

Beyond Equality in English Language Teaching: *Self-Development and Professional Positioning of Native and Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers in the Gulf Cooperation Council*

Masuda Wardak¹

¹ University of Khorfakkan, Sharjah UAE, United Arab Emirates

Correspondence: Masuda Wardak, University of Khorfakkan, Sharjah UAE, United Arab Emirates.

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Abstract

This study investigates the roles, perceptions, and professional experiences of native and non-native English-speaking teachers in GCC-related English language teaching contexts. The study adopts an exploratory qualitative design, drawing on systematically documented professional observations accumulated over a fifteen-year period and a thematically analyzed corpus of 200 publicly available LinkedIn posts related to English language teaching in the GCC. Data were analyzed inductively using a transparent coding procedure supported by reflexive memos and iterative theme refinement, allowing for the identification of recurring patterns across professional discourse and reflective practice. Analysis of the data generated nine interrelated themes: hiring bias and native speakerism, name-based discrimination, NNEST professional challenges, identity pride and resistance, linguistic relatability and bilingual support, professional complacency, optimal placement, social media advocacy, and sector innovation potential. The findings indicate that effective English language teaching is not inherently determined by linguistic origin but is more consistently associated with pedagogical clarity, cultural responsiveness, and sustained professional development. The study further reveals discursively constructed tensions between identity and professional growth, alongside perceived inconsistencies in teacher deployment practices as reflected in professional narratives. The findings support calls for competency-based recruitment, strategic deployment aligned with teacher strengths, particularly at foundational proficiency levels, and equity-oriented professional development frameworks. By integrating reflexive professional observation with social media discourse, this study advances a multidimensional perspective that repositions the debate beyond binary inclusion toward a critical examination of professional growth, pedagogical contribution, and self-directed excellence in multilingual English language teaching contexts.

Keywords: NNEST, native-speakerism, teacher identity, professional development, ELT hiring practices, social media discourse, GCC context

1. Introduction

The long-standing divide between native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) has shaped hiring policies, classroom practices, and perceptions within English language education worldwide. However, the key question today is not simply who a native speaker is, but which teachers most effectively facilitate learner development and academic success. Particularly in multilingual contexts such as GCC countries, NNESTs, especially those sharing students' first language, often hold unique advantages, particularly at lower proficiency levels. Teachers who have themselves experienced learning English typically bring empathy, cultural understanding, and strategic scaffolding techniques that enhance learner confidence and comprehension. Their ability to explain complex grammar, offer culturally relevant examples, and provide targeted support in learners' first language (L1) can play a critical role in facilitating foundational language acquisition.

While NESTs excel in advanced contexts where fluency, idiomatic precision, and cultural immersion are priorities, they may face challenges at lower levels in the absence of shared linguistic resources. Notably, some native speakers working in the Gulf have actively learned Arabic to better connect with their students, underscoring the growing recognition that linguistic competence is multifaceted and extends beyond nativeness.

This study seeks to explore how NNESTs in the GCC countries engage in professional development, perceive their contributions relative to NESTs, and are positioned within institutional practices. It also investigates the challenges and attitudes influencing NNESTs' pursuit of native-like competence and examines how their unique strengths can be best leveraged to enhance learner outcomes. Drawing on professional observation and thematic analysis of LinkedIn discourse, this research offers a multidimensional exploration of these questions. To summarize, this study makes three key contributions to the field of English language teaching. First, it extends existing NNEST research by shifting the focus from classroom performance and hiring bias to the intersection of professional discourse and practitioner reflection, offering a more dynamic understanding of how teacher identity and legitimacy are constructed in contemporary

contexts. Second, it introduces LinkedIn as a site of professional sense-making, highlighting the role of digital platforms in shaping and contesting narratives of expertise, equity, and professional value. Third, it reframes the discussion beyond the native/non-native dichotomy by foregrounding professional development, pedagogical adaptability, and self-positioning as central determinants of teaching effectiveness. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing efforts to reconceptualize teacher expertise in multilingual and globalized ELT contexts.

1.1 Problem Statement: NNESTs' Linguistic Competence

While the existing literature has widely highlighted the strengths, resilience, and pedagogical contributions of NNESTs, several critical research gaps remain underexplored. Most prior research focuses on classroom performance, student perceptions, or systemic hiring biases; however, limited attention has been given to how NESTs and NNESTs contribute to curriculum development, material selection, and syllabus design within multilingual institutional contexts. Moreover, although equity in hiring and promotion is frequently discussed, there remains a lack of systematically documented evidence regarding the specific HR mechanisms that privilege nativeness and their long-term impact on career trajectories. Importantly, while student opinions have been surveyed, there is a lack of comparative data on measurable learning outcomes such as exam scores or writing proficiency between students taught by NESTs versus NNESTs. Another overlooked dimension involves the coping mechanisms NNESTs develop to navigate biased educational environments, particularly in the Gulf, and how parents' or employers' perceptions further reinforce hiring disparities. The role of teacher accent on student comprehension and the possibility that NNESTs may, in some cases, be better trained in digital pedagogy are also under-investigated. Finally, while the field often critiques institutional discrimination, less attention has been directed toward the internal professional accountability of NNESTs particularly in relation to ongoing linguistic development, cultural competence, and alignment with international teaching standards. Addressing these gaps offers an opportunity to reframe the conversation beyond external bias and focus on how NNESTs can elevate their professional standing to match or surpass that of their native-speaking peers.

2. Literature Review

Contemporary English language teaching (ELT) scholarship has undergone a marked shift in how it conceptualizes teacher identity, professionalism, and legitimacy, particularly regarding the long-standing distinction between NESTs and NNESTs. While early foundational scholarship challenged the "native speaker fallacy" and exposed the ideological privileging of nativeness in ELT (Medgyes, 1983, 1992, 1994; Phillipson, 1992; Widdowson, 1994; Moussu & Llorca, 2008; Wardak, 2014), recent research has moved decisively beyond binary categorization, reframing the debate in terms of professional competence, intersectionality, and accountability.

Recent critical scholarship conceptualizes (non)native speakerism not merely as a linguistic distinction but as a socio-professional construct intersecting with race ethnicity, class, accent, and institutional power (Selvi, Yazan, & Mahboob, 2024; Holliday, 2025). This work argues that native-speaker status functions as a symbolic proxy for legitimacy rather than a reliable indicator of teaching effectiveness. Selvi (2025) further contends that ELT professionalism should be evaluated through demonstrable pedagogical competence, reflective practice, and learner outcomes rather than linguistic origin. These perspectives mark a clear departure from earlier deficit-oriented framings of NNESTs and instead situate teacher identity as dynamic, performative, and contextually negotiated (Gatwiri, 2021; Dovchin & Wang, 2024; Li, 2022).

2.1 Hiring Practices, Institutional Bias, and Market Pressures

Post-2020 research consistently documents the persistence of native-speakerism in ELT hiring, despite decades of critique (Nigar, Kostogriz, Gurney, & Janfada, 2024; Yip, 2023). Chahkandi (2025) demonstrate how ELT job advertisements continue to rhetorically construct native speakers, often implicitly white and Western, as the ideal teacher, thereby reproducing systemic inequities under the guise of quality assurance. In the GCC context specifically, Lemana's (2022) qualitative study and Awad, Abu Guba, and Fareh's (2024) large-scale survey reveal sustained institutional preference for NESTs, frequently justified by parental expectations, school branding, and perceived marketability rather than pedagogical evidence.

More recent regional analyses deepen this critique. Daoud and Kasztalska's (2025) examination of ELT job advertisements in the United Arab Emirates identifies explicit and implicit mechanisms through which nativeness and citizenship from Anglophone countries are used as proxies for competence. These practices, the authors argue, undermine merit-based hiring and restrict professional mobility for qualified NNESTs. Beyond formal policy, broader sociolinguistic research highlights how name-based and accent-based discrimination operate in employment contexts, shaping access and opportunity independently of actual skill or qualification (Montoya & Correa, 2024; Zoghbor, 2025). However, while the existence of bias is well established, the precise mechanisms through which institutional, parental, and commercial pressures interact remain insufficiently theorized.

2.2 Teacher Competence, Professional Development, and Accountability

Recent scholarship increasingly shifts attention from structural discrimination alone to questions of teacher professionalism, agency, and internal accountability. Farrell (2021) emphasizes the centrality of reflective practice and continuous professional development in sustaining effective language teaching, regardless of linguistic background. Similarly, Cong-Lem (2024) frames teacher agency as a critical driver of professional growth, arguing that educators who actively engage in self-directed learning and innovation are better positioned to influence institutional change.

This perspective complicates earlier narratives that positioned NNESTs primarily as victims of discrimination; while systemic bias

remains real, recent work cautions against treating NNEST identity as inherently oppositional or static (Yang & Forbes, 2025). Sadeghi and Richards (2021) note that professionalism in TESOL must be understood as an ongoing process involving skill refinement, pedagogical adaptation, and responsiveness to learner needs. Within this framing, both NNESTs and NESTs may experience professional stagnation if they rely on symbolic status, whether nativeness or identity pride, rather than sustained development.

2.3 Bilingual Pedagogy, Learner Outcomes, and Strategic Deployment

A growing body of recent research provides empirical support for the pedagogical advantages of bilingual and multilingual teaching practices, particularly at lower proficiency levels. Macaro, Tian and Chu's (2020) critical review of L1 use in English-medium instruction challenges monolingual immersion ideologies, demonstrating that judicious use of learners' first language can enhance comprehension, reduce anxiety, and improve learning outcomes. Subsequent studies confirm that teacher beliefs about bilingual pedagogy directly influence classroom practice and student achievement (An & Macaro, 2022).

Similarly, Lee, Lee and Lo (2023) report that strategic L1 use in EFL classrooms facilitates grammatical understanding and learner confidence, especially among beginner-level students. These insights align with broader arguments that NNESTs who share linguistic or cultural backgrounds with learners may possess instructional advantages in foundational and grammar-intensive contexts, while NESTs may be better suited to advanced fluency-oriented courses (Zhang & Solarz, 2022). Despite this evidence, institutional deployment practices often fail to strategically align teacher strengths with course objectives.

2.4 Student Perceptions and Classroom Dynamics

Recent studies on student perceptions complicate assumptions that learners uniformly prefer native-speaking teachers. Awad et al. (2024) find that students in the UAE prioritize teaching clarity, structure, and engagement over linguistic origin, valuing NNESTs for explicit explanation and reliability and NESTs for fluency and pronunciation. These findings echo broader post-2020 research suggesting that student evaluations are shaped more by instructional effectiveness and affective rapport than by accent or nationality.

2.5 Synthesis and Research Gaps

Taken together, recent scholarship demonstrates a clear shift away from simplistic native/non-native binaries toward nuanced examinations of professionalism, competence, and equity in ELT. However, several gaps remain. First, limited research examines how NNESTs themselves navigate professional growth, negotiate identity pride, or pursue near-native competence within biased institutional contexts. Second, while hiring discrimination is well documented, few studies trace its impact from recruitment practices through to classroom outcomes and learner success. Third, much of the literature relies on single-method designs, limiting triangulation between institutional discourse, lived experience, and professional self-representation.

Responding to these gaps, the present study integrates autoethnographic reflection with social media discourse analysis to move beyond defensive equity narratives and critically examine how NNESTs can actively enhance their professional positioning, pedagogical value, and institutional impact within the GCC ELT context.

2.6 Research Questions

The following research questions aim to explore how native and non-native English-speaking teachers are represented, perceived, and reflected upon within professional discourse and practitioner experience in GCC contexts.

1. To what extent do NNESTs as represented in LinkedIn discourse and professional reflection engage in professional development toward near-native competence, and how do attitudes like identity pride or resistance to native-speaker models affect their motivation and the optimization of their teaching strengths?
2. How are NNESTs' roles and contributions constructed and interpreted within LinkedIn discourse and reflective professional narratives, particularly in relation to pedagogical strengths, bilingual advantages, and perceived institutional value?
3. How are teacher placement practices and role differentiation between NESTs and NNESTs described and discussed within professional discourse, and what insights emerge from these representations?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative research design grounded in thematic analysis to examine the professional positioning, development trajectories, and institutional treatment of NESTs and NNESTs in the GCC countries. Given the under-theorized nature of NNEST self-development, institutional placement, and professional accountability in this context, an inductive approach was selected to allow patterns and meanings to emerge organically from the data rather than be constrained by pre-existing frameworks.

Data were drawn from two complementary sources: (1) a purposefully constructed corpus of public professional discourse on LinkedIn, and (2) the researcher's autoethnographic reflections based on fifteen years of professional engagement in English language education in the Gulf region. The integration of social media discourse with reflective professional experience enabled a form of qualitative triangulation linking publicly articulated professional narratives with practitioner-based insight, providing a multidimensional and context-sensitive analytical lens. The corpus was treated as a site of professional sense-making rather than as representative public opinion, reflecting how educators and stakeholders articulate identity, legitimacy, and professional value within a semi-public professional

space, without implying comprehensive representation across all institutional stakeholders in the GCC.

3.2 LinkedIn Corpus Construction and Selection Procedures

The LinkedIn corpus was constructed between January 2023 and March 2024 using targeted keyword-based searches on the LinkedIn platform. Search strings included combinations of: “*native English-speaking teachers*,” “*NNEST*,” “*native speaker hiring*,” “*speakerism*,” “*native speakers only*,” and “*ELT hiring practices*.” These terms were selected to capture discourse related to professional identity, hiring practices, pedagogical legitimacy, and institutional bias within English language education.

Posts were included if they met the following criteria: (a) authored by self-identified education professionals (teachers, academic coordinators, administrators, or policy stakeholders); (b) directly addressed issues related to the hiring, professional development, institutional positioning, or perceived value of NESTs or NNESTs; (c) written in English; and (d) publicly accessible at the time of data collection.

Posts were excluded if they were purely promotional, lacked substantive commentary, were unrelated to ELT, or duplicated content through reposting. Where reposts occurred, only the original post was retained. Following screening and de-duplication, a final corpus of 200 posts was established. The corpus was treated as a site of professional sense-making rather than as representative public opinion, reflecting how educators and stakeholders articulate identity, legitimacy, and professional value within a semi-public professional space.

3.3 Autoethnographic Data and Researcher Positionality

In addition to the LinkedIn corpus, this study incorporated autoethnographic data derived from the researcher’s fifteen years of professional experience in English language education across the Gulf region. During this period, the researcher worked alongside both NEST and NNEST colleagues, participated in hiring and placement discussions, observed classroom practices across proficiency levels, and navigated institutional expectations related to language, accent, and professional legitimacy.

This autoethnographic component follows Chang’s (2016) conceptualization of analytic autoethnography, wherein personal experience is systematically examined and situated within broader sociolinguistic and institutional patterns. The researcher’s positionality as a near-native English-speaking educator informs the analysis, offering insight into the internal negotiations of linguistic competence, identity pride, and professional accountability. Reflexivity was maintained through ongoing reflective memos that interrogated how personal experience shaped interpretation and thematic emphasis.

3.4 Data Analysis Procedure

Data from both sources were analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis. An inductive coding approach was employed to allow themes to emerge from the data rather than be imposed a priori.

The analytic process involved:

1. Familiarization with the data through repeated reading of LinkedIn posts and reflective field notes.
2. Initial coding, generating descriptive and interpretive codes such as *hiring bias*, *pedagogical competence*, *identity pride*, *professional complacency*, and *bilingual advantage*.
3. Theme development, clustering codes into broader conceptual themes related to teacher identity, institutional practice, and professional development.
4. Theme review, ensuring internal coherence and distinction across themes.
5. Theme definition and naming, supported by analytic memos documenting coding decisions.
6. Synthesis and reporting, integrating themes into the study’s analytical narrative.

A codebook was developed to define themes, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and analytic decision rules, enhancing transparency and analytic consistency. Illustrative examples from the LinkedIn corpus were ethically paraphrased and reported in aggregate to preserve anonymity and avoid traceability.

3.5 Credibility and Reflexivity Strategies

To enhance analytic credibility and trustworthiness, several strategies were employed. An audit trail was maintained documenting corpus selection decisions, code development, theme refinement, and reflexive considerations throughout the analysis. Reflexive memos were used to critically examine the researcher’s assumptions and positionality.

Additionally, emerging themes and interpretations were discussed with two experienced ELT professionals familiar with the GCC context, serving as informal peer debriefing. This process helped challenge interpretive bias and strengthen thematic coherence while remaining consistent with the study’s qualitative and exploratory design.

3.6 Ethical Consideration and Absence of Human Participants

This study did not involve direct human participants. No interviews, surveys, or interactions were conducted for the purpose of data collection. All LinkedIn content analyzed was publicly accessible and subsequently anonymized through paraphrasing and aggregation. No personal names, usernames, or identifiable details were retained. As such, the study did not require institutional ethical approval, and standard ethical principles of privacy, respect, and non-maleficence were upheld.

3.7 Limitations

As a qualitative and interpretive study, the findings are not statistically generalized. The insights are contextually grounded and most applicable to multilingual, expatriate-dominated educational systems such as those in the GCC countries. Additionally, while the integration of LinkedIn discourse and autoethnographic reflection provides valuable insight into professional narratives, it does not permit direct verification of institutional practices or stakeholder perspectives, and therefore the findings should be interpreted as discursively situated rather than empirically generalizable across the GCC region. While the integration of autoethnography provides depth and authenticity, it also necessitates ongoing reflexivity to mitigate interpretive bias. The reliance on LinkedIn discourse further reflects self-selected professional narratives shaped by platform norms and professional self-presentation. As such, the dataset captures how professional identities and practices are constructed and represented, rather than offering a comprehensive account of institutional realities. Finally, analysis conducted by a single researcher may limit interpretive plurality, despite the use of audit trails and peer debriefing, although these strategies were employed to enhance analytic rigor and transparency.

4. Data Presentation and Findings

This section presents the findings of the thematic analysis derived from the combined LinkedIn corpus ($n = 200$) and the researcher's autoethnographic reflections. Guided by the inductive coding process described in Section 3, nine interrelated themes were identified. These themes reflect recurring patterns in how NESTs and NNESTs are positioned, perceived, and deployed within English language education in the GCC countries. Table 1 provides an overview of the themes, analytic focus, and illustrative paraphrased examples drawn from both data sources. The table is followed by a thematic narrative that integrates social media discourse with professional observation.

Table 1. Combined Thematic Analysis of LinkedIn Discourse and Autoethnographic Data

Themes	Analytic Focus	Illustrative Paraphrased Observation
Hiring Bias and Native-Speakerism	Institutional preference for nativeness over pedagogical competence	<i>Schools advertise "native speakers only" despite NNESTs holding equivalent qualifications</i>
Name-Based Discrimination	Assumptions based on names, ethnicity, or perceived accent	<i>Candidates with non-Western names are asked to prove English proficiency despite Western degrees</i>
NNEST Professional Challenges	Limited recognition, promotion barriers, continual need to prove competence	<i>NNESTs report repeated validation demands compared to native peers</i>
Identity Pride and Resistance	Tension between cultural identity and institutional expectations	<i>Some NNESTs reject pressure to approximate native accents</i>
Linguistic Relatability and Bilingual Support	Strategic use of students' L1 to scaffold learning	<i>Explaining grammar in Arabic accelerates comprehension at lower levels</i>
Professional Complacency vs. Development	Stagnation among both NNESTs and NESTs	<i>Some NNESTs resist upskilling; some NESTs rely solely on nativeness</i>
Optimal Role Placement	Alignment of teacher strengths with course levels	<i>NNESTs excel in grammar-focused classes; NESTs in advanced fluency</i>
Social Media Advocacy	LinkedIn as a site of resistance and professional voice	<i>Educators use the platform to challenge discriminatory hiring</i>
Sector Innovation Potential	NNESTs' capacity to reshape ELT practice	<i>Multilingual strategies enhance learning beyond traditional models</i>

4.1 Hiring Biases and Name-Based Discrimination

One of the most consistently observed themes across both datasets relates to hiring bias rooted in native-speakerism and name-based discrimination. LinkedIn posts frequently described institutional practices in which nativeness was implicitly or explicitly prioritized, often justified by parental expectations, institutional branding, or marketability rather than pedagogical effectiveness. Within this discourse, candidates with non-Western names were regularly reported to face heightened scrutiny regarding their English proficiency, even when they possessed Western citizenship, advanced degrees, or extensive teaching experience.

Autoethnographic observations strongly corroborated these accounts. During recruitment and evaluation cycles, colleagues with Arabic, Asian, or African-sounding names were required to submit standardized language test scores such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or undergo additional scrutiny, while similarly qualified candidates with Anglo-sounding names were assumed to be linguistically competent. This form of symbolic filtering, based on perceived identity rather than demonstrable ability, emerges as a persistent and structurally embedded mechanism contributing to inequity in ELT hiring practices as represented in the data,

4.2 Perceived Competence Versus Linguistic Origin

A second dominant theme concerned the tension between perceived teaching competence and linguistic origin. NNEST contributors frequently articulate frustration at being overlooked for positions or advancement despite holding postgraduate qualifications, international teaching certifications, and years of classroom experience. These narratives repeatedly questioned the assumption that nativeness equates to instructional effectiveness.

The researcher's professional observations echoed this disconnect. In multiple institutional settings, NNESTs who demonstrated structured lesson planning, explicit grammar instruction, and high learner engagement consistently received strong student evaluations and positive academic outcomes. Nevertheless, institutional preference often continued to favor native speakers, particularly in public-facing roles, revealing a persistent gap between classroom realities and hiring rationales.

4.3 Professional Complacency and Continuous Development

A more critical and less frequently addressed theme involved professional complacency across both groups. While much of the discourse critiques discrimination against NNESTs, LinkedIn discussions and reflective observations also revealed instances where some NNESTs limited themselves to teaching lower-level classes and showed resistance to further linguistic or pedagogical development. In these cases, identity pride occasionally functioned as a rationale for disengagement from international benchmarking or advanced proficiency goals.

Conversely, certain NESTs were described as relying excessively on their native-speaker status, demonstrating limited engagement with professional development, cultural responsiveness, or methodological training. These parallel forms of stagnation suggest that neither nativeness nor non-nativeness guarantees professional excellence. Instead, sustained effectiveness emerged as closely tied to reflective practice, upskilling, and responsiveness to learner needs.

4.4 Linguistic Relatability and Bilingual Support

The value of linguistic and cultural alignment between teachers and learners emerged as a particularly salient theme, especially at lower proficiency levels. Bilingual NNESTs frequently highlighted the strategic use of students' first language, most notably Arabic, to scaffold grammar explanations, reduce anxiety, and accelerate comprehension. These practices were framed not as shortcuts but as pedagogically intentional interventions.

The researcher's classroom observations reinforced this pattern. In beginner and elementary level contexts, judicious use of Arabic facilitated conceptual clarity and fostered learner confidence, particularly among students with limited exposure to English. While immersion remained an overarching goal, temporary L1 support was shown to enhance engagement and retention when applied strategically.

4.5 Optimal Role Placement and Strategic Deployment

Closely related to linguistic relatability was the theme of optimal teacher placement. Across both datasets, participants advocated for aligning teacher strengths with course objectives rather than adhering to rigid native/non-native categorizations. NNESTs were frequently described as particularly effective in grammar-intensive, foundational, and exam-oriented courses, while NESTs were viewed as advantageous in advanced fluency, discussion-based, and pronunciation-focused contexts.

Despite these insights, institutional deployment strategies rarely reflected such pedagogical differentiation. Instead, placement decisions were often driven by assumptions about nativeness rather than instructional fitness, resulting in suboptimal utilization of teacher expertise.

4.6 Advocacy, Empowerment, and Digital Professional Identity

A final major theme concerned the role of social media, particularly LinkedIn, as a space for advocacy, reflection, and professional empowerment. NNESTs increasingly used the platform to share experiences, challenge discriminatory practices, and collectively articulate alternative visions of teacher professionalism. Campaigns, open letters, and reflective posts functioned as counter-narratives to dominant hiring discourses.

For the researcher, participation in these online exchanges revealed strong convergence between personal experience and collective sentiment. Social media thus served not only as a data source but as a professional arena in which NNESTs negotiated legitimacy, community, and agency beyond institutional constraints.

4.7 Summary of Findings

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that teaching effectiveness in the GCC ELT context is shaped less by linguistic origin and more by pedagogical competence, cultural responsiveness, and commitment to continuous professional development. While systemic bias and symbolic discrimination persist, the data also reveal internal challenges related to professional complacency and resistance to growth among both NNESTs and NESTs. Bilingualism and linguistic relatability emerged as critical assets at lower proficiency levels yet remain underutilized due to rigid hiring and placement practices. Social media discourse further highlights a shift from defensive equality claims toward proactive professional self-positioning and advocacy.

Table 2. Summary of Findings

Theme	Key Insights
Competence vs. Nativeness	Teaching effectiveness is grounded in pedagogy, not linguistic origin
Bilingual Support	Shared L1 enhances comprehension and confidence at lower levels
Professional Development	Stagnation affects both NNESTs and NESTs when growth is neglected
Name-Based Discrimination	Perceived identity influences hiring beyond qualifications
Digital Advocacy	Social platforms enable collective NNEST empowerment and reform discourse

5. Discussion

This section expands on the study's findings and addresses the research questions (in no order), drawing directly on the literature discussed earlier to contextualize and support the analysis. The discussion explores key themes that have emerged from both personal observation and the analysis of social media discourse, particularly LinkedIn posts, and aligns these with current debates in the field regarding hiring practices, language use, teacher development, and conceptions of professional competence.

5.1 Beyond the Native/Non-Native Binary (RQ 2)

Aligning with prior research (e.g., Selvi et al., 2024; Awad et al., 2024), the findings reinforce that nativeness is not a reliable measure of teaching quality. Consistent with prior studies (e.g., Awad et al., 2024; Zhang & Solarz, 2022), teaching effectiveness is defined by pedagogical skill, cultural responsiveness, and clear communication. Drawing on long-term professional observation and patterns reflected in LinkedIn discourse related to GCC context, several recurring patterns emerge regarding hiring practices. Within the analyzed discourse and professional reflections, employers are frequently described as prioritizing teachers' ability to meet institutional expectations and deliver curriculum objectives effectively. Nativeness may be initially considered (as highlighted in Daoud & Kasztalska, 2025), but teachers who demonstrate strong linguistic competence, a clear and intelligible accent, and cultural awareness are ultimately favored, regardless of origin. Most employers increasingly value teachers who can deliver the syllabus with linguistic clarity, cross-cultural understanding, and professional expertise, while others hire "Native only" believing that their native status can promote their institutional status. The analysis also reflects the complex hiring landscape discussed in Lemana (2022) and Al-Hadithy (2023), where native-speakerism persists in institutional discourse, yet is increasingly challenged in practice by the realities of teacher performance. In line with these findings, the discussion moves beyond the native/non-native binary to emphasize a shift toward evidence-based hiring practices that focus on adaptability, classroom impact, and learner outcomes.

5.2 The Strategic Role of L1 in Instruction (RQ 3)

One of the most compelling findings is the pedagogical value of shared L1 use, particularly at beginner or elementary levels. This supports earlier observations in the UAE context (Al Noursi, 2009) and global context (Wardak, 2014) which highlight the unique role NNESTs play in scaffolding learning through cultural and linguistic proximity. Teachers who can strategically use the students' L1 enhance conceptual understanding, reduce learner anxiety, and bridge communication gaps benefits that are often overlooked in "English-only" policy environments.

Zhang and Solarz (2022) and Adara (2019) similarly acknowledge the complementary strengths that NNESTs bring to the classroom, particularly in fostering clarity and empathy. In multilingual and under-resourced contexts, particularly where students are not literate in their first language, bilingual instruction can offer dual benefits. Some Arabic-speaking students with limited literacy have improved both their English and Arabic reading and writing skills when taught through translation-based strategies. This highlights the potential for bilingual teachers to support dual-literacy development, a factor that is rarely considered in traditional teacher evaluations.

When considering the suitability of NNESTs for lower-level English language classes, successful examples within EFL contexts demonstrate their effectiveness. On various social platforms, countless videos show NNESTs teaching English to students in their own countries, often in their shared native language. Far from being ineffective, these teaching methods form a strong foundation. NNESTs, who understand the linguistic and cultural background of their learners, are often better equipped to guide students through the initial stages of language acquisition. As learners progress and require more advanced input, they naturally turn to native-speaker sources such as films, online content, and immersive experiences. In contrast, learners with no foundational English who are suddenly immersed in native-speaking environments, such as refugees or asylum seekers arriving in the UK, required to attend English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes, often face significant challenges without access to translation or first-language support, especially in the early stages.

Furthermore, learner perceptions, as explored by Awad et al. (2024) and Tosuncuoglu (2017) suggest that students appreciate NNESTs' ability to explain complex concepts in relatable terms. This reinforces the position that bilingualism constitutes a significant pedagogical resource rather than a limitation, warranting greater institutional recognition and integration.

5.3 Challenges and Self-Development (RQ 1)

While institutional discrimination has been well documented in previous and recent studies (e.g., Phillipson, 1992; Daoud & Kasztalska, 2025), this study shifts attention to the self-driven development of NNESTs. The findings reveal that neither NESTs nor NNESTs are immune to professional stagnation, though the underlying causes and impacts differ. On one hand, some NESTs display a degree of professional complacency, relying on their native-speaker status without investing sufficient effort into adapting to local classroom needs or expanding their pedagogical repertoire. While this presents challenges, the more significant concern emerging from the study is the lack of proactive professional development among NNESTs.

As Farrell (2013) argues, reflective practice and continuous learning are essential for teacher growth, complacency among NNESTs is particularly notable. Many non-native teachers limit themselves to teaching lower levels, assuming this is sufficient, which often results in stagnation of their own language growth. This can lead to persistent errors in pronunciation, pragmatics, and written communication, reducing their effectiveness in higher-level or specialized English instruction. While institutional biases and hiring preferences have been widely discussed in NNEST research, less attention has been paid to the NNESTs' own responsibility to pursue ongoing linguistic and professional development.

In some cases, NNESTs may lean too heavily on moral or equity arguments, emphasizing their right to equal treatment without matching this with efforts to enhance near-native competence. A subtle form of identity-based resistance can also emerge, where teachers take pride in their distinct L2 identity and consciously resist conforming to native-speaker models. This complements the call by Selvi, Yazan, and Mahboob (2024) to move beyond binary identity politics and focus on performance, agency, and reform leadership. While empowering in

some post-colonial and sociolinguistic contexts, such resistance may limit effectiveness in classrooms where students, parents, or employers expect native-like input.

This dual pattern of disengagement among both groups underscores the need for continuous, self-driven professional development. Institutions should not only promote fair hiring and inclusion but also encourage NNESTs to enhance their near-native competence by continuously improving pronunciation, cultural and pragmatic fluency, idiomatic use, and professional skills, while maintaining pride in their unique bilingual identity. The future of English education depends not merely on defending NNEST equality but on fostering a generation of non-native teachers who lead, innovate, and elevate the standards of the profession, not just as capable alternatives, but as transformative agents within the field.

5.4 Toward a More Inclusive Definition of Expertise

Ultimately, the findings support a redefinition of what it means to be a "qualified" English teacher in a globalized, multilingual educational context. This article aims to challenge the simplistic native–non-native binary and instead foreground the attributes that truly matter in teaching effectiveness: linguistic proficiency, cultural empathy, student-centered pedagogy, and a commitment to ongoing professional growth (Zhang & Solarz, 2022). The study confirms that both NESTs and NNESTs can succeed or stagnate, depending on their commitment to professional development and adaptability to context. Through critical reflection, lived experience, and years of classroom observation, this study advocates for an inclusive and performance-based rethinking of how English language teachers are evaluated, perceived, and hired.

Likewise, expertise in ELT is not tied to one's birthplace or accent, but to one's ability to support learners, foster linguistic growth, and engage meaningfully with diverse classroom communities. It is time to explore not only whether institutions are fair to NNESTs, but also whether NNESTs are prepared to match or even exceed the expectations historically reserved for their native-speaking peers. In line with Perry (2023), NNESTs who leverage their multilingualism and cross-cultural experience can act as transformative agents within the field. The GCC countries are well-positioned to lead this paradigm shift, moving from identity-based to performance-based teaching models and offering equal recognition to all educators who enhance the profession through their diversity, adaptability, and skill and are committed to excellence.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

In conclusion, the study challenges the assumption that teaching effectiveness is defined by nativeness. Instead, both NESTs and NNESTs possess distinct strengths that, when effectively integrated, can create richer, more dynamic learning environments. Institutional policies as reflected in professional discourse and practitioner insight should prioritize pedagogical effectiveness, continuous professional development, and student outcomes over simplistic identity markers.

The findings reaffirm that NNESTs, especially those who share students' first language, offer unique classroom advantages including linguistic empathy, culturally responsive pedagogy, and scaffolded instruction techniques. Yet the study also highlights that both NESTs and NNESTs can face professional stagnation if they fail to grow or connect meaningfully with learners. Moreover, it draws attention to subtle but persistent biases, such as name-based discrimination, and underscores the emerging power of digital advocacy in reshaping professional narratives and perceptions. Ultimately, the native/non-native divide is no longer a useful measure of quality; what matters is a teacher's ability to foster learning, show professional commitment, and contribute meaningfully to institutional goals. The GCC's multilingual and multicultural educational setting provides a valuable contextual lens for interpreting these findings, rather than a basis for broad generalization.

6.2 Recommendations: Implications for Policy and Practice

Several tentative and contextually grounded as well as analytically derived recommendations emerge from the patterns identified in the analyzed discourse and professional reflections to guide educational institutions, hiring committees, and teacher training bodies:

6.2.1 Institutional Hiring and Recruitment Practices

- **Adopt Competency-Based Hiring Practices:** Shift focus from nativeness to comprehensive evaluations based on pedagogical skill, qualifications, classroom effectiveness, language proficiency, and adaptability.
- **Implement Equity-Focused Recruitment Processes:** Introduce anonymized CV reviews, transparent evaluation criteria, and anti-bias training for hiring panels to ensure merit-based selection.
- **Revise Hiring Language and Job Advertisements:** Rewrite job postings to emphasize competency and professional requirements, removing discriminatory native-speaker preferences that deter qualified NNEST applicants.

6.2.2 Pedagogical Recognition and Support

- **Recognize and Utilize Bilingual Advantages:** Acknowledge the pedagogical strengths of teachers who share students' L1, particularly for lower-level learners, and promote strategic, research-backed L1 use in instructional design.
- **Design Strategic Teacher Placement:** Align NESTs and NNESTs with class levels and instructional contexts where their respective strengths (e.g., bilingual scaffolding or idiomatic fluency) are most beneficial.

6.2.3 Professional Development and Growth

- **Support Continuous Professional Development:** Offer all teachers, regardless of linguistic background, equal access to skill updates, reflective teaching opportunities, and cross-cultural training.
- **Foster Cross-Cultural Collaboration:** Develop peer mentoring, co-planning, and intercultural exchange opportunities between NESTs and NNESTs to enhance mutual understanding and teaching quality.

6.2.4 Evaluation and Assessment

- **Implement Inclusive Teacher Evaluation Policies:** Base performance reviews and promotions on measurable outcomes, student learning gains, cultural responsiveness, and professional engagement, not nativeness.

6.2.5 Digital Engagement and Advocacy

- **Leverage Social Media for Institutional Learning:** Monitor educator discussions on platforms like LinkedIn to inform institutional policies and stay attuned to teacher concerns and innovations.
- **Acknowledge the Role of Digital Advocacy:** Recognize digital spaces as valid arenas for professional advocacy and incorporate insights from these platforms into institutional reforms.

6.2.6 Systemic Change and Future Directions

- **Promote Industry-Wide Standards:** Collaborate across professional bodies to develop frameworks that evaluate teacher effectiveness beyond native/non-native categories.
- **Support Research and Evidence-Based Practice:** Invest in research on optimal teacher deployment, the impact of bilingual instruction, and pathways for NNEST professional advancement to inform long-term policy development.

By adopting these comprehensive recommendations, educational institutions can build fairer, more effective English language teaching systems that value all qualified teachers for their skills, contributions, and commitment. Moving beyond identity-based assumptions toward performance-driven excellence will require institutional leaders, policymakers, and educators to work together in reshaping the future of English language education.

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