

# EFL Teachers Employability in Saudi Arabia: Native and Non-Native Speakers

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*Abstract*—This paper explores the process of hiring EFL teachers, the criteria used, and the effect of the status of applicants as native/non-native speakers of English on their employment potential. A questionnaire surveyed 56 recruiters in Saudi Arabia by asking them to listen to five speakers applying for teaching jobs by leaving voice messages on an employer's answer machine. The analysis of the data revealed that the academic qualification, teaching experience, native speaker status, nationality, and accents of the applicants were perceived to be important as hiring criteria. Also, it was found that the participants who assigned more importance to the status of the applicant as native or non-native speaker, nationality, and accent perceived the non-native speakers to be less qualified and therefore had limited chances in employability.

*Keywords*—native speaker; non-native speaker; perception; EFL teachers; employability, hiring process.

## I. INTRODUCTION

English is definitely the fastest growing language on the face of earth. With over two billion learners [8], people with English as their first language are consequently outnumbered by those who are speakers of English as a second language, or as a foreign language. In reality, relatively few native speakers— who are already outnumbered by the non-native speakers— opt for a teaching career when they graduate from universities. This huge number of English learners requires a good number of qualified teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) or Foreign Language (EFL). According to Canagarajah [7], Non-Native English Speaker Teachers (NNESTs henceforth) represent about 80% of the EFL teachers in the world.

Recently, the issues of NNESTs in the higher education institutions have been gaining a considerable attention in the field of English language teaching (ELT). One of these issues is the employability of NNESTs all over the world as well as the hiring practices of EFL programme administrators. An expanding body of literature is emerging to shed light on the situation of the employability of the NNESTs and the challenges they face in the United States ([3] and [2]) and in the United Kingdom ([4] and [5]). According to these studies, NNESTs have a privileged status as they are perceived as model speakers and ideal teachers. Thus, the native speakers have an advantage over their non-native counterparts. Also NNESTs

are often perceived as having a lower status in the profession and therefore they have been shown to face discriminatory attitudes when applying for teaching positions [4]. These studies concluded that when more importance was given to the native speakership, the non-native speakers had less chance in being employed.

EFL teachers in the Saudi higher education institutions are normally recruited through recruiting committees which usually travel outside the kingdom searching for good teachers. These committees normally include an administrative officer, to deal with the paperwork and formalities, and a number of professors (two to four) from the seeking institution to determine the applicant's perceived qualifications and suitability for the job. The members usually make their hiring decisions by interviewing the applicants and assessing their qualifications, teaching experience, and other credentials. Sometimes, not all the professors at the recruiting committees are specialized in TESOL or TEFL but they usually obtained their PhD degrees from English-speaking countries.

The hiring process for EFL/ESL teachers in EFL context has not yet received any attention. Therefore, this paper endeavours to fill this gap in the literature by assessing the employability and perception of NNESTs in a country where English is a foreign language since the literature has so far taken into consideration the context of English speaking countries, namely the United States and the United Kingdom only. Therefore, this paper will probe the recruitment of EFL teachers in the higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia by exploring the criteria used in the hiring process and investigating whether the status of the applicants, as native or non-native speakers of English affects their employment chances. Thus, this research aims to find answers to the following two questions: 1- What are the important hiring criteria used in the recruitment of EFL teachers in the Saudi higher education institutions? 2- Does the status of applicants as native/non-native English speakers affect their hiring potential?

The next sections will present the methodology used in this paper to answer the two research questions. Also, the results of the study will be presented and discussed.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

It is well-established in the literature that native speaker teachers are preferred over non-native speaker teachers ([7], [11], [3], [4], and [5]). This preference might be attributed to the fact that many English learners and programme administrators believe that English native speaker teachers are the ideal English teachers. This belief gives NESTs a powerful status so that they are seen as inherently better teachers than NNESTs [12]. This "superiority", as Phillipson [13] asserts, originated in 1960 in Uganda as a conclusion drawn by the Commonwealth Conference on the teaching of English as a second language: "the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker" (P. 194)

The preference for NESTs is clearly noticeable in many parts of the world in ELT jobs advertisements which require 'native speakers of English only' or give them an advantage over their non-native fellow teachers. In countries where English is not the first language, this preference is usually justified by the argument that these teachers teach a language that is their mother tongue in which they are very competent and therefore they have a kind of a fall command over it. Widdowson [1] asserts that native speakers of English are assumed to have a patent not only on the proper language but also on the proper ways to teach it.

In countries where English is the first language where students come to these countries to learn English, the justification for the preference for NESTs over NNESTs takes a different perspective in addition to their perceived competence and patent on language. A number of researchers such as Cook [11] and Medgyes [14] noted that programme administrators favour NESTs over NNESTs because they believe that students come to English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States with the expectation that they will be taught by NESTs.

Similarly, Holliday [15] states that some influential UK employers say that while they would abolish the discrimination between NESTs and NNESTs in the ELT profession right away, they simply cannot do so because students demand it.

This issue of hiring only NESTs because of students is truly problematic. On the one hand, language institutions and especially commercial ones are trying to satisfy their customers, i.e., the students, by providing them with what they expect when they come to the English-speaking countries: English native speaker teachers. Al-Omrani [12] states that English learners who come to the United States to study the language not only expect to be taught by Americans whose mother tongue is English but they are surprised when they find out that their teacher is a non-native speaker. Similarly, Medgyes [16] suggests that school principals who focus on business consideration hire NESTs only because they are "aware that international students studying in Britain preferred to be taught by native-speaking English teachers. This demand would have to be satisfied by the school principal" (P. 344).

On the other hand, the justification of student-preference seems to be used as a legitimate justification for the discrimination against NNESTs, something which many EFL

organizations including TESOL clearly oppose and reject. In its 'Position Statement Against Discrimination of Non-native Speakers of English in the Field of TESOL,' the organization...

strongly opposes discrimination against nonnative English speakers in the field of English language teaching. Rather, English language proficiency, teaching experience, and professionalism should be assessed along on a continuum of professional preparation. All English language educators should be proficient in English regardless of their native languages, but English language proficiency should be viewed as only one criterion in evaluating a teacher's professionalism. Teaching skills, teaching experience, and professional preparation should be given as much weight as language proficiency [6].

The validity of justifying this discrimination against NNESTs based on students' demand does not seem to hold ground. Let us consider this situation: a certain language institution only employs female teachers or those who come from a particular ethnicity only because the students demand so and without any other valid criteria. Wouldn't this centre be described as sexist or racist? This practice would definitely be unacceptable discrimination even though the hiring criteria were determined by the students.

Although it has been shown that many programme administrators hire NESTs only because of students' preference, few studies have empirically examined whether students have a clear preference for NESTs over NNESTs. More importantly, research has shown that students do not necessarily prefer to be taught by NESTs. Cook [11] used a questionnaire to examine the attitudes of children towards NESTs and NNESTs in different countries and whether students would prefer native speakers over non-native speakers. The study revealed that only 18% of Belgian children, 44% of English children, and 45% of Polish children preferred native speaker teachers. More interestingly, 47% of Belgian, 32% of English, and 25% of Polish children preferred NNESTs. The rest did not have a preference. Cook [17] assures that "more revealingly, nowhere is there an overwhelming preference for NS teachers. Being an NS is only one among many factors that influence students' views of teaching" (P. 331). Clearly, students' preferences are not simply based on teachers' native speakership but rather the preferences are more complex.

Although the research on NNESTs is still in its infancy as Mahboob [3] puts it, this field is continually gaining more attention. A limited number of researchers have empirically explored issues of discrimination against NNESTs in the hiring practices from the perspective of EFL programme administrators ([3], [4], and [5]). They all agreed that being a non-native speaker has an effect on a teacher's recruitment chances. Mahboob [3] investigated the attitudes and hiring

practices of 122 programme administrators of Intensive English Programmes (IEP) in the United States where they were asked to evaluate various hiring criteria they use in their recruitment of EFL teachers. He concluded that being a native speaker is an important hiring criterion to the recruiters and that the more importance they assigned to this criterion the less numbers of NNESTs were employed in those programmes. In other words, there was a negative statistical association between the importance assigned to the 'native' criterion and the numbers of non-native teachers in those programmes. Clark and Paran [4] replicated the study of Mahboob [3] in the United Kingdom and similar results were shown. Similarly, Helal [5] conducted a study to assess the hiring practices of three types of colleges in the North East of the United Kingdom. She found that overall employers had a clear preference for native speakers as well.

To date, research on the recruitment of EFL teachers and hiring practices of programme administrators has covered only the context of the United States and the United Kingdom, leaving an apparent gap in the literature since the contexts of non-English speaking countries have not yet been studied.

The next section presents the methodology used in this study to answer the two research questions provided earlier.

### III. THE STUDY

#### A. The participants

The study used the snowball sampling technique to recruit a sample of fifty six participants in charge of recruiting EFL teachers for the Saudi higher education institutions. All of them were Saudi males working in various Saudi universities, colleges, and institutions.

#### B. Stimulus providers

The selection of the stimulus providers was based on their nationalities which included an Indian, a Syrian, 2 Britons and an Egyptian. They fell into two groups: native speaker teachers (NESTs) and non-native speaker teachers (NNESTs). The first group had two speakers while the second group included three speakers.

The NEST group included two native speakers of British English because the researcher wanted to include two levels of qualification. Therefore, one was more qualified than the other in terms of academic qualification, teaching experience, and teaching in a country where English is a foreign language. The second group included three non-native English speakers who came from India, Egypt, and Syria. The three had similar credentials in terms of age, teaching experience, and academic qualification. They were selected because many EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia and in its neighbouring countries come from these ethnicities.

The stimulus providers were assigned colours instead of numbers to avoid implying any sort of order which might influence the participants' perception of which applicant of the five has the highest qualification level. Thus, the Indian

applicant was assigned "Red Speaker", the Syrian applicant "Blue Speaker", British applicant who was slightly more qualified than the other "White Speaker", the Egyptian applicant "Green Speaker", and the less qualified British applicant "Yellow Speaker". They were all friends of the researcher.

#### C. The recordings

The study included a listening task which involved five recordings with each lasting for less than a minute. Each stimulus provider was told to read a script as if they were leaving a voice mail on the phone of an employer. The script gave information on the applicants' academic qualification, age, number of years spent in teaching, and in what countries they taught English. Table I summarizes these credentials.

TABLE I

Speaker	Academic Qualification	Age	Teaching Experience
Red Speaker	MA in TESOL from Manchester University in 2003	35	6 years (2 in Kuwait)
Blue Speaker	MA in TESOL from Sheffield University in 2001	34	7 years (3 in Dubai)
White Speaker	MA in TESOL from University College London in 2004	38	4 years (2 in Egypt)
Green Speaker	MA in TESOL from University of London in 2000	36	8 years (1 in Qatar)
Yellow Speaker	BA in English from University of Leicester in 2004	33	1 year in UK

Applicants' Credentials: Academic Qualification, Age, and Teaching Experience

#### D. The questionnaire

The questionnaire included two main sections. The first part was a listening task in which the participants were asked to listen to the five recordings and evaluate the qualification levels of the five applicants on a seven-point Likert-scale, on which 1 meant 'highly unqualified' and 7 meant 'highly qualified'.

The second part asked the respondents to evaluate the importance of five hiring criteria: academic qualification, accents, nationality, native speaker status, and teaching experience. This was done on a five-point Likert-scale, on which 1 meant 'not important at all' and 5 meant 'very important'. This coding of data facilitated the statistical analysis which used the SPSS software.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### A. Evaluation of the five hiring criteria

Table II presents the minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation scores for every criterion. The minimum score reflects the lowest (negative) evaluation a criterion received on the five-point scale while the maximum score

shows the highest positive evaluation given to the criterion. Mean scores column is the most important column in this table. It reflects the average score of importance given to every criterion by the 56 participants.

TABLE II

Criteria	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Academic Qualification	5.00	5.00	5.00	0.00
Accent	1.00	5.00	3.14	1.38
Nationality	1.00	5.00	3.23	1.43
Native Speakership	1.00	5.00	3.84	1.28
Teaching Experience	4.00	5.00	4.88	0.33

Minimum, Maximum, Mean, and Standard Deviation Scores of the Criteria

From Table II above, it is obvious that the order of the five criteria based on their perceived importance is as follows: academic qualification, teaching experience, native speakership, nationality, and accent of the applicant. More specifically, the academic qualification criterion was perceived to be the most important one since it was assigned a score of 5, the highest possible score on the scale, by all the 56 participants which reflects its mean score of 5.00. Thus, there was no variation within the answers of the participants, which explains the standard deviation score of 0.00.

Next in perceived importance was the teaching experience. With a minimum score of 4, this criterion was positively perceived since its mean score was 4.88. Also, the evaluations were highly homogeneous since the SD score was 0.33 (the lower the score the more homogenous the responses are).

More importantly, the native speakership criterion was found to be moderately important as reflected by its mean score of 3.84. The minimum score of 1 indicates that some participants perceived this criterion to be 'not important at all' while some of them viewed it as 'very important' by assigning it the maximum score of 5. Thus, these dispersed answers were reflected in the relatively high SD score of 1.28.

The nationality criterion was next in the order of the five criteria with a mean score of 3.23 which indicates relative importance. Also, the SD score of 1.43 reflects the highest level of variation in the participants' evaluations.

Lastly, the accent of the applicant was found to be the least important criterion as perceived by the participants since its mean score was the least (3.14). Also, the SD score of 1.38 indicates a high level of variation in the participants' evaluations.

The discussion above informs the first research question in that the participants ordered the five criteria used in the recruitment of EFL teachers in Saudi higher education institutions as follows: academic qualification, teaching experience, native speakership, nationality, and accent of the applicant.

### B. Evolution of the qualification level of the five applicants

This section will present the evaluation of the qualification levels of the five applicants as perceived by the 56 respondents. Table III shows the minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation scores for every applicant.

TABLE III

Speaker	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Red Speaker	2.00	6.00	4.04	1.17
Blue Speaker	2.00	7.00	4.59	1.26
White Speaker	4.00	7.00	6.48	0.69
Green Speaker	2.00	6.00	4.57	1.14
Yellow Speaker	4.00	7.00	6.45	0.71

Minimum, Maximum, Mean, and SD Scores of the Applicants

Table III shows that the white speaker, who was a highly qualified native speaker of English, was perceived to be the most qualified speaker of the five with his mean score of 6.48. Surprisingly, the next in order was the Yellow speaker who was a native speaker and held the least qualification of the five. He was followed by the Blue speaker, Green speaker and then the Red speaker.

### C. Effect of native speakership on the perception of speakers' qualification

In order to answer the second research question about the interaction between the perceived importance of the native speakership criterion and the perception of the qualification level of the applicants, a Spearman's Rho correlation analysis was conducted.

As for the 'native speakership', the results indicated that there were three significant negative associations that involved this criterion. The first was with the Red speaker ( $p=0.004$ ) with a correlation coefficient of -0.378. The second was with the Blue speaker ( $p=0.000$ ) with a correlation coefficient of -0.495. The third was with the Green speaker ( $p=0.018$ ) with a correlation coefficient of -0.316.

As regards the perception of importance of 'nationality', it also showed three significant negative associations. The first was with the Red speaker ( $p=0.000$ ) with a correlation coefficient of -0.616. The second was with the Blue speaker ( $p=0.000$ ) with a correlation coefficient of -0.680. The third was with the Green speaker ( $p=0.000$ ) with a correlation coefficient of -0.686.

Finally, the results indicated that there were also three significant negative associations that involved the 'accent'. The first was with the Red speaker ( $p=0.001$ ) with a correlation coefficient of -0.432. The second was with the Blue speaker ( $p=0.000$ ) with a correlation coefficient of -

0.585. The third was with the Green speaker ( $p=0.000$ ) with a correlation coefficient of  $-0.532$ .

These negative relationships indicated that the more importance the participants gave to the native speaker criterion, the less qualified they perceived the Red, Blue, and Green applicants to be. Also, the respondents who assigned more importance to the nationality as a hiring criterion perceived the three non-native speakers to be less qualified than did those who assigned the criterion less importance. Similarly, the participants who gave more importance to the accent criterion found the three non-native applicants (Red, Blue, and Green) to be less qualified.

Thus, the discussion above made it obvious that non-native EFL teachers are at a disadvantage if they apply to a position where the recruiters believe that being a native speaker is an important criterion in the hiring process. However, this practice goes against the recommendations of the TESOL statement [6] which advocates that: "employment decisions in this profession which are based solely upon the criterion that an individual is or is not a native speaker of English discriminate against well-qualified individuals, especially when they are made in the absence of any defensible criteria".

Although this finding goes parallel with the findings of the previous research ([3]; [4]; [5]), this paper contributes to the literature greatly in that it showed that in a country where English is a foreign language, the nationalities of the applicants and their accents are added to the suffering of non-native EFL teachers when they seek employment.

In addition, it showed that native speakers have an advantage over non-native speaker teachers even though they were less qualified in comparison with their non-native counterparts. This was evident in the Yellow speaker who was the least qualified applicant and yet he was perceived to be more qualified than the three non-native speaker applicants. Furthermore, the respondents were more homogeneous in their judgments on the obviously less qualified applicant (SD for the Yellow speaker = 0.71). Although this issue can be in a sense attributed to the earlier point of NES preference, indeed it is an interesting point that requires further investigation.

It can be fairly said that hiring criteria used by programme administrators do matter because they have an effect on the prospects of EFL teachers' employment. However, it is of extreme importance that recruiters commit to these criteria when they assess applicants' qualifications. For example, the Yellow applicant should not have been assigned this high level of qualification (mean = 6.45) if academic qualification and teaching experience were truly of high importance to the recruiters.

Certainly, this research has some limitations that need to be identified. One of these limitations is the relatively small size of the sample. Although the sample consisted of 56 participants, the nature of the research, which used the snowball sampling technique, did not allow much room to add more. That is, in order for the participants to be included in the sample, the research requires them to have participated at least once in the process of recruiting EFL teachers. Therefore, the same participants were repeatedly nominated and no new ones were suggested.

Another limitation of the study was that it only applies to the context of Saudi Arabian higher education institutions. More work is definitely needed in order to generalize the findings to other countries where English is a foreign or second language.

For a fuller picture, more information is needed about the personal experiences of the participants with both categories of teachers: NESTs and NNESTs. This certainly calls for the inclusion of qualitative data such as interviews. Indeed, more input from the participants is essential since personal experiences can play a role in the judgments on others. Although it showed that native speakership is an important hiring criterion, this paper does not provide explanation for this importance. It is suggested that teachers training programmes can play a role in reducing the negative attitudes towards non-native English speaker teachers by increasing their self-confidence and also by raising the native English speaker teachers' awareness [9]. This will hopefully result in programme administrators who are more aware about the whole issue. Nemtchinova [10] also supports this by arguing that once teacher trainers work with NNESTs, they may well form positive impressions of them.

## V. CONCLUSION

This paper investigated the important hiring criteria used in the recruitment of EFL teachers in the Saudi higher education institutions. It found that the participants perceived the importance of these criteria in the following order: academic qualification, teaching experience, native speakership, nationality, and accent of the applicant. However, when they were asked to evaluate the applicants' qualification level, the participants unconsciously ignored the academic qualification and the teaching experience and used the native speaker status as a qualification indicator. Interestingly, this contradicts with the order of the two criteria which they assigned the most importance: academic qualification and teaching experience. This conforms to the arguments of Widdowson [1] that native speakers of English are assumed to have a patent not only on the language but also on the proper ways of teaching it. In other words, the English native speakers are believed to be the ideal teachers of English merely by the virtue of being native speakers of English. This paper also showed the status of applicants as native or non-native English speakers does indeed affect their employment chances.

Not only the native speakership criterion that plays a significant role in the employment of the EFL teacher in the Saudi higher education institutions but also the nationality of the applicant and his accent.

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