concept of New Year's resolutions which, although extremely engaging among her international students, is quite unfamiliar and foreign for Turkish students. Instead of asking her students to share their resolutions, like she used to do when teaching international students, she modified it into a group vocabulary activity aimed at teaching collocations.

Similar to Barbara, Mohammad also chose to adapt his teaching practice as well as the content of his lessons as a result of working in a monocultural environment. In parallel with Barbara's observations about using cultural references in class, he also learned that certain types of cultural content might be misunderstood or even openly rejected by his Turkish students. However, unlike Barbara who tackled cultural content by adapting it into a different activity (e.g. a vocabulary activity), Mohammad chose to limit any references to "the Western culture" to an absolute minimum. He feared that incorporating such content into his lessons might be interpreted by his students as "cultural propaganda".

> *There is no such thing as just learning a language without any baggage. There is always going to be some kind of cultural baggage. If you are teaching people English, you are also teaching them an interpretation of the culture. There might be unintended propaganda.* (Mohammad, I2)

Susana observed an incompatibility between cultural content found in students' textbooks and her students' actual life experiences. In consequence, she believed that in order to engage her students in speaking activities, she also had to modify what she taught. One example of this was the topic of traveling which she covered in one of the classes observed by the researcher. While the speaking activity in the textbook called for students to share their experiences of traveling to a foreign country, Susana asked them to discuss the last time they traveled to a different city in Türkiye.

> *I switched up things because if you are asking Turkish students "what countries have you been to?" and I know that 90% of them haven't been outside Türkiye then this book is clearly not working well with Turkish students. So you have to, if you are a good teacher, adapt.* (Susana, I2)

Relationship with the professional community

Barbara felt that she was not fully integrated into the professional community at her university. She felt that her outsider status was particularly visible during staff meetings when

local teachers switched to Turkish even though they were aware of her limited knowledge of their native language. Although she emphasized the fact that her local colleagues are friendly and welcoming, their everyday conversations at the office usually only involved them asking her questions about English words they are not familiar with. She saw it as an opportunity to share her knowledge and welcomed such questions as a way of offering support to her colleagues.

Mohammad also found himself providing commentary on authentic vocabulary use to his colleagues. He described being frequently asked by local teachers to verify if a certain word fit a given context, similarly to Barbara. However, unlike Barbara who described such practices in positive terms, Mohammad's portrayal of such interactions was underlain with negative language such as "pressure" and feeling "self-conscious". The fact that he was one of very few NESTs at the university further intensified the number of such interactions and the pressure to answer his colleague's questions.

> They are asking me questions in English about certain language use. I kind of feel self-conscious because here I am and I can't say "I don't know". If I say "I don't know" then it's like- what am I here for? You feel aware that you are amongst a small minority. (Mohammad, I1)

What is more, the fact that his responsibilities as a proof-reader in the testing office were different from his colleagues' duties, emphasized his role as a verifier or controller of language and created distance between him and his colleagues.

> I am kind of left out of the whole, most of what they are involved in, the stress of the exams, the whole business. I am just there as a person to check if it is up to the standards, I am in the team, but not fully. There is a boundary there at some level. (Mohammad, I1)

Susana purposefully distanced herself from her professional community dominated by local teachers. The reasons for her decision were irreconcilable differences in her own approach to teaching and the attitude she observed among her colleagues. Similarly to Barbara who saw herself as a "facilitator", Susana was of the opinion that a successful teacher should find a way to make things easier for their students. In contrast to her beliefs, she found that her local colleagues "blindly followed the rules even if they made life difficult". As a result, she remained friendly towards her colleagues but chose not to discuss her teaching style or teaching philosophy with them and never asked them for professional advice, although she admitted she was sometimes in need of professional support. Similarly to the other participants, she was often asked about the use of English words and idiomatic expressions.

Discussion

The influence of NEST status on teacher identity

All participants of the study emphasized their role as teachers of speaking. They felt that, as native speakers of English, they were better equipped to hold conversations with their students and improve their speaking skills. Barbara saw herself as an "activator" and she sought to maximize her students' opportunities to speak English in class, believing that they might not have an extended opportunity to do so outside her classroom. On top of activating their students'

speaking skills, Mohammad and Susana felt that their role as NESTs also involved developing their students' critical thinking skills and creativity. At the same time, this sense of responsibility was heightened by the fact they were the only NESTs at the university. A review of extant literature on the roles of native speakers in ELT shows that teaching speaking is a common expectation which many NESTs hold. Ko and Kim (2021) studied the experiences of two native speakers teaching in Korea and found that, similarly to the participants of the current study, they saw themselves as facilitators of speaking with their primary aim being to maximize their Korean students' opportunities to speak English. Similar results were found by Tajeddin and Adeh (2016) who questioned one hundred NESTs on how they perceive their identity and found that they focused on teaching speaking skills rather than grammatical content. NESTs who participated in Yim and Ahn's (2018) study also described themselves as "English role models" and felt that focusing on speaking skills was the best way in which they can model English for their students. The transformative role that Mohammad and Susana wished to play in their students' critical thinking skills, was also observed by Guo et al. (2021) in their study of four NESTs in China with one participant, in particular, quoting the use of his cognitive skills as a way to "exert broader and deeper influences on students" (p.252).

The word that was used frequently by all participants and was perceived as a defining aspect of their identities was "difference". They were aware that their linguistic and cultural backgrounds differentiate them from other teachers at the university. All of them accepted this "different" status and perceived it more in terms of a duty or a responsibility rather than a choice. When this sense of responsibility was challenged by the local context in which they were teaching, it created pressure. The sense of pressure was least articulated in Barbara's case. It can be hypothesized that, as the most experienced teacher among the participants, she felt more confident in her own methods and approach to teaching. The pressure that Susana felt was a result of the conflict between her flexible teaching style and the constraints of formal assessment. Although her opinions about the role of NESTs remained unchanged, her classroom practice underwent a significant change towards a more structured, teacher-centered approach to language teaching. The lack of concordance between a NEST's teaching philosophy and formal assessment has been documented in previous studies on NEST identity. For example, Johnston (1999) narrated experiences of British teachers working in Poland. The teachers often felt that they were expected to teach their students how to pass exams and any content that would not be tested during exams was deemed useless by their students and the management. In the case of Mohammad, the pressure of being "different" was most evident in the way he described his interactions with local ELT teachers. He believed that as a native speaker of English, he had to know everything about his native language and any hesitation on his part could threaten his status in the eyes of his colleagues. He often referred to his struggles as trying to fit a model, a mold of an ideal NEST with unlimited knowledge of English. Zyl (2016) warned that political, social and cultural theories on the status of native speakers can produce "superficial and harmful guidelines for our narratives of self and other" (p.44). Such guidelines could, in turn, lead to feelings of pressure and inadequacy. Similarly to Mohammad, Breckenridge (2010) experienced pressure when working in Korea. Strict expectations of what a NEST should and shouldn't do as well as rigid rules regarding their teaching practice forced her and other participants of her study to rebel against being perceived as a resource. The objectification of a NEST is, however, still

visible in Mohammad's account of his teaching experience in Türkiye and it continues to exert a lot of pressure on him and his teaching identity. Mohammad's desire to conform to the "ideal model" of a NEST, might be seen as an attempt to compensate for his mixed cultural background. Discrimination of NESTs on basis of their appearance was documented by Amin (1999) who observed that students exhibited a strong tendency to associate being White with being a native speaker of English. Such bias can lead to the marginalization of some NESTs as documented by Kubota and Fujimoto (2013). NESTs in their study felt marginalized by their Japanese students and management who failed to accept them as native speakers of English due to their race.

Relationship with local teachers

In their systematic review of literature on university teachers' identity, Lankveld et al. (2017) highlighted the importance of a supportive community in developing and nurturing teacher identity. However, if teachers are not able to find support and guidance from their colleagues, the development of their identities can be suppressed. Due to their different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, NESTs working abroad can often find integrating into their new community to be a challenging, if not even an impossible endeavor (Yim & Ahn, 2018). Jeon (2009) observed that even though the NEST status can command respect, it does not necessarily allow NESTs to instantly become full members of their professional communities.

In line with this observation, none of the participants of the current study felt that they were fully integrated into their community. The interactions that Barbara, Susana and Mohammad had with their colleagues placed them in the role of verifiers of language. In Mohammad's case, this role was even formally acknowledged due to his position as a proof-reader. In parallel to Mohammad's experience, McConnell (2000) discovered that NESTs administrative duties in their communities are often limited, and they are excluded from decision-making processes. As a result, even though their workload might be lighter in comparison to local teachers, it also deepens their feelings of alienation from their communities (Kim, 2012). Susana intentionally distanced herself from her colleagues due to their different attitudes to teaching which also entailed that she was not able to receive any professional support that an effective community of practice can offer. Breckenridge and Erling (2011) warned that frustration caused by not being understood or accepted by one's professional community can deter NESTs from seeking professional development opportunities. Mohammad was the only participant who asked his local colleagues for pedagogical advice, but he was also the one who felt most self-conscious about answering all his colleagues' questions. Being asked to verify the correctness of a word or an utterance is a common type of interaction between NESTs and local ELT teachers. Participants in Johnston's (1999) study recalled being treated as ultimate sources of information about English with their local colleagues accepting their linguistic judgments without any doubts. Davies (2003) pointed out that native speakers are believed to possess an insider's knowledge of their native language which automatically puts them in a position of "sources to which we appeal for the 'truth' about the language" (p. 1). Breckenridge (2010) observed that NESTs are often viewed and referred to as "arbiters of the language who can verify language accuracy" (p.139). However, if a teacher has any self-doubts about the legitimacy of his status, they might "become imposters, required in spite of themselves to behave as if they were legitimate experts" (Creese et al., 2014, p.943). Thus, the feelings of self-consciousness and

pressure experienced by Mohammad could be traced back to the doubts he had about his NEST status.

Relationship with local students

Lankveld et al. (2017) listed contact with students as a greatly impactful element in the development of teacher identity. Interacting with students can give teachers a sense of purpose and professional satisfaction. Taking this into account, it is not surprising that all participants of the current study stressed the importance of creating a friendly and informal atmosphere in their classes in order to build a harmonious relationship with their students. Barbara's efforts to forge such a relationship manifested itself in her reliance on fun, collaborative activities as well as a strategic use of Turkish words. On the other hand, Mohammad struggled to engage his students in his classes and although his principal aim was to encourage his students to speak, they remained quiet. Liddicoat (2016) suggested that a NESTs status, especially when elevated, can actually discourage students from actively participating in language classes. Fear of making a mistake in front of an expert user of English can cause paralyzing anxiety in some students. It is possible that classroom dynamics observed in Mohammad's class might have been a result of his NEST status. The low number of NESTs at the university meant that many students did not have an opportunity to interact with a NEST in their previous classes which could further intensify their anxiety. Echoing Liddicoat's assumption (2016), Susana believed that her elevated status as a NEST could hinder the relationship with her students. She also felt that showing an interest in local culture combined with using Turkish in class can help her to create a better rapport with her classes. Intentionally lowering one's status in order to forge better relationships with students was also documented by Ko and Kim (2021) who narrated how one of their participants tried to "break down the stereotype" to make her students feel less anxious in class. Kim (2017) who studied four NESTs employed at a Korean university found that, similarly to the participants of this study, they prioritized creating a comfortable and friendly atmosphere in their classrooms in order to make their students feel relaxed and maximize their engagement. All participants in the current study described creating a friendly and informal atmosphere as a challenging process and identified students' past educational experience as the main culprit. They all painted a picture of Turkish students as passive and dependent learners who prioritize assessment over critical thinking. Guo et al. (2021) suggested that "holding an essentialized view of culture and stereotypes towards students impedes professional identity development" (p.257). Whereas Susana chose to partially conform to her "essentialized" beliefs about Turkish students and their expectations by imitating local teachers' practices, Mohammad and Barbara remained determined to change their students' attitudes to language learning.

Culture

Barbara, Susana and Mohammad adapted their teaching practice to account for the homogeneous cultural background of their students. The most noticeable change was the implementation of cultural content. Susana and Barbara capitalized on their knowledge of Turkish culture and society to modify activities from their students' textbooks. In contrast, Mohammad feared that adding cultural content can be perceived by his students as promoting

Western values so, instead of discussing culture in his lessons, he chose to focus on expanding his students' vocabulary knowledge. Mohammad's fear of spreading "unintended Western propaganda" in his classroom is also corroborated by Simon (1992) who discussed the intertwined nature of teaching pedagogy and politics. The refusal to promote values associated with the Western culture was also depicted by Amin (2001) in her study of minority immigrant teachers in Canada. For example, she found that some of her participants adapted listening materials used in class in order to incorporate a wider variety of English accents instead of using only those which she perceived as "White accents" (p.97).

Conclusion

The current research study narrated the experiences of three NESTs working at a university in Türkiye and provided a deeper understanding of the impact NEST status can exert on NESTs' professional identities and their classroom practice. It was found that all three participants had similar perceptions of what their role as NESTs involved. Among the similarities, focus on speaking, creative thinking and creating a friendly, informal learning environment can be listed. All three participants described working in a monocultural environment as a challenge and the area they struggled most with was adjusting their teaching practices to the new context in terms of incorporating cultural content and transforming their students' attitudes. Furthermore, it was established that the fact that the participants were in a significant minority intensified the sense of pressure they felt to perform their self-attributed roles.

Limitations and Further Research

There are several limitations to this study. First of all, a study with a longitudinal approach could be more successful at capturing the process of the participants' identity development. Secondly, all participants in this study were experienced ELT practitioners. Contrasting the findings of this study with accounts collected from novice NESTs could offer a deeper insight into what role teaching experience plays in NESTs' identity development. Based on the findings of this study, important implications can be formulated for NESTs working abroad as well as their employers. As suggested by other researchers (Guo et al., 2021; Ma, 2012; Rao & Yuan, 2016) more opportunities for professional collaboration between NESTs and NNESTs are needed to facilitate community building. Moreover, the current study exhibited the importance of being open to local cultures and showcased benefits of incorporating teachers' knowledge of their students' culture into their classroom practice. Taking this into account, it is important for NESTs to familiarize themselves with local culture and customs in order to avoid making assumptions about their students based on cultural and societal stereotypes (Breckenridge, 2010; Guo et al., 2021).

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