Voices within Nonnative English Teachers: Their Self-Perceptions, Cultural Identity and Teaching Strategies

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**Abstract**

Despite the fact that there are a number of studies on nonnative English teachers’ (NNETs) self-perceptions and identity construction, scarce attention has been paid to the complex role NNETs’ amount of teaching experience plays in teaching English in the U.S. This study aims to investigate the influential factors that shape the self-perceptions and teaching styles of novice vs. experienced NNETs in the U.S. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five NNETs teaching in a major American university. Follow-up email exchanges were employed to clarify information and probe unanswered questions. Interview excerpts of the analyzed patterns were validated through member checking with participants to confirm the emerging features from coding. The results reveal that NNETs of less teaching experience are more likely to conceal their cultural identity and that NNETs’ self-perceptions are affected by students’ attitudes, disadvantageous positioning in employment, and their perceived language needs. Findings drawn from this study also indicate that future NNETs teaching in the U.S. should capitalize on their cultural and linguistic repertoires by embracing their cultural identity, validating their teaching quality and self-esteem as a competent TESOL professional, and empathizing with their ESL students. For future research, this study suggests that with more NNETs of different races and have different amount of teaching experience involved, a greater understanding could be achieved with more widespread implications.

**Keywords:** Nonnative English teachers (NNETs), cultural identity, TESOL profession, teaching strategies

**Introduction**

Despite the “native speaker fallacy”—“the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker” (Phillipson, 1992, p. 185), an obvious but seldom-noticed fact in the TESOL field is that the majority of ESL/EFL professionals all over the world are nonnative speakers of English (NNS) (e.g., Braine, 1999; Liu, D., 1999; Liu, J., 1999a). Among the increased research on issues related to nonnative English teachers (NNETs), a great number of studies debate over native/nonnative speakers dichotomy (e.g., Davies, 1991; Medgyes, 1992, 1999; Liu, J., 1999a; Reves, and Medgyes, 1994; Samimy & Brutt-Griffler, 1999). For example, Medgyes (1992) defines a nonnative speaker as one who cannot acquire a native speaker’s language competence. He argues that native English teachers (NETs) and NNETs reveal considerable differences in their teaching behavior and that most of the discrepancies are language-related. He also generalizes some perceived advantages and disadvantages of being a NNET in the profession, such as NNETs’ ability to serve as successful English language learner role models for the students but still having...
a faulty command of English. Besides seeing the native/nonnative contrast clearly, Medgyes (1999) also pays attention to certain individual variables. He points out that non-language-specific variables such as experience, age, sex, aptitude, charisma, and so on play a decisive role in the teaching process. Unlike Medgyes, Davies (1991) believes that successful second language learners can achieve native-like proficiency. He further argues that the native/nonnative dichotomy, “like all majority-minority power relations, is power-driven, identity-laden, and confidence-related” (cited in Saito, 2003, p.70.). Admitting the complexity of the native/nonnative speaker construct, Liu (1999a) suggests that we go beyond this debate and focus on how to train and prepare qualified NNETs in both ESL and EFL settings.

Given all these debates, how nonnative professionals construct their identities seems to be a central issue. In this vein, there is a small but growing body of literature focusing on the factors that affect NNETs’ self-perceptions and beliefs (e.g., Amin, 1997; Braine, 1999; Kamhi-Stein, 2000; Liu, J., 1999a; Polio & Duffy, 1998; Samimy & Brutt-Griffler, 1999; Thomas, 1999). For example, Thomas (1999) points out three challenges that NNETs face on the issues of teacher credibility based on her personal experiences. The first challenge is that NNETs are still at a disadvantage in the hiring process. Their credibility as ESL professionals is challenged even by some professionals involved in TESOL who believe that being a native speaker is a necessary condition to teach English. Therefore, according to Liu, J. (1999a), many try to minimize their identity as NNETs, so they will not be overlooked before their qualifications for jobs are considered. The second challenge is NNETs’ lack of voice and visibility in the TESOL organization, which is also mentioned by Kamhi-Stein (2000) as a perceived concern of NNETs. In addition, NNETs’ credibility as ESL professionals is also challenged by their non-native students. It is disturbing to find that the “native speaker fallacy” affects not only institutional practices but also the students and their expectations. However, Amin (2001) indicates that the NNETs in her study feel that they are effective teachers despite the initial nonacceptance by their students and colleagues and despite being constantly judged against the native speaker norm.

Needless to say, such challenges inevitably leave their marks on the NNETs. Besides their lack of voice and visibility mentioned above, Kamhi-Stein (2000) notes three other perceived needs and concerns of NNETs from the extant literature: (a) “low confidence and self-perceived challenges to professional competence”, (b) “self-perceived language needs”, and (c) “self-perceived prejudice based on ethnicity or nonnative status” (p.10). She also suggests several ways to address these concerns, two of them are (a) assign experienced nonnative teachers to serve as mentors and role models, and (b) for NNETs to explore their own beliefs as teachers and learners.

Despite their many challenges and concerns, NNETs are beginning to see themselves and to be viewed by others as equal partners in the ELT profession. Through an international survey conducted by Reves and Medgyes (1994), they conclude that NNETs and NETs have an equal chance of success as English teachers and that the only area in which the NNETs seem to be less qualified— English language proficiency— is also one that helps NNETs develop capacities that NETs “would never be able to acquire” (Medgyes, 1999, p.178). Phillipson (1996) also states that there are many ways in which NNETs are at an advantage in teaching English. For example, compared to NETs who can be good language models, NNETs can be good learner models for imitation (Medgyes, 1992). Also, thanks to their own learning experience, NNETs often have better knowledge of grammar (Arva & Medgyes, 1999). In addition, many NNETs, especially those who share their students’ first language (L1), have developed a keen awareness of the differences between English and the students’ L1. This sensitivity allows
them to anticipate and prevent language difficulties better (ibid). Furthermore, Brain (1999) adds that NNETs can bring multiculturalism and diversity to language classes. When talking about the NNETs working in the U.S., another unique contribution that Auerbach (1993) mentions is that NNETs not only bring to the language classroom their experiences as English language learners but also share with their students their struggles as newcomers to the U.S. culture. Therefore, these shared experiences allow them to make curricular connections that would otherwise not be possible.

By the same token, Samimy and Brutt-Griffler (1999) also suggest that NNETs need to develop an identity of their own construction that neither limits their role in the profession nor specifies definite boundaries to their capacities. Amin (2001) echoes this claim by finding that NNETs are more effective in the classroom when they build their pedagogies on their nonnative identity rather than try to follow the native speaker norm. Kamhi-Stein (2002) further argues that in ESL contexts, NNETs’ self-identification as teachers, immigrants, and language learners profoundly affects how they construct their classrooms and their instruction.

Drawing from the existing scholarly papers on issues related to NNETs (e.g., the challenges that NNETs face and the attitudes of ESL/EFL students and NETs have toward them) that were reviewed above, the central research questions of this study are framed (see below) in order to address the current issues previous research still leaves unanswered. Next, we will delineate the methods for this study in terms of the rationale for the methodological approach, recruitment of participants, procedures of data collection and analysis. Then we will report on our data and interpret our findings. Finally, we will point out the implications of our study and make suggestions for further research.

Research Questions

Despite the fact that there are a number of studies on NNETs’ self-perceptions and identity construction as previously discussed, there is limited information on the complex role NNETs’ amount of teaching experience plays in teaching English in a U.S. educational setting. As teacher researchers, we are intrigued by other NNETs’ real-life experiences, especially those ESL professionals whose first language is not English, teaching in an English-speaking country. Would they share similar beliefs, reflections and impressions with the ESL/EFL professionals mentioned in the reviewed studies above? Has living and teaching in the ESL context challenged the NNETs professionally and personally? We are especially interested in investigating the “hidden” factors (some of the factors are so subtle that even some NNETs are not aware of them) that influence the self-perceptions and beliefs of NNETs currently teaching in the U.S, because teachers’ beliefs and self-perceptions often influence the way they teach (Richard & Lockhart, 1994). In addition, we would also like to compare novice NNETs and experienced NNETs, and further examine how their self-perceptions change the way they teach in their home countries and in the U.S. and see if there are any perceived differences. Therefore, two major research questions in this study are raised:

1. How does amount of teaching experience influence the self-perceptions of NNETs in the U.S.?
2. Do NNETs perceive any changes/differences in their teaching styles in their home countries and the U.S.?
Methods

Since NNETs’ amount of teaching experience that shapes their self-image and teaching behaviors are intrinsically complex and idiosyncratic, the observation or survey approach falls short of capturing the full spectrum of individual real-life experiences. As Mackey and Gass (2005) pinpoint, “[i]nterviews can allow researchers to investigate phenomena that are not directly observable, such as learners’ self-reported perceptions or attitudes” (p. 173). In order to uncover the nuanced features of NNETs’ self-perceptions, we conducted in-depth interviews with the participants in this study. Also, semi-structured interviews were employed to gather the data, which allowed the use of planned questions as guidance but with the flexibility to ask open-ended and spontaneous questions to further “probe for more information” (ibid.).

Given the fact that semi-structured interview was the primary instrument to collect data in this study, we pilot-tested the original interview questions with TESOL professionals and colleagues in order to spot any subtle flaws, such as inappropriate phrasing or questions diverging from our research goal. Based on the constructive comments given in the pilot-testing session, interview questions were revised to ensure the usefulness and feasibility of the instrument before conducting it (see Appendix A). After consenting to participate in the interview at their convenience, each individual participant was interviewed and audio-taped in approximately 45-to-60-minute segments by a team of the two researchers. One participant did not feel comfortable with being audio-taped so on-site note-taking was applied to record the data instead.

The interview was initiated by an icebreaker in order to make participants feel more relaxed before they were required to answer more important questions. They were encouraged to elaborate on their thoughts and personal experiences throughout the interview. Drawing on the semi-structured interview approach, we asked open-ended and spontaneous questions in a relaxed fashion so that all interviewees would feel comfortable disclosing more insightful reflections than they would in a more structured interview format. In order to seek more in-depth data, we conducted follow-up email exchanges with the participants after interviews to clarify and elicit further information pertaining to the research questions.

Participants

Five participants were recruited from researchers’ personal contact with faculty members, colleagues, and TAs in both the MATESOL program and Intensive English Program (IEP) in a major research university in the U.S. Our participants were five NNETs having different amount of teaching experience. The most experienced NNET among the five was one female from Romania who came to the U.S. for study in her early 20s and got a Master’s degree in linguistics. She had teaching experience of approximately 13 years in ESL settings. The next most experienced NNET was one male from Ukraine who received a Master’s degree in TESOL. He had teaching experiences of approximately four years in ESL settings.

The novice NNETs were two females from Romania and Slovakia, and one male from Korea. The Romanian and Korean teachers were the graduate students in the MATESOL program. The novice Korean teacher was doing his teaching practicum in the IEP, while the Romanian teacher was an employed ITA in the IEP. The Slovakian teacher earned her Master’s degree in TESOL in an American university and was a full-time instructor in the IEP as well. They were either private tutors or student teachers in their home countries and had taught ESL in the IEP for six months to one-and-half
years as of then (also see Table 1).

Table 1
Background Information of the Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Susan</th>
<th>Jeong</th>
<th>Michelle</th>
<th>Audrey</th>
<th>Symon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>Early 30s</td>
<td>Early 40s</td>
<td>Late 20s</td>
<td>Mid 20s</td>
</tr>
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<td>Korean</td>
<td>Romanian</td>
<td>Romanian</td>
<td>Ukrainian</td>
</tr>
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<td>High school</td>
<td>4th grade</td>
<td>4th grade</td>
<td>5th grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other foreign</td>
<td>Russian</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Russian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>languages learned or spoken</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>German</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational</td>
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<td>2nd year graduate student in MA TESOL program</td>
<td>MA in Linguistics with TESOL Certificate</td>
<td>2nd year graduate student in MA TESOL program</td>
<td>MA in TESOL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>background</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of staying</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the U.S.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of EFL</td>
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<td>2.5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teaching in</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>home country</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of ESL</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teaching in</td>
<td>(novice)</td>
<td>(novice)</td>
<td>(most experienced)</td>
<td>(novice)</td>
<td>(experienced)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the U.S.</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Data Analysis

Using a qualitative inductive data analysis approach (Mackey & Gass, p. 179), the present study aimed to unpack significant features naturally emerging from the interview data. Instead of confining the data within a set of preconceived schemes in a survey or questionnaire, we “let the data guide the analysis” (ibid.). Both researchers listened to the audio tapes several times, and the interview data were then transcribed and coded into thematic patterns. The researchers then discussed their impressions of the transcripts to seek common patterns and to reach a consensus on differences between novice and experienced participants. In the follow-up email exchanges, participants were asked to confirm the thematic features from transcript excerpts of the analyzed patterns. To ensure accuracy of interpretations of data, interview transcripts from participants’ insightful perspectives, on-site notes from the interviews and follow-up email exchanges through the lens of member checking were triangulated to categorize salient and meaningful patterns.

Results

The coding that reifies the thematic patterns was consistently cross-examined and discussed by the two researchers. After a systematic analysis of interview data with a
thorough examination and comparisons of transcripts, on-site notes and email exchanges, the following major categories were identified:

1. Teaching styles of NNETs in both home country and the U.S.
2. Advantages and disadvantages/challenges in teaching as a NNET in both settings
3. NNETs’ self-image fluctuated with amount of teaching experience
4. NNETs’ positionality of cultural identity vis-à-vis students

The sub-themes centering on each thematic category are presented in the following tables to further exemplify the nuanced patterns emerging from each main theme. The subtle differences and common similarities across levels of NNETs’ teaching experience will be delineated as well. Also, a model that illustrates how those complex factors shape NNETs’ self-perceptions in the U.S. will be presented in the discussion section, which will be highlighted with valuable suggestions from NNETs’ insightful perspectives drawn from the interview data.

**Comparisons between Teaching in Home Country and the U.S.**

Since most NNETs used to learn and teach English in their home countries where English was a foreign language (EFL), they all vividly reflected on how their teaching styles had changed from the EFL to ESL settings and how the transition impacted the ways they taught and interacted with their students in the U.S. The comparisons between their teaching styles in their home countries and the U.S. are shown in Table 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching Styles in Home Country and the U.S.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teaching styles</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home country: Teacher-directed: role drills, L1 use, formal instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exam-oriented: grammar, translation, lecturing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher authority</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Apparently, the teacher-centered and examination-oriented instruction underpinned by L1 translation and grammar drills had predominated English language teaching and learning in EFL context, especially in most Asian countries. Even though there was only one Asian NNET (i.e., Jeong, the Korean teacher) in our study, the other European NNETs also addressed the same phenomenon. For example, Symon recalled how he used to teach English in Ukraine:

*There were a lot of lecturing, explaining grammar and a lot of teacher talks. I didn’t do group work as much as I do here. Students were alone or in pairs...student levels were too low and it’s hard to make them speak English in a group. Also, they had English class an hour a day, three times a week. Time...*
was really limited and you wanted to make sure that students know the
grammar in order to pass the exam. (Symon, 02/15/2007)

The use of L1 to translate English into their native languages in order to help
students grasp the meaning of vocabulary or sentences was also commonly used as a “fast
and convenient” tool for teaching in their home countries. For example, Audrey
mentioned, “It’s easier to teach in my country because of the [native] language...it’s easy
to explain some hard words in Romanian than in English” (Audrey, 02/12/2007). Symon
also echoed the same reason why L1 use was necessary, “I used more Ukrainian than
English. If I used English only, they couldn't get it. I translated English in Ukrainian, say,
probably 60% of the time in my teaching” (Symon, 02/15/2007).

Interestingly, teachers seemed to benefit from the homogenous context and
possessed their teacher authority in their home countries. For example, Jeong gave credit
to those good old days back in Korea, saying “I was more confident and knew the answers
to questions of students even before they finished the sentences” (Jeong, 02/08/2007).

Compared with the teacher-centered formal instruction in their home countries,
it was more student-centered through the communicative language teaching (CLT)
approach in the U.S. when NNETs recounted the differences of their teaching styles in
both settings. As Michelle pinpointed, “It's more student-centered and students are
expected to speak up in pairs or groups” (Michelle, 02/09/2007). The integration of
different teaching methods and the awareness of students’ diverse backgrounds and
learning needs were also emphasized in their teaching styles. For example, Susan
described her teaching methods as follows:

I don't believe that is only one approach to teaching. I try to [incorporate] other
approaches because you have different diverse learners and I always adjust my
teaching skills to the needs of my students. But having said that, I believe it's
important to teach what your students are asking because you want to make sure
they are involved, they are included. (Susan, 02/07/2007)

Advantages and Disadvantages/Challenges in Teaching as a NNET

The self-reflective accounts of their teaching styles are also interrelated with how
NNETs perceived the advantages and disadvantages in teaching in their home countries
and the U.S. Through the lens of self-analysis of the teaching phenomena, it sheds light
on how they capitalized on the teaching assets and resources they could utilize and
tackled the challenges they faced in both ESL/EFL settings. Comparisons between
advantages and challenge in teaching across both settings are categorized in Table 3:
The most salient feature emerging from NNETs’ remarks is that they all agreed teaching in their home countries was easier, less challenging and had a better class control. It is because there were not many NETs teaching in their home countries while they were teaching back then. So they all thought of teaching back home as “no competition” or “not an issue” and that it was easier to get a teaching job. It also has a lot to do with how convenient and useful it was for them to “…go back to my first language to explain something and you are familiar with the culture and expectations of students” (Audrey, 02/12/2007). Another case in point that speaks for the advantage of teaching in the home country is that students saw them as a “role model” and as having the same cultural background. Similar English learning experiences also provided them with more authority in front of their students. For example, Symon recalled his glory days, “I was more of an expert or role model to my students in my country. It’s more relaxing and they didn’t question my expertise” (Symon, 02/15/2007).

Despite the prerogatives in teaching NNETs possessed, they also came across certain limitations of teaching in an EFL setting. Since exam-oriented instruction focusing on grammar-translation was prevalent in their home countries, the traditional teaching approach was constrained by big class size, fixed class settings and students’ low motivation to learn English. The commonly used communicative language teaching (CLT) in an ESL setting was therefore unlikely to be implemented. As Symon pointed out,

It's hard to use CLT in public school back in my home country because other teachers or the principal would [observe] my teaching through the class window[s]. If I decided to move desks or chairs to do some interactive activities

Table 3
Advantages (+) and Disadvantages (challenges) (-) in Teaching in Both Settings

| Home country (+) | Successful learner model for students
|                 | Similar cultural background and learning experience
|                 | The use of L1 to supplement instruction at esse
|                  | Fixed class setting: big class size; public pressure
|                  | Student low proficiency and motivation;
|                  | High expectation of teacher to answer all questions
|                  | Lack of cultural knowledge, authentic materials, resources, updated textbooks

| U.S.A. (+) | Small class size; more resources; class observation
|           | Empathy: similar English learning experience
|           | More tolerant of teacher’s lack of knowledge
| (-)      | No L1: limitation on vocabulary and pronunciation
|          | New environment: lack of teaching experience and cultural knowledge about the U.S.
|          | Anxiety: faced with questions unable to answer; making errors
|          | Hard to get a job

It’s hard to use CLT in public school back in my home country because other teachers or the principal would [observe] my teaching through the class window[s]. If I decided to move desks or chairs to do some interactive activities
in the classroom, I wasn't allowed to do that. Or if I wanted to do TPR [Total Physical Response], somebody would look through the windows and question me, saying “it's weird”...Also, students were not motivated to learn English because it's not common to go abroad at that time. (Symon, 02/15/2007)

He went on to talk about how the curriculum was also out-of-date in his home country, Ukraine:

Because we could only rely solely on textbooks, those textbooks [assigned to us] were a bit outdated...Those textbooks were written by those professors who studied English 20 years ago so it might not be updated. (Symon, 02/15/2007)

Some teachers also voiced concerns that they were lacking cultural knowledge of the target language when they taught in their home countries. Authentic teaching/learning resources were also limited in an EFL setting, which hindered their adoption of real-life materials to assist their teaching and student learning. Michelle recalled, “I wish I could have more cultural knowledge but that's something I was lacking so I was unable to help [my students]...Also, it's lacking authentic materials in my home country because there was no internet at that time” (Michelle, 02/9/2007).

Even though most of NNETs agreed that teachers had more authority as a role model in their home countries, the flip side was that they were also expected to be “omniscient.” Audrey stated,

In Romania, as a teacher, you are expected to know everything and you're expected to be able to answer any kinds of questions. “C'mon, you are the teacher, you should know!” So there’s more pressure. And I think it’s also [because of] the cultural differences. (Audrey, 02/12/2007).

Teaching in the U.S. seems to be an eye-opening experience for them. When compared with those constraints of teaching they encountered in their home countries, the communicative approach (e.g., game and authentic materials) and small class size (e.g., doable pair/group activities) embodying ESL teaching here provides them with more options and resources. Above all, the cultural and linguistic background and similar English learning experiences make them more empathetic with their students. As Michelle stated,

I can relate more to my students because we all learned English as a foreign language in our countries and I can be more aware of their needs, such as culture shock. Sometimes I also make fun of Americans...so that my students can laugh with me. (Michelle, 02/9/2007)

Unlike the teacher-should-know-everything image in an EFL setting, the notion that teachers are not omniscient is more acceptable in an ESL setting. Compared with her perception of being a more than knowledgeable teacher in her home country as exemplified above, Audrey shared with us her teacher role in the U.S.:

But in the USA, you can just say “I don't know and I'll tell you tomorrow” or “I am not sure.” Although I have been told that Asian students also have this misconception that teachers should know everything and be able to answer any kinds of questions, I try not to give them answers about everything and try to teach them the American way of [thinking]. I think they’re ok with that or maybe someone who arrived here in the beginning might feel like, “oh, she doesn’t know,” but they’ll be used to [the phenomenon] and realize that we’re all human beings and we can’t know everything. I learned this kind of teaching style from teachers I observed and from my teaching supervisor in my practicum. I was also surprised in the beginning that she didn’t know the answer ‘cause “you should know everything, teacher!” but I realize it’s ok to say I don’t know now. (Audrey, 02/12/2007)
The major challenge most NNETs faced in the U.S., especially novice teachers, was that they couldn’t use their L1 in an ESL setting as conveniently as they used to in an EFL setting, especially when they encountered some difficulty of choosing the “right words.” Audrey vividly recollected her experience, “…sometimes I can’t remember some English words or phrases and I wish I could use my native language to explain some words” (Audrey, 02/12/2007). Also, their qualms about less mastery of English proficiency and lack of ESL teaching experience daunt their confidence of teaching in the U.S. Symon delineated his experience in his first-year teaching:

Collocations, and particular words when students asked were also a challenge to me that I didn’t know how to answer, especially in the beginning of my teaching here…The combination of the limited language proficiency and [less teaching] experience made me tense. (Symon, 02/15/2007)

The anxiety about not being able to answer students’ questions or making errors in front of them also overwhelms NNETs to a great extent. Jeong talked about his uneasiness of being “afraid, anxious, not used to the teaching ESL context—worried about how students feel why a NNET teaches them” (on-site notes, 02/08/2007). His concern also mirrors Symon’s not being able to “win the heart” of his students:

In the beginning of my listening and speaking class, they asked me two questions that I couldn’t handle very well. Because I wasn’t sure how to answer their questions, I was stumbling and tense. And maybe the next day I didn’t know how to respond again and I wasn’t confident enough and I felt tense…I followed the whole lesson plan but didn’t make it work…They even complained to the program about my teaching. For example, they didn’t like pair work, but it’s pointless not to do pair work in a L/S [listening/speaking] class. Because they didn’t like me or trust me, they didn’t like every way I taught. (Symon, 02/15/2007)

Unfortunately, this kind of “traumatic” experience also haunted Symon’s later teaching:

I am pretty confident with lower-level class but I am a bit apprehensive when teaching higher-level students. For example, I am teaching grammar 5 now. Even though I am really good at grammar and I studied EFL myself and had to study all the grammar...they’re advanced students and I made mistakes sometimes in the past and I felt embarrassed when they corrected me. Even though I plan my lesson well and the instruction goes well and students trust me, I am still apprehensive about that maybe someday they might ask me questions I am not pretty sure if the particular grammar rule is correct or not. (Symon, 02/15/2007)

The most striking concern voiced by all the NNETs is that it is hard to get a teaching job as a NNET in the U.S. They were also unsatisfied with being a “low-paid ESL teacher.” Some of them could even sense the air of “discrimination” in their job pursuits. For example, Michelle reflected on her past experience of being a NNET in the U.S.:

It's also hard to get a job here as a non-native English teacher. I had to fight a lot to get a job as a non-native English teacher and would probably have to fight for several jobs in order to get the second best, not the first one even if I got my Master's degree...There seemed to be certain discrimination sometimes when a non-native English teacher went for a teaching job in English [countries]. I always had to start as a [substitute] teacher until I proved to be a qualified teacher as a non-native English teacher than them [native English teachers]. (Michelle, 02/09/2007)
NNETs’ Self-image with Levels of Teaching Experience

The transition from teaching in their home countries to living and being a NNET in the U.S. is a crucial trajectory that deeply impacts how they teach in an ESL setting. The newly constructed notion of teaching in the U.S. coupled with how they could “survive” as a NNET in a new English-speaking environment are complexly challenging their prior English learning and teaching experiences and their diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The formation of their self-perceptions about teaching in the U.S. is also fluctuating, ranging from individual to individual and to different amounts of teaching experience. Table 4 sums up the characteristics of NNETs’ self-image with levels of teaching experience:

Table 4
Self-image across Experienced and Novice NNETs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-image</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retain one’s own cultural identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A different “me” in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fully merged into a new environment: fluid identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use diverse backgrounds and similar learning experiences as a merit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among all the NNETs we interviewed, Michelle, the most experienced teacher, keeps her composure throughout her real-life experience in teaching and self-perceptions as being a NNET in the U.S. Her extensive teaching experience and being comfortable with her own cultural identity strengthens her confidence and self-image. However, a slight degree of uneasiness is also raised in that she is safe only under the umbrella of being one of the NNETs in her program:

I don't think I've changed my identity. I am still who I am. If I were the only nonnative English teacher in our program, that might be a problem? But since I am the one out of four, I don't think it's a problem. If I don't know what I am teaching in class, that might be a problem because that [negative comments from students] will show in teacher's evaluation. There is nothing to do with whether or not you're a native teacher or nonnative teacher, but how you teach in class. (Michelle, 02/09/2007)

Interestingly, NNETs perceive themselves differently in an English-speaking country with different levels of teaching experience. Compared with Michelle, the less experienced teachers appear less static about who they are. They are more adaptable to the new environment in a sense that they either consciously or unconsciously become more “Americanized.” For example, Symon casts a different image whenever he is in class:

In my TESOL practicum, my fellow students and I talked about when you go teaching in class, you change or are different from who you really are in everyday life. I am the same. But when I walk in class, I am sure I am smiling more, making more jokes. I am kind of pretending consciously, copying the American approach...I am an American. It's not that I am trying to be one but unconsciously, I did try. Normally, I am not that outgoing, I am a bit reserved.
But in class, I play the role of an outgoing and talkative person. (Symon, 02/15/2007)

Audrey also described how she put on her “new skin” as a NNET in order to be more visible in the U.S.:

I always change something about my cultural identity when I live in a foreign country because I want to belong there. I have to adjust my cultural attitudes and perceptions or applications to those American people but I can’t adjust everything so I am still pretty much Romanian in many ways. So I just took something from this culture that I am OK with. (Audrey, 02/12/2007)

Jeong, the only Asian NNET in our study, takes on a different view about being a NNET in the U.S. Even though he also echoes Michelle’s “being who you are,” his lack of teaching experience coupled with the fact that he is not “white” pushes him to work even harder in order to survive in an English-speaking environment. As he points out, “I am still who I am because I can’t change my native language and skin color” (Jeong, 02/08/2007). So he endeavors to improve his lesson plans, to think out loud to make instruction progress more smoothly and fully dedicates himself to teaching in order to “win the confidence and appreciation of students” (02/08/2007).

Despite that most NNETs express opinions that their multicultural and multilingual backgrounds brought from their home countries contribute significantly to their teaching in the U.S., the less experienced teachers we interviewed seem to utilize the asset to supplement their lack of teaching experience. Also, the similar English learning experiences make them more attached to their students as opposed to their native colleagues. For example, Susan and Audrey shared their self-perceptions of taking advantage of the multicultural/lingual asset:

I’ve been thrown into learning English from scratch, thrown into the culture shock that some of the American teachers might not have experienced. So that may be the difference that I did experience the culture shock and what it’s like to be in college while learning English. So I may develop more empathy for students ’cause I can say to my students, “Trust me, I know you're struggling and I know English is not easy, ’cause I also learned English from A to Z.” (Susan, 02/07/2007)

I don’t necessarily think I have an advantage of being a NNET but maybe I have the advantage that comes from the fact that I am multilingual, and I’ve lived in many cultures, and I can appreciate and understand cultural differences and have no problem with anyone [coming] from different cultures. (Audrey, 02/12/2007)

**NNETs’ Positionality of Cultural Identity vis-à-vis Students**

Apparently, all NNETs more or less came across a “grey area” where they started to face the music of being questioned by students about their cultural identity, especially in the initial stage of their teaching as a NNET in the U.S. The most commonly asked question, “Where are you from?” triggers various versions of responses, interrelated with the levels of their teaching experience and individual strategies that they employ to grapple with the direct but thorny question. The extent to which they perceive themselves as NNETs and retain their cultural identity determines how they answer the question satisfactorily to both themselves and students. Table 5 presents the different ways of how NNETs position themselves in front of their students:
Table 5

Positionality of Cultural Identity in Teaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural identity</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being labeled: foreign accent and name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial disclosure: evasive about one’s cultural identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implicit about the &quot;nativeness&quot;: change of cultural identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acculturation: being Americanized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism: value teaching quality, but not nonnative identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most salient feature that singles most NNETs out is their foreign accents and names. It also plays a critical role of how they react to students’ attitudes from this noticeable aspect. The experienced NNET, Michelle, seems quite candid about her cultural identity and doesn’t conceal it from her students just because her accent sounds “not American.” Even so, she is still aware of the extent to which her disclosure of her true identity may influence how her students will judge her teaching:

*I think a lot of students might notice that I have a British accent and asked me if I am an American or a British. I am pretty upfront and honest with my students. I said, “I am not an American.” Now it’s easier for me to tell them that I am not an American or a nonnative English teacher in the beginning of class...But there is a slight change in their attitude when they hear I am not an American. Because if I go to another country to study and pay a lot of money, I want to study with a person from that country and why do I have to be taught by a teacher who is not an American but somebody else? But I am not the only one [NNET] out of the four teachers so I hope it won’t have a big impact on them when they study here. But with more advanced students, I can use it [NNET identity] as an incentive to provide them with some motivation and say, ‘Look, I know who you are and what you are doing. I’ve been there and I’ve done that. If I can do it, you can do it, too.’* (Michelle, 02/09/2007)

In contrast, the more similar American accent a NNET speaks, the safer. It helps NNETs get pass the trouble water despite their foreign names that label them as NNETs. As Symon indicated,

*Actually when I first came here, I spoke British English. But gradually, my accent changed. It’s not like I tried to copy or something but it just happened itself...I am pretty sure that students don’t know I’ve been in this country [only] for a short period of time because of my pronunciation [that sounds like an American]. I thought it could be a problem because of my [foreign] name. But my coworkers said, “well, we have a lot of differences in our program, we also have Korean Americans so the name is not a problem.”* (Symon, 02/15/2007)

Unlike Michelle who is honest with her students about who she is, the less experienced teachers take an opposite strategy to tackle this issue. Even though Symon has been teaching in the U.S. for around four years, he still decides not to reveal his cultural identity in the beginning until he is confident that he has won the trust of his students in the latter term of the class:
Because my name is unfamiliar to them, I tell them it's a Ukrainian name and I have the Ukrainian background but I don’t tell them where I was born or how long I have been here. So most of them believe that I've been living here for a long while. But later in the quarter, I have got students who trust me, good relationship with them and the class goes well. To encourage students more, I start to share with them that I started to learn English when I graduated from high school and I've been in this country for only a few years. So they would think if they learned English as an adult, they can do it, too… I have an advantage to be a role model. (Symon, 02/15/2007)

Similar to Symon’s partial disclosure of his “nativeness” but with more implication, Audrey’s take on this issue is “shedding her cultural identity” and “wearing an American skin.” It also reveals her insecurity of being identified as a NNET by her students: I prefer to be seen as a native English speaker [NES] because I don’t know how students will react if they know that I am not a NES. I am not sure if that will make them feel that I am less competent than the other teachers and that’s the reason why I never tell them I am not a NES… I was also advised by my supervisor to do that, not to tell them that I am not a NES. (Audrey, 02/12/2007)

She goes on talking about the strategy she uses to parry students’ questions:

I try to keep it very short and simple when students ask me where I am from and my background... I am very succinct. They know my background is a Romanian, but...I didn’t leave room for too much discussion. People [Students] do judge very quickly so you don’t want to leave room for doubts or anything. I never say I wasn’t born here but I just don’t talk about it. I don’t know what I’d answer if I was asked [about this question] but I don’t think someone would actually ask. (Audrey, 02/12/2007)

The acculturation and length of stay in the U.S. will also reshape NNETs’ cultural identity and how they position themselves when faced with students’ questions. For example, even though Susan only has limited ESL teaching experience, her long-term stay in the U.S. and her attachment to the American culture make her seem Americanized in her teaching, regardless of the confrontation with her private students due to her “nonnativeness” in her early ESL teaching:

So sometimes students ask me, “where are you from?” I’d say, actually I am from here ‘cause I’ve been here for so long. Yea, I was born there [Slovakia] and yes, I am Americanized in many ways. I am adapted to this culture, I love it here, it’s my home... I don’t have a specific label, I can’t find that label and I don’t really want to... The only time I experienced a little bit negative attitudes was when I was teaching a couple of Russian ladies. They would say, like, “I don’t think you can teach us pronunciation, you know, you’re not American.” That’s the only one time. (Susan, 02/07/2007)

Compared with his white NNET colleagues, Jeong finds another way out to tackle the fact that there is no way he could hide his cultural identity since his skin color speaks for his nonnativeness. The strategy that he uses to position himself in front of his students is, “...to realize what students care about is your teaching quality rather than your nationality or skin color as long as you act like a professional role model to them.” (on-site notes, 02/08/2007)
Discussion

Where Are You From?

NNETs' self-perceptions of teaching styles, teaching phenomena in both settings, and cultural identity across levels of teaching experience are all interrelated to reconstruct how they position themselves as NNETs against students’ attitudes in the U.S. Drawing on the results above, a model is proposed (see Figure 1) to highlight how those complex factors formulate NNETs’ self-image:

![Figure 1. A model of NNETs’ self-perceptions intertwined with other hidden factors](image)

Centering on the intersection of the model, NNETs’ self-perceptions are originated in the cultural backgrounds and teaching experience they bring from their home countries. Their prior teaching authority as a role model, corroborated by the same cultural background and similar English learning experience with their students, pronounces their “guru” status in the EFL setting. In other words, they know the learning needs of their students more than their counterparts, namely, NETs in their home countries. They are more confident and relaxed in an EFL setting. Despite the fact that there are certain constraints in EFL context as mentioned in the findings, their expertise in grammar-translation instruction, freedom of switching to L1, and less competition in the job market secure their identity as NNETs in their home countries. Their NNET identity is unchallenged due to the homogenous context.

However, their NNET’s identity is critically impacted by the new English-speaking environment where “the grass might not be as green as they expected.” On the contrary, their glory days in their home countries are now replaced with anxiety, challenge and doubts, especially in their early teaching in the U.S. In order to “survive” in the ESL arena, they need to employ different strategies to tackle thorny problems facing them. For instance, students’ simple but direct question about “where they are from” would be the hot potato cast to them in the first class. Answering the question is apparently not hard, but how to answer the question honestly and strategically is another story that tests NNETs’ self-perceptions of their cultural identity and awareness of
students’ attitudes once their nonnative identity is revealed.

Our Voices Within

When asked about what suggestions they could offer for those NNETs who would like to teach in the U.S., they all wholeheartedly shared with us their insightful advice based on their real-life experiences and valuable teaching strategies. The self-reflective suggestions, once again, also mirror the progress of how they have strived to be NNETs in the U.S. and their survival guides. For example, some teachers stress that the notion of “embrace who you are” should go with each NNET no matter where they are. Only valuing one’s own cultural and linguistic backgrounds can he or she bring into the class multiple and valuable perspectives, aligning with the multicultural/lingual backgrounds of students. The rich cultural and language assets are also the prerogatives that set NNETs apart from their NET colleagues.

Second, it is the “teaching quality and skills” that really matter. Our NNET participants voice that just because you are a NET doesn’t mean you can teach better than a NNET if you don’t have solid teaching training. It also shows that being a professional English teacher has nothing to do with the race, ethnicity and gender but the efforts each individual makes to his/her teaching.

Third, NNETs should work on their “pronunciation” as one of our participants, Michelle, stressed in her interview. Even though most NNETs still speak with foreign accents, it won’t hinder their teaching efficiency as long as their pronunciation is intelligible.

Fourth, NNETs need to be more “confident” and not worried about making mistakes because teaching is also a learning experience. The student-centered and tolerable atmosphere in an ESL setting also allows them to say “I don’t know” instead of playing the role of an omniscient teacher from their home countries. Having a sense of humor also relieves the tension and facilitates the instruction.

Last but not least, the NNETs we interviewed all voice the importance of being “empathetic” with students. Given the similar English learning experiences and living in a foreign country, NNETs can be more understanding and aware of the very needs of their students from a diversity of backgrounds. “If I can do it, you can do it, too” vividly sets a good role-model for their students, which also echoes the glory days when they used to teach in their home countries.

Conclusion

Through the in-depth interviews with the five NNET participants, the emic perspectives (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 163) drawn from them not only unpack the nuanced factors that we, as NNET researchers, intend to explore, but also empower the five NNETs to self-reflect on their faced challenges, cultural identity, and teaching strategies in order to survive as a nonnative teacher in the U.S. The phenomena through the insider lenses of the five NNETs and insightful patterns analyzed in our study also mirror the findings in the prior studies. For example, the challenges the five NNETs have encountered also echo 1) the pressing issues in obscuring or abandoning nonnative identity to secure employment and teaching credibility questioned by the students in Davies (1991) and Thomas (1999), and 2) the lack of confidence in language proficiency and nonnative status in Kamhi-Stein (2000) and Medgyes (1992). Despite the constraints most NNET participants encounter in teaching in the U.S., they also voice the strengths that make them stand out from their NET counterparts. Those strengths also
corroborate the advantages addressed in being a successful learning role-model for students (Medgyes, 1992), having similar English learning experience and stronger grammar competency than NETs (Arva & Medgyes, 1999; Auerbach, 1993; Medgyes, 1999) and diverse multicultural/lingual assets (Brian, 1999).

Returning to the research questions posed in our study, perhaps the most uplifting finding that bridges the gap the previous literature leaves is NNETs’ self-perceived positionality of nonnative identity across amount of teaching experience. The complex trajectory along which they position their identity is also positioned by their concerns about students’ attitudes toward them if their nonnative identity is revealed. Among the five NNETs, the most experienced NNET is “transparent and honest” with her students without hiding her nonnativness. Her confidence in teaching and being comfortable with her cultural identity articulate her motto, “I am who I am.” The less experienced NNET, on the contrary, is evasive about his nonnativness, especially in the beginning of class. He only reveals his nonnative identity once he is confident that he has won the heart of his students. Interestingly, novice NNETs are even more implicit about their nonnative identity. One of them prefers to be seen as a native teacher by completely avoiding the native origin discussion with her students while the other is totally “Americanized” due to her long-term stay in the U.S. Her acculturation also frees her from being questioned by her students about whether or not she is “native” enough. The only Asian NNET in our study, unlike his white counterparts, endeavors to work on his teaching skills and quality in order to shift the focus from the native/nonnative issue to his teaching professionalism. Since his skin color speaks for his nonnative identity, it is inevitable that he needs to employ a strategy different from those white NNETs in order to overcome his perceived constraint and expand his visibility.

**Implications for Future Research**

As the number of NNETs is increasing worldwide, it is critical to conduct more research on the issues and concerns that NNETs have regarding their TESOL profession. Such research will not only reveal NNETs’ inner voices but also raise our collective consciousness and awareness as both native and nonnative English teachers. Although the majority of ESL professionals in the U.S. are native English speakers, the phenomenon of a growing body of NNETs cannot go ignored (Liu, J., 1999b). From our own experiences, we have also witnessed that teaching ESL in an English-speaking country is a big challenge for NNETs even if they are qualified to teach ESL after receiving a MATESOL degree.

Although there are some interesting findings revealed in this study, it was conducted on a relatively small scale. Additionally, among the five participants, there is only one NNET who has substantial teaching experience, which doesn’t lead to any generations about how experienced and novice NNETs differ in their self-perceptions. However, their take on grappling with this issue of how they position themselves in the U.S. and how they are perceived by their students still can shed some light on the salient patterns of the phenomena illustrated in the model presented above. Also, it might have been more informative to observe NNETs’ classes to see if there is a match between their stated self-perceptions and changed teaching styles with their actual teaching behaviors in the classroom. Furthermore, four out of five NNETs in our study are Caucasians. Their white features might make it easier for them to hide their nonnative identity if they wish. Therefore, it would have been more beneficial to have more Asian NNETs involved so that we could have a better understanding of how their nonnative students impact their self-perceptions as “non-white” NNETs. We believe that with more NNETs of different
races and have different amount of teaching experience involved, a greater understanding could be achieved with more widespread implications. A voice from Michelle (02/9/2007), the most experienced NNETs in our study, pronounces the importance of NNETs in the globalization era:

*There is always the policy or even discrimination toward nonnative English teachers so those issues and the fact that you’re not native English teachers still remain. But be upfront and you are who you are. There’s nothing to do with your being a nonnative English teacher but more to do with your teaching ability, qualification...Also, remind your students who they will speak English to and why they are studying English. It's not just Americans they speak English with, but with people around the world. Actually, there are now more nonnative English speakers speaking English in the world than native English speakers.*

**References**


Pseudonyms are chosen for the five participants throughout the study in order to protect their real identities.

Appendix

Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about your background (education, ethnicity, language learning and teaching experiences)?
2. When did you arrive in the U.S.? What made you decide to study or work here?
3. What countries have you taught in? What differences do you find in your teaching in those countries? (teaching methods/styles)
4. Did you experience any challenges when you taught English as a NNET in your home country compared to now?
5. What are the advantages and disadvantages in teaching English as a NNET in your home country and now?
6. How do you see yourself as a nonnative ESL teacher in the U.S.? Do you notice if there is any change in your cultural identity?
7. What are students’ attitudes toward you as a NNET both in your home country and the U.S.?
8. How about your NE colleagues’ attitudes?
9. Have you changed your identity based on these attitudes? Why or why not?
10. What are your suggestions to NNETs who are interested in teaching English in an English speaking country?

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