



## Expatriate Non-native English-speaking Teachers' Challenges and Coping Strategies in the Turkish EFL Classroom: A Qualitative Study

### Anadili İngilizce Olmayan Yabancı Öğretmenlerin Türkiye'de İngilizcenin Yabancı Dil Olarak Öğretildiği Sınıflarda Karşılaştıkları Zorluklar ve Başa Çıkma Stratejileri: Nitel Bir Çalışma

Wrood Hashim Sahib ALTAI\* 

Burcu GOKGOZ-KURT\*\* 

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**ABSTRACT:** The global demand for teachers of English has led to an escalation in the number of non-native English speakers traveling overseas to teach English. Although teaching English abroad is typically associated with native English-speaking teachers hailing from inner-circle countries, it has also become commonplace to see non-native English-speaking expatriate teachers being hired. Yet, studies probing into expatriate non-native English-speaking teachers' experiences have been sparse, particularly in the context of Turkey. This study endeavors to explore the challenges and coping strategies of expatriate non-native English-speaking teachers who worked in private schools and language programs in Turkey. To collect data, semi-structured interviews were conducted, and the analysis revealed that teachers faced several obstacles, including linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical challenges. Nevertheless, they managed to surmount these obstacles by acquiring proficiency in the local language, fostering intercultural awareness, and acquainting themselves with the education system. In light of the findings and the relevant literature, suggestions and implications are discussed for potential expatriate teachers intending to work in Turkey and other stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Expatriate teachers, EFL teachers' challenges, non-native English-speaking teachers, teaching abroad, Turkish EFL classroom, foreign teachers, foreign national language teachers

**ÖZ:** İngilizce öğretmenlerine yönelik küresel talep, İngilizce öğretmek için yabancı ülkelere seyahat eden anadili İngilizce olmayan öğretmenlerin sayısında artışa yol açmıştır. Yurtdışında İngilizce öğretmek daha çok iç çember ülkelerdeki anadili İngilizce olan öğretmenlerle ilişkilendirilse de anadili İngilizce olmayan yabancı öğretmenlerin işe alınması da artık çok yaygın görülen bir durum haline gelmiştir. Buna rağmen, özellikle Türkiye bağlamında, anadili İngilizce olmayan yabancı öğretmenlerin deneyimlerini araştıran çalışmalar kısıtlıdır. Bu çalışma, Türkiye'deki çeşitli özel okullarda ve dil kurslarında çalışan ve anadili İngilizce olmayan yabancı öğretmenlerin karşılaştığı zorlukları ve başa çıkma stratejilerini araştırmayı amaçlar. Yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelerin bulguları, öğretmenlerin dilsel, kültürel ve pedagojik zorluklar da dâhil olmak üzere birtakım güçlüklerle karşılaştıklarını fakat çalıştıkları ülkenin dilini öğrenerek, kültürlerarası farkındalığı geliştirerek ve eğitim sistemine aşına olarak bu engellerin üstesinden gelmeyi başardıklarını ortaya koymuştur. Son kısımda, bulgular ve alanyazın ışığında, Türkiye'de çalışmayı planlayan yabancı öğretmen adayları için önerilere ve paydaşlar için çıkarımlara da yer verilmiştir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Yabancı öğretmenler, İngilizce öğretmenlerinin zorlukları, anadili İngilizce olmayan öğretmenler, yurtdışında öğretmenlik, Türkiye'deki İngilizce öğretim sınıfları, yabancı öğretmenler, yabancı uyruklu öğretmenler

\* M. A. Student, Kütahya Dumlupınar University, Kütahya, Turkey, wrood.hashim45@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2263-0295>

\*\* Corresponding Author: Asst. Prof. Dr., Kütahya Dumlupınar University, Kütahya, Turkey, [burcu.gkurt@dpu.edu.tr](mailto:burcu.gkurt@dpu.edu.tr), <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7169-2890>

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With growing mobility around the world, acquiring proficiency in foreign languages has gained more importance. As noted by Crystal (1997), speaking at least one foreign language fluently was once thought to be a desirable objective for everyone in many nations. The role of studying English as a tool for creating opportunities to acquire new information and possibilities in a global setting has been especially emphasized (Oder & Eisenschmidt, 2018). Although it is not easy to determine the number of English speakers due to the ever-increasing trend in learning English, it is estimated that there are over two billion speakers of English around the world (Jenkins, 2014, p. 5). According to Eberhard et al. (2020), there are over 2.5 times as many people who speak English as a second or foreign language (243%) as there are people who speak English as their first language. In this vein, Kachru's influential circles identify three categories of statuses for English: inner, outer, and expanding circles (Kachru, 1992), which are represented by, for instance, the United States, Nigeria, and Turkey, respectively. English is utilized in each of these countries in various ways and purposes and to differing degrees.

In the context of Turkey, English is the most studied foreign language with limited exposure outside of the classroom. Apart from English being a mandatory course in most educational settings, Turkish students study English for a variety of reasons, including prestige, employment, and academic careers, since it is the language of communication in international business, commerce, tourism, and academia (Dogancay-Aktuna, 1998). However, as reported by the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey, TEPAV (2014) and Education First English Proficiency Index (2022) rankings, a majority of Turkish learners are not proficient enough in the English language, and Turkey comes 34 out of 35 European countries indicating "low proficiency." Therefore, language policymakers have been working on new plans and policies to help improve the proficiency level of Turkish learners of English (for a review, Karadağ, 2022).

Given the prominence of classroom learning in education, the position of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in facilitating language learning has always been underscored. Teachers with qualifications in teaching and education and commendable language use skills are sought, especially in the private sector. To increase the internalization and prestige of schools (Tatar, 2019) and the intercultural awareness of the students while supporting their communication skills, hiring non-local teachers is considered a must (Ayдын et al., 2019). Non-local teachers may include expat teachers who are willing to teach abroad for higher salaries, more satisfying job opportunities (Clark & Paran, 2007), or simply to fulfill their desires to develop as a teacher or to continue their career path (Nunan, 2012).

However, due to the native speaker fallacy (Phillipson, 1992) and "the native speakerism [which] acts as the sword of Damocles hanging over the heads of NNESTs [non-native English-speaking teachers] across the world" (Selvi, 2010, p. 174), there is an imbalance between native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and NNESTs in many respects such as employability, wages as well as learner bias and perceptions (Moussu & Llurda, 2008). Previous studies have already shown that when program administrators (Clark & Paran, 2007) and local non-native teachers (Doan, 2016) prioritize being a native speaker as a norm for hiring, NNESTs are disadvantaged (Ayдын et al., 2019). Such biases against NNESTs exacerbate challenges in achieving

equity in hiring, which can lead to other perception-related difficulties in the classroom and at the institutional level. In his recent article, Bostancıoğlu (2022) discusses the advantages of recruiting expat NESTs and NNESTs in the context of Turkey, some of which are increasing intercultural awareness and communication, maintaining a high level of proficiency in English, and providing avenues for collaboration. An additional benefit specifically mentioned by Skliar (2014) for expat NNESTs was the increased exposure to a variety of accents which could enhance the use of English as an international language for Turkish learners of EFL (p. 435). It should be noted here that despite the complexities and arguments in defining and using the terms *native* and *non-native* in the field, these terms are used for the purposes of the present study.

To reveal the perception of NESTs through the eyes of language policymakers and implementers, Coşkun (2013) cites newspaper articles mentioning the five-year plan, which at the time intended to bring in 40,000 English teachers from inner circle nations such as the United States to work as co-teachers in the Turkish K-12 schools. This plan may be an indication that, as in many other expanding circle countries, the NESTs are perceived to play an important role in students' language learning. Native English speakers are likely preferred because of the authentic input they can provide to students without having to speak their native language. Extensive use of the local language is usually considered a threat to learners' gains in foreign language fluency. Therefore, schools tend to hire non-Turkish-speaking English teachers instead of local ones, especially in contexts where NESTs are less likely to be found and hired. This brings about a new way of approaching the NNEST perspective because NNESTs who do not come from inner-circle countries mostly use English to communicate with their students (Chen & Cheng, 2010). With the provision of an authentic environment conducive to communication in the target language, learners are obliged to lead their conversations in English with the non-local NNESTs. Recruiters' favoritism for non-local teachers at private institutions applies especially to classes in which the primary objective is communication rather than teaching more structural aspects of the language. Besides, previous research has already shown learners' preferences for NNESTs for learning and assessment of grammar and writing (e.g., Chun, 2014; Koşar, 2018). While studies have already examined the NNEST-NEST dichotomy in the Turkish context, very few studies focused on the expat NNESTs' challenges (Aysan-Şahintaş, 2019; Halicioğlu, 2015). Therefore, the present study aims at examining expat NNESTs' experiences and challenges of teaching in the context of Turkey and how they coped with these challenges.

### Literature Review

While the present study does not specifically discuss the NNEST vs. NEST dichotomy, there is a need for a review of these two constructs mainly because it will help better understand their positioning in the global context of English language teaching (ELT). The construct of "native speaker" in the field of ELT has been defined and challenged in diverse ways in the literature. In his chapter devoted to discussing the construct of "the non-native teacher," Selvi (2019) provides a definition in line with what he calls "compulsory native speakerism" in the following way:

"the idealized NS [native speaker]" construct (and "NEST") in ELT has traditionally been conceptualized as White, Western, (often) male, middle-class, (often) monolingual individual

living in urban spaces and endowed with the uncontested privilege of linguistic, cultural and pedagogical authority to serve as the benchmark by which facets of the ELT enterprise (e.g., theory, research, learning, teaching, publishing, instructional materials, assessment, teacher training and hiring practices) might be defined and/or measured (Kubota & Lin, 2009). (p. 186)

Selvi (2019) further defines NNESTs as those “whose linguistic, cultural and pedagogical capabilities as language users and teachers are defined *vis-à-vis* their ‘NS’/ ‘NEST’ ‘other’....and therefore are often associated with discrimination and marginalization of professional identities and personas” (p.186). These definitions are noteworthy in illustrating the many true facets of being an NNEST, which are often disregarded and/or taken for granted in many language-teaching contexts. Despite the demand for NESTs, the number of NNESTs is rapidly expanding around the world as NNESTs outnumber the NESTs in many expanding circle countries. In other words, the world’s English-speaking population is now a minority, with less than a quarter speaking English as a native language, while nearly one billion individuals who speak English as an L2 now constitute the global majority (Lyons, 2021). Recruiters, therefore, favor NNESTs over local teachers in contexts where NESTs are less available or unaffordable. This brings about new challenges germane to non-local NNESTs in the EFL classroom. In this vein, Halicioglu (2015) summarizes various challenges that expat EFL teachers may face in the Turkish context. Some of these are choosing the right school, accepting and dealing with various stages and forms of culture shock, getting the right support in the new cultural environment, and professional and personal life challenges. She explains each of these in detail and suggests that teachers do their research before moving to a new country, be open to change and see this process as “personal growth” (p. 252).

Lave and Wenger’s (1991) notion of “legitimate peripheral participation” is worth noting here because it is usually used to explain how experience and participation serve as learning opportunities for teachers in their adaptation processes. This framework has been used in various ways to account for the experiences of newcomers into a society or community, including expat NESTs (Yim & Hwang, 2019) and novice teachers (Shin, 2012). In this theoretical framework, Lave and Wenger (1991) underscore the fact that “learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community” (p. 29). In the context of the present study, expat NNESTs are perceived as learners in their new environment in which they may or may not take part in the communities of practice, but all the information is legitimately available to them, which may very well be transferred into a learning experience leading to be included in the community. This will, in turn, affect how they perceive their experiences of teaching abroad, including the challenges and their coping strategies.

Previous studies have examined the challenges and perceptions of expat NNESTs in various contexts. Chen and Cheng (2010) investigated the challenges encountered by foreign English teachers in Taiwanese elementary schools using a case study design. They interviewed three South African teachers from different elementary schools. The data analysis indicated three major challenges foreign English teachers face in Taiwanese elementary schools: class size, teachers’ doubts about their accents, and using a textbook with which they were unfamiliar.

In her study, Ma (2012) looked at how local English teachers perceived their NEST peers and found that foreign English teachers' lack of local cultural background and expertise in the school system was likely to cause issues. Some of these were reported as NESTs' ignorance of students' preferences and desires, misconceptions in the formation of intimate relationships with their students, students' unwillingness to communicate with foreign English teachers, as well as their difficulties in maintaining classroom discipline. Similar findings were reached by Walkinshaw and Thi Hoang Duong (2012), who found that NNESTs are not knowledgeable enough about the culture of their students, which may lead to misunderstandings. Hasanah and Utami (2019) conducted a similar study about NNESTs' challenges in the language teaching classroom, with participants from diverse countries such as China, Japan, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. Besides cultural difficulties, their findings showed that teachers felt challenged by overcrowded classrooms, unfavorable school environments, students' low motivation, and poor learning resources that did not meet students' needs. Similarly, Dumlao and Mengorio (2019) reported fifteen expat NNESTs' teaching experiences in Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam. The study specifically examined the reasons for and benefits of teaching abroad and the challenges expat teachers faced. The findings relevant to the present study indicated that the status of being an NNEST, culture shock, and curriculum and materials were the primary challenges.

In the context of Turkey, Demir (2017) looked at the challenges faced by NESTs and Turkish NNESTs and identified three key challenges which are described as student-related, teacher-related, and institutional. Among student-related issues, Demir (2017) mentioned learners' attitude problems, use of L1 Turkish, and lack of autonomous learning, which may be related to teacher-related problems as these factors prepare the ground for teachers' assertion of not being able to teach learners effectively. Other challenges directly related to teachers were found to be classroom management, burnout, and pedagogical knowledge. Finally, institutional challenges were summarized as crowded classes, mixed-level classes, tech support, and issues regarding curriculum and assessment. There was a substantial difference between NNESTs and NESTs in terms of the challenges they reported, with the latter complaining much more about teacher-related issues followed by institutional difficulties. In light of the fact that NNESTs are primarily comprised of local teachers, studies on expat NNESTs may provide a different point of view.

A study by Aydın et al. (2019) discussed the perspectives of 25 expat teachers working at Turkish private schools regarding educational and administrative issues through interviews. The analyses of the interviews revealed that (a) the program of education was "heavy" and outdated, (b) teachers did not use innovative ways of teaching and learning, (c) administrators were not sufficient in their competencies of management, and (d) there was injustice regarding the employment of expats from Western cultures as opposed to those coming from other nationalities. However, it should be underscored that the participants in this study comprised teachers from various subject fields and were not limited to language teachers. Besides, it included both native and non-native speakers of English. Therefore, studies looking at expat NNESTs help better understand the specific challenges they face.

Aysan-Şahintaş (2019) also provided an analysis of the pedagogical practices and professional identity of a highly experienced expatriate NNEST from Pakistan

working in Turkey at the time. The results of semi-structured interviews with a single participant indicated that her pedagogical practices and professional identity were largely based on the following: her collaboration with students and co-workers, including teachers and administrators, and her teaching style, which emphasized inclusive and responsive instruction. Since the study findings are based on a single participant, it calls for further studies that could explore the expat NNESTs from various contexts and perspectives.

Given the findings from the previous research, it is obvious that while NNESTs and NESTs may experience similar problems, being a non-local NNEST adds more complication to the existing issues teachers face in the language classroom. To date, studies have investigated the challenges of language teachers from both the perspective of NESTs working abroad/overseas (e.g., Demir, 2017) and of NNESTs working in their own countries as well as abroad (e.g., Chen & Cheng, 2010). However, little is known about the perspective of expat NNESTs working in Turkey. One study looked at the experiences of expat NNESTs in Turkey. However, it was from the perspective of a single participant without specifically aiming to examine the challenges and coping strategies (Aysan-Şahintaş, 2019). To fill the gap, the purpose of this case study is to explore expatriate NNESTs' struggles in teaching EFL in Turkish private (language) schools and their strategies for overcoming these challenges. In order to unravel some of these challenges and coping strategies, the present study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of the expatriate NNESTs regarding the challenges in the Turkish EFL classroom?
2. How did expatriate NNESTs overcome these difficulties?

### **Method**

The present study aims to understand the difficulties faced by expat NNESTs while teaching in Turkish EFL classrooms. This is a descriptive study that required qualitative inquiry and qualitative data because the research questions were aimed at an in-depth study of the challenges teachers experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2017). We adopted a descriptive and multiple case study design to investigate the phenomenon of challenges and coping strategies faced by expat NNESTs since the purpose of a case study is to explore “a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries and contexts are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2003, p. 13). Specifically, in the field of English language teaching and learning, as Chapelle and Duff (2003) indicated, “a case typically refers to a person, either a learner or a teacher, or an entity, such as a school, a university, a classroom, or a program” (p. 164). They further describe case studies “as an interpretive, inductive form of research [which] explore the details and meanings of experience and do not usually attempt to test a priori hypotheses. Instead, the researcher attempts to identify important patterns and themes in the data” (p. 164). In this vein, we aimed to identify commonalities in the instructors' testimonies about their struggles and coping mechanisms through interviews by making an effort to interpret participant experiences in an authentic manner.

## Participants

This study is based on qualitative data, which allows for an examination of what individuals think (Riessman, 2002). For participant selection, to provide transferability (Shenton, 2004) criterion purposeful sampling was used in which “all cases...meet some criterion [which is] useful for quality assurance” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28). The criteria for selection were determined as being an expat NNEST in Turkey actively teaching or having taught English as a foreign language in Turkish private schools at any level (only those who have taught until the past three months were eligible). It should be noted here, though, that the schools mentioned here include those which provide extra language support/teaching after students’ regular schools. This is an important factor mainly because the teachers’ challenges reflected in this study may be different from those experienced in other regular schools. Five NNESTs from different countries, who have experience teaching in the Turkish EFL classroom, participated in the study. Information on participants’ demographics and educational backgrounds is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1

### *Participant Profiles*

Pseudonym	Country of origin	Gender	Teaching experience (in years)	Teaching experience in Turkey (in years)	Education background
Elian	Albania	Female	5	3	M.A. in ELT
Sema	Algeria	Female	4	3	B.A. in ELT
Ali	Iraq	Male	14	3	B.A. in ELT
Ameer	Iran	Male	10	5	M.A. in ELT
Khaled	Syria	Male	20	6	B.A. in ELT

## Data Collection, Coding, and Analysis

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews in which open-ended questions were asked, including those that arose during the interviews. The benefits of semi-structured interviews are the interviewer’s undivided attention and the ability to answer all the questions comfortably. The “naturalness” and the “flexibility” of the semi-structured interview make it a “productive research tool” (Gillham, 2010, p. 65). The interview questions (see Appendix), which were structured around their experiences and challenges while teaching EFL to Turkish students, were prepared by the researchers in light of the previous research on similar studies (Coşkun, 2013; Demir, 2017) to ensure credibility (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021) and were piloted with another expat teacher for clarity, and necessary corrections were made. The interview consisted of four main questions, with the first question having five sub-questions. To help the participants understand the purpose of the interview, they were informed about the preliminary questions prior to data collection. The first author met them individually online, and each interview session lasted about 20 minutes. The interviewer used

English to ask questions as the study involved people from diverse language backgrounds, and all five sessions were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants.

An iterative step-by-step thematic analysis was conducted in accordance with the guidelines specified for this method (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data analysis method adopted was an inductive one, where themes were defined from the raw data that were investigated without any predefined classification. First, the information gathered from the interviews was transcribed and coded by the first author, and for cross-checking, the second author read the transcribed data and coded it to help ensure validity and reliability (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Once an almost complete agreement was reached between coders (.90), themes were constructed through thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). Then, emergent themes were created after going through several coding stages, and the initial codes were then categorized based on their similarity. Finally, themes were created from these categories, which entailed merging codes into broad themes that faithfully represented the data. All quotations that matched a theme of the analysis matrix were separately extracted and identified.

### **Ethical Procedure**

The authors confirm the following research and publication ethics during data collection and the writing of the article. First, ethics committee approval within the scope of the research has been obtained from Kütahya Dumlupınar University Research Ethics Committee with the decision numbered 2021/218 dated 16.04.2021. Participants were also duly informed about the scope of the research, their rights, and the withdrawal procedure prior to the data collection. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were given to the participants, and ethical principles were considered during the interview.

### **Findings**

Based on the analysis of the data obtained from the online interviews, the challenges of NNESTs extracted were language barrier, lack of familiarity with the educational system and the local culture, and student-related issues. For the second research question, the themes derived from their experiences indicated that NNESTs faced these challenges by overcoming the language barrier in various ways, by staying in Turkey for an extended period, and by familiarizing themselves with the education system. Figure 1 and Figure 2 below provide a summary of the findings.



## **Expatriate NNESTs' challenges**

### ***Language barrier***

The participants came from different countries, and each experienced a different set of challenges when they began working in Turkish private schools. However, all five teachers agreed that the language barrier was one of the most challenging aspects of teaching in Turkish EFL classrooms. All five participating teachers were unfamiliar with the Turkish language, and they explained how this caused major communication problems with their students, leading to difficulties in building a connection with them. One of the participants, Elian from Albania, expressed her ideas as follows:

“The first challenge was the language, their language. I did not know Turkish at that time I just knew Marhaba and like three sentences.” (Elian)

Some participants, like Ameer (Iran) and Sema (Algeria), claimed that their native languages were completely different from the Turkish language, which made it harder for them to deal with Turkish students.

“Because we are not as familiar with the Turkish language as we are with the Persian language, having a good delivery in the Turkish language is a bit difficult. I advise the incoming teachers to not get shocked, they can make it easy or worse, but they may feel shocked in the very beginning, especially, with the Turkish language and the Turkish culture.” (Ameer)

“The first challenge I faced in my first year was the language barrier because most students in Turkey are not familiar with English well. They might be but not to the point where they can understand everything I say.” (Sema)

Because the teachers were not speaking Turkish, they used English to communicate with their students. Since most of the Turkish students were at the beginner level in English, they could not understand everything their teacher said, and it appeared to the teachers that this had an impact on the students' learning processes. Ali (Iraq) and Khaled (Syria) concurred with the rest of the teachers about how their communication with the students was challenged.

“I don't know Turkish very well, and therefore, English is the only way I can communicate with them.” (Ali)

“The first time when I started teaching in Turkey at school, especially for 7th and 6th graders, they haven't had English background when I was speaking in English even though it was so simple to understand, but they can't understand it.” (Khaled)

As reflected in the statements by expat NNESTs teaching in the Turkish EFL classroom, the language barrier constituted a big challenge for communication. Although it may be quite normal to hear such voices of teachers, it seems to be the major source of complaints by non-local NNESTs, which they mostly attributed to low proficiency, although there may be additional student-related reasons such as them not being used to communicating in English with Turkish EFL teachers or fear of negative evaluation by their peers (Aydın, 2008).

### ***Lack of familiarity with the local culture***

A related challenge the teachers faced was cultural differences. According to some of the teachers, despite sharing some cultural resources, each country has a unique

culture and traditions. In this vein, some teachers noted how Turkish culture differs from their culture, which, in their opinion, could affect the teaching process and the relationship between the teacher and the students.

“As I noticed here in Turkey, they are not accepting other cultures, so I try my best to make my students understand the fact that there are different cultures and different mentalities all over the world; especially if they want to learn English, they need to know that they if you learn a new language you have to learn the cultural background.” (Sema)

“There is a culture difference between my country and this country, and also, there are some cultural beliefs that somehow affect the process of teaching in classes.” (Ali)

This difficulty was not mentioned by all teachers in their interviews, and this might be due to the way teachers perceive cultural differences regardless of the culture they come from. If the teachers or their students did not construe such diversity as a problem in teaching or learning English, this might have led them not to mention it in their narratives. Another plausible interpretation could be that their own culture had already intertwined with Turkish culture, thereby rendering any cultural disparities inconsequential.

#### ***Lack of familiarity with the education system***

Another challenge that teachers faced in Turkish schools was the education system, which they were not familiar with. Some participants indicated that the Turkish education system was completely different from the education system in their countries. Elian, for instance, stated how her unfamiliarity with the educational system, including classroom atmosphere and teaching methods, caused her relationship with her students to suffer, as seen in the following excerpt:

“The most difficult for me was the education system because in my country actually, we have a different education system everything like the methods that we follow in the class, the topics that we talk about with our students, the way how we interact with each other, and the way how we do the project, so for me, everything was so different so at the beginning, it was hard because sometimes maybe some students couldn't get along you with my method of teaching; some of them could have some complaints.” (Elian)

One of the teachers (Ali) commented that there were a lot of similarities between the education systems in Turkey and his home country, but he noticed one difference. In the Turkish classroom, more than two teachers were usually teaching the same class different language skills. In other words, the way the teachers were assigned to teaching certain skills as opposed to teaching those in an integrated way by a certain teacher appeared to be a difference in the school system. Although this might be a school-specific choice that may depend on the school type and curriculum design, various teachers are indeed assigned to teach different skill courses in many private schools in Turkey.

#### ***Dissatisfaction with the teaching materials***

In addition to the challenge of being unfamiliar with the Turkish education system, teachers also faced difficulties with teaching materials and textbooks, which, in their opinion, made the teaching process more difficult for them. Although materials could be coded as a part of the education system in general, it was handled separately

because the challenge was beyond unfamiliarity. One of the teachers admitted that the coursebook was not suited to his students' proficiency level:

"The level of the book was higher than the real level of the students, for example, the level of the book was B2 for example, but students' level was A1 so that was a problem." (Khaled)

Other than proficiency issues, teachers also commented on the content of the books used in their schools. For example, two teachers had a challenge with the course materials:

"There are some grammar structures that you don't find in the Turkish language so it's going to be a problem or challenging to make it, for example, to present like all the perfect tenses according to books and materials and standard methods, but in the school I was teaching there were no books and materials using a standard method." (Ameer)

As indicated by Ameer, Khaled, and Ali (not quoted here), the teachers were not happy with the course materials, and one teacher also criticized Turkish teachers for not using the books very often, claiming that they taught their students "*whatever they have in their minds and whatever they have been taught before*" (Ameer). While the use of coursebooks is a separate discussion that would go beyond the purposes of this paper, it is clear that there was dissatisfaction with some of the materials used in the context of private schools in this study.

### ***Student-related issues***

NNESTs also reported having experienced various problems in relation to students, their overall engagement and motivation, and attitudes to learning English. One of the teachers admitted that the Turkish students did not seem willing to learn English, or they did not take learning English seriously, which was a challenge for him to gain their attention.

"I'm concerned the issues are somehow...I can say that Turkish students are lazy they don't want to follow the lesson, they just want to come and consider this school a place only for socializing, and finally they don't learn anything." (Ameer)

Ameer seemed to be concerned about his students not being very eager to learn, and he primarily attributes it to their proficiency being low:

"When I am speaking in English, even though it is so simple to understand...they can't understand it, and it is their English background, which is so weak and they haven't started well because of that, they are not able to understand." (Ameer)

Some teachers also reported difficulties with classroom management for different reasons and further claimed that some students even complained about their teachers only because they couldn't get along with them.

### **Teachers' coping strategies with challenges and advice for teachers**

#### ***Overcoming the language barrier***

Two ways of overcoming the language barrier were learning the local language and using online translation tools in the classroom. After presenting the challenges the participants faced, each participant reported overcoming them in different ways. The first and most commonly mentioned strategy was learning Turkish and becoming fluent speakers of the language.

“I got over all my challenges now, after two years in Turkey, now I can speak Turkish fluently.” (Ameer)

“I got over the language challenge after I finished A1 and A2 in Turkish, so I can communicate now.” (Elian)

“[It would be useful if potential teachers learn] especially the words, when the students try to transfer the meanings or say the meaning. I have this problem, they use Turkish, if the teacher knows Turkish it can be good and useful for their teaching; it will be better if the teacher knows some Turkish vocabulary.” (Khaled)

Other teachers stated that they were able to cope with the language barrier in communication by using translation tools, which helped them when they faced difficulties during the lesson.

“[To overcome] the language challenge; yes, we have lots of different techniques in teaching to convey the material, and also we use the body language, which sometimes works. I use some smart students in the class, the ones whose English is better than the others, sometimes, I ask them to translate for their classmates, and we use some translating platforms in class.” (Ali)

“I used Google Translate, I did not translate all of the sentences, but it can help me understand their language, but I cannot speak, so I use, for example, the English-Turkish translation or dictionary, I do not translate the whole sentence, just a word or when I’m speaking about a topic, and one can help them understand it better.” (Khaled)

As indicated by teachers, they either learned the local language or primarily relied on translation aids to support their communication with the students. As is seen, instead of learners feeling obligated to learn English to communicate with their teachers, it was teachers who felt pressured to learn the language as “outsiders” or “minorities in the classroom.” However, one teacher also stated that teachers should not feel overwhelmed by the language barrier. They may not prefer to learn the local language but rather should see it as an advantage:

“I can advise teachers that are newly teaching here in Turkey...I don’t want them to get scared or afraid because of the language barrier with the students here in Turkey...the students are interested when you say I’m a foreign teacher, they get interested to know you, and also this will motivate you and will help you to get over the language barrier with them. and I think it won’t be a problem because you will motivate them to speak English once you don’t know their language, and they don’t know your language, which I think is another advantage because they can speak to you in English.” (Sema)

### ***Extended exposure to local culture***

Most teachers reported time as a panacea for overcoming most challenges. In other words, staying in Turkey for an extended period and raising students’ intercultural awareness by being a model were the two sub-themes indicated by the teachers.

“For the other challenge, the cultural challenge, it was not that difficult to get over, so yeah, I consider that I got over these challenges... [some piece of] advice I can give is that the teacher should be respectful. They should respect other people’s culture, and try to make students understand that everyone should be respectful to other cultures and how people should deal with these cases.” (Sema)

Both Sema and Ali maintain that teachers should respect the local culture, which will, in turn, demonstrate how their students should also respect their cultures. It is

essential for teachers to raise learners' awareness of intercultural communication and respect for other cultures. They stated these strategies as means of surviving in the Turkish schools they were teaching. One teacher suggests an additional approach for educators to equip themselves even before embarking on their journey to Turkey, which entails acquainting themselves with Turkish culture and acquiring a certain level of proficiency in the language.

"When I planned to teach in Turkey, I needed to have some kind of examples about that country's culture; it can help teachers to understand it better and gets familiar with their languages." (Khaled)

### ***Familiarizing oneself with the education system***

Teachers further stated how they were able to acclimate themselves to the educational system and the classroom atmosphere. Especially after teaching in Turkish schools for an extended period exceeding two years, they succeeded in acquainting themselves with the education system, as noted by Elian:

"I didn't change the education system in Turkey; I couldn't do that it's like such a big job, but I gave my students another point of view in life and education so as long as my students were happy, and they want to follow my way of teaching it means, yes, I got over of this challenge like we got along with each other." (Elian)

After spending an extended period teaching in Turkey, teachers were unsurprisingly able to circumvent the disadvantages of not being familiar with the educational system. In fact, they managed to come up with their own coping strategies for adapting different teaching materials for their own way of teaching.

"I have no problem here now with the delivery of teaching or anything because I learn how to teach, and I know how to train how to use the material here according to the Turkish education system." (Ameer)

Time, not surprisingly, helped teachers to get accustomed to the culture and classroom atmosphere, as well. Ali and Sema reported overcoming difficulties due to cultural differences and student attitudes through time.

"For the cultural parts, I am respecting old cultural attempts, and I set some rules in my classes, but I set the rule I say this is my rule and you must have made this rule, and, in most classes, it works so I could manage these by using these simple techniques." (Ali)

## **Discussion and Implications**

The current study sought to investigate the challenges that five expat NNESTs from Iraq, Syria, Algeria, Iran, and Albania have confronted in the EFL Turkish classroom and their coping strategies to overcome these difficulties.

The findings suggested that the language obstacle was the most frequently cited problem by the instructors, a finding that corroborates with prior research in this area. (Ospina & Medina, 2020). Foreign teachers experienced impediments while communicating with Turkish students as their students, in the teachers' opinion, did not show much effort to be understood by their teachers. Teachers handled this challenge in a variety of ways, as reflected in their responses. While some overcame this obstacle by learning Turkish, others preferred using translation tools such as Google Translate, which assisted them in communicating for different purposes. Given that Turkish was not their primary language, teachers encountered challenges when attempting to

communicate with their students for social purposes outside of the class setting, as well as elucidating particular grammatical concepts during lessons. A similar study looking at foreign NNESTs' challenges also reported that not sharing the same L1 with the students was a huge barrier in the classroom, especially in the primary school context (Hasanah & Utami, 2019). Echoing the conclusions drawn from the current investigation, Skliar (2014) contended that expatriate NNESTs were the most disadvantaged in comparison to their local NNESTs and NESTs counterparts, chiefly attributable to their limited expertise and authority over both the students' first language and the target language. This phenomenon may arise from a range of factors, including the teachers' lack of prior experience in teaching Turkish students, but it could also stem from the inadequacy of the training teachers received. Specifically, they may not have undergone specialized training to teach English abroad in a context where the dominant language is foreign to them.

However, there are certain cultural norms and learning habits that may exacerbate teachers' unfamiliarity with the local culture during communication. Sharing the same L1 with the students has already been established as an advantage for teachers for several reasons, such as being a role model, providing strategies that facilitate language learning, establishing rapport, and supporting teacher confidence (Medgyes, 1992; Seidlhofer, 1999). Foreign-national teachers' concerns, therefore, seem to be legitimate, and similar concerns were also made in previous research. Reporting on NESTs' professional identities at a Turkish university, Keskin (2022) also showed that being able to speak or use Turkish in the classroom helped achieve an insider's position in the eyes of the students, and it helped to establish a good rapport with the students through humor.

However, according to Halicioglu (2015), merely acquiring linguistic proficiency in a language does not necessarily ensure effective communication without considering cultural aspects because, beyond words, language is "also about *how* the language is used and whether it is culturally appropriate" (p. 246). Therefore, lack of familiarity with the local culture was shown to be a challenge for the expat NNESTs, which exacerbates the issues highlighted in prior research conducted with NNESTs as well as NESTs teaching abroad. Although cultural differences have been claimed to bring new opportunities for learning in the classroom, it has also been shown to create an environment susceptible to problems when "cultural sensitivity" is not taken care of (Dumlao & Mengorio, 2019). Therefore, to facilitate effective language learning and teaching in terms of various aspects such as student-teacher relationships, classroom atmosphere, or classroom management, raising expat teachers' awareness of the host culture is advantageous for both the instructors and the students. Although Halicioglu (2015) emphasizes culture shock as an important challenge for expat teachers, the participants in this study did not mention this notion in their narratives. This could be attributed to the length of their teaching experience in the Turkish context, which exceeds the 10-month adaptation period described by Roskell (2013). As a consequence of shared norms and rituals, participants from cultures with various ethnic, linguistic, and religious similarities to Turkish culture may initially be thought to experience fewer problems as compared to those from completely different cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, the present study has provided counterintuitive evidence to suggest that this may not be the case. However, this finding should be interpreted with caution and

cannot be generalized due to the small sample size and the potential for idiosyncratic attitudes and responses from participants.

Unfamiliarity with the education system, dissatisfaction with classroom materials, and misfits of the curriculum were also among the challenges teachers had to face. Participants commented that since they found the educational system very different from what they were used to, including the classroom atmosphere and classroom materials, this seemed to be a challenge for teachers. Comparable findings regarding the classroom materials were also reported in similar research, which stated that the materials did not cater to learners' needs (Chen & Cheng, 2010; Hasanah & Utami, 2019). The curriculum was also reported as a problem by the expat teachers, which was supported by Aydın et al. (2019). Teachers in their study mentioned that the curriculum was outdated, with loaded yet "superficial" content, and it was incompatible with the international curricula (Aydın et al., 2019, p. 9). However, their findings should be interpreted with caution because, in their study, it was not clear whether this challenge was reported by expats working as language teachers or in a different subject field as the participant group was mixed.

Regarding student-related issues, teachers also had difficulties with classroom management and student attitudes. Expat NNESTs found Turkish EFL learners unwilling to engage in classroom activities. The findings of the current study are supported by Kara and Ayaz's (2017) research, which also found that Turkish students lacked interest in learning English. Regarding expat teachers' reported difficulties with classroom management, although the interview data from the present study did not provide any explanations as to why teachers found classroom management a challenge, Halicioğlu (2015) attributed this to varying perceptions of teacher leadership and teaching and management styles across countries. Expat NNESTs' narratives analyzed by Hasanah and Utami (2019) support the findings of the present study in that in their study, learners in the classrooms lacked motivation and engagement, and teachers had similar management and leadership issues in the classroom.

Teachers also explained how they managed to overcome these challenges. They suggested that some coping strategies were learning the local language, setting your rules right from the beginning, and being a role model in raising students' intercultural awareness. The participants advised teachers who intend to work in Turkish schools to be prepared before arriving in Turkey, have some knowledge of Turkish culture, and respect their customs. They specifically suggested learning the Turkish language because this would make it easier for them to establish rapport with Turkish students and facilitate learning in the classroom. The results also indicated that the participants' students reportedly expected their teachers to be able to converse in Turkish instead of pushing themselves to converse in English with their teachers. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to discuss the role of L1 in the classroom (for a review, Shin et al., 2020), these findings should be interpreted with caution especially because expat NNESTs implied that being able to speak the students' L1 was an advantage to be able to teach effectively.

The present study is not without its limitations. Due to the small sample size and the sampling method, the findings of the research cannot be generalized. Furthermore, triangulation of data is needed to make comprehensive conclusions because interviews, which are very useful for in-depth analyses, may not be "neutral" methods of data

collection due to various reasons such as the context or the researcher's identity (Denscombe, 2007, p. 184). Therefore, other than self-expressed forms of data, classroom observations of expat NNESTs could provide an abundance of information that could help tap into the underlying and context-related reasons for especially explaining the challenges stated by the participants.

Despite the limitations, the current study provided a clear image of the challenges faced by nonnative foreign teachers in Turkish classrooms, which were shown to impact the educational process in a variety of ways. The findings of this study have several important implications for future practice. One way to prepare foreign teachers for teaching in Turkish EFL classrooms could be developing teacher training programs for expat teachers, which could be offered online or in a blended format. The blended component could include an on-site orientation program specific to each institution/school, which could offer courses familiarizing expat teachers with the Turkish education system, including the curricular expectations and methods, Turkish classroom dynamics, cultural basics, and student profiles at each level of education.

Incorporating optional, extended training programs that are tailored to equip foreign teachers with knowledge of Turkish language and culture could be a promising strategy to promote positive outcomes both in the classroom and in their professional relationships. Learning the Turkish language and culture cannot be imposed, but the potential benefits of doing so may be underscored. Previous studies have shown that expat EFL teachers have used Turkish (even words or certain phrases) to establish rapport with the students in the classroom, which they found very helpful in keeping them engaged (Aysan-Şahintaş, 2019; Keskin, 2022). Similarly, being able to understand and speak Turkish was also found to help communicate with colleagues (Keskin, 2022) and parents (Aydın et al., 2019). The curriculum and the syllabi of such a comprehensive program would need extensive planning. However, one point that deserves noting is that these courses should incorporate practical components that go beyond traditional lecture formats and include practical examples, simulations, or case studies demonstrating how teachers can effectively handle similar situations in their classrooms. Another component of the courses could be interviews with real teachers who provide the teachers with various problems along with their own suggestions for navigating similar challenges. Although such courses may not provide the teachers with the same amount of information they would acquire through direct contact and communication, it would help them feel safer and prepare them for a smooth experience in exploring the language and the culture. To ensure that all teachers have access to such a program, employing schools might be required to have their teachers complete the training program prior to signing a contract with them. Pedagogy courses might also be offered as part of in-service training. Similar programs have been recently designed for in-service K-12 EFL teachers by the Ministry of National Education for teachers planning to take the Expert Teacher Exam (Öğretmen Bilişim Ağı, 2023).

Psychological support should also be included in the programs to avoid the extended negative effects of culture shock that incoming teachers might experience. Further professional and mental support from both peer teachers and administrators could also be performed through peer collaboration and support in the form of peer coaching and mentoring between the local NNESTs and the expat NNESTs. This could help make the transition smoother, increasing expat teachers' motivation and teaching

efficiency. A similar suggestion for helping newcomer NESTs with their adaptation to culture and learners' ways of learning in the Turkish context was made by Karakas et al. (2016). Similarly, Yim and Hwang (2019, p. 2) emphasized the crucial role of more experienced local teachers in helping the newcomer expat NESTs to "engage in legitimate peripheral participation" in the teaching community in the Korean context. The findings of the present study help extend the implications of these studies by making similar suggestions for improving NNESTs' experiences of adaptation while teaching abroad.

From the perspective of the recruiters, administrators, and policymakers, there are several implications of the present study. Previous research has shown that expat NNESTs are valuable contributors to a country's internationalization in various forms (Aydın et al., 2019); therefore, (precautionary) measures may be taken for their job satisfaction, which would have a significant impact on the way teachers approach and manage challenges that arise in their teaching environments. Ensuring that they have similar or equal rights to their local and NEST peers in terms of benefits, contracts, workload, leadership roles, support, and appreciation in the program or school they are working at is crucial. The hiring regulations and procedures for expat teachers play a crucial role, too, and Aydın et al. (2019) already summarized the laws and regulations guaranteeing the rights of expat teachers (not specifically language teachers). They state that there are certain requirements and procedures in the selection and hiring of expat teachers, and they should be followed by the institutions depending on their affiliation with the Ministry of National Education or the Council of Higher Education. However, as Tatar (2019) states, there is not "an established, systematic mechanism (except for a few private agencies)" in Turkey, which recruits expat teachers, so she maintains that requiring both the local NNESTs and the expats to hold similar qualifications is needed. However, it should be noted that her research and implications do not specifically involve expat NNESTs and the ideological underpinnings as to whether this should be performed by governmental agencies are beyond the scope of this research.

Given such implications, the present study hopes to pave the way for uncovering expat NNESTs' struggles and coping strategies to guide other teachers planning to teach EFL in Turkey. Expat teachers planning to work overseas should perform significant research and prepare themselves for unexpected circumstances. They should be aware that a change in setting and culture, new colleagues, a shift in parental involvement, and the loss of established signs and symbols all necessitate careful planning, ultimately affecting professional and personal fulfillment (Joslin, 2002). Once expat teachers have taken the necessary precautions and meticulously planned each step (Halıcıoğlu, 2015) prior to their departure for teaching abroad, how they perceive and interpret their experiences will play a crucial role in their ability to overcome challenges in the classroom setting. Challenges may be seen as opportunities for learning and may encourage expats to discover new ways of doing things in or outside of the classroom, or conversely, these obstacles may be regarded as intolerable situations which could even lead expats to leave the country. This shows that a combination of careful research and planning, as well as mental preparation in regard to what to expect while teaching abroad, is likely to help expat language teachers during their experience teaching abroad.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aimed to investigate the challenges and coping strategies of five expat NNESTs teaching in Turkey. As revealed by the participants' responses, teachers faced different challenges, such as the language barrier, different education systems, and cultural differences, but they were able to overcome most of these challenges by learning the language, staying in the country for an extended period, and familiarizing themselves with the education system. By identifying the difficulties faced by five participants and offering advice and solutions to help overcome them, the present study hopes to assist expat English teachers who intend to work in Turkey. Although the study relies on the narratives of the foreign NNESTs in the context of Turkey, the findings have been shown to support similar research conducted in similar contexts in other expanding circle countries. Further research investigating expat NNESTs from a variety of different perspectives is encouraged.

## Statement of Responsibility

The authors declare that they equally contributed to the manuscript. Both authors were involved in the conceptualization, methodology design, data collection instrument design, validation, investigation, data analysis, and the initial writing of the paper. Moreover, the first author was responsible for conducting the online interviews and the initial transcription of the data from the audio recordings and the second author was responsible for preparing the manuscript for submission, which involved writing and revising the paper, visualizing the findings, and addressing the reviewers' comments.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

## Author Bios:

Wurood Hashim Sahib Altaai is an Iraqi English teacher working in a private school in Ankara, Turkey. Having received her B.A. from Baghdad University, Iraq, she is currently an M.A. student at Kütahya Dumlupınar University, Turkey.

Burcu Gokgoz-Kurt is an Assistant Professor working at the Department of English Translation and Interpreting at Kütahya Dumlupınar University, Turkey. Her primary teaching and research interests include pronunciation teaching, cognitive aspects of language learning, academic listening & speaking, linguistics, and translation.

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## Appendix

### Semi-structured interview questions

1. What kind of challenges did you face when you first started teaching English?

#### *Follow-up questions*

- a. Did you face any difficulties in transferring the course content? You may respond with specific references to specific skills and courses.
  - b. Did you face any challenges in classroom management?
  - c. Did you face any challenges due to socio-cultural differences?
  - d. Did you face any challenges regarding Turkish student profiles?
  - e. Did you have any problems at the institutional level (i.e., with colleagues, administrators, salary, and benefits (e.g., social security, health insurance))?
2. What kind of similarities & differences do you observe between the teaching styles in your country and Turkey?
  3. Do you think you got over any of these challenges? If so, how? Please exemplify.

#### *Follow-up question*

- a. What kind of advice would you give to foreign teachers who are already teaching or planning to teach in Turkey?



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