Challenges Faced by Non-Native English Teachers: A Phenomenological Inquiry at Dong Nai University

Bui Nguyen Phuong Thuy

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Dong Nai University, Dong Nai Province, Vietnam

ABSTRACT

This study explores the challenges faced by non-native English teachers (NNETs) at Dong Nai University through a phenomenological inquiry. Using qualitative research methods, the study investigates the lived experiences of NNETs in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), identifying key difficulties such as linguistic limitations, credibility issues, and cultural differences. The study draws on semi-structured interviews with NNETs to understand their perspectives on professional development, student perceptions, and institutional support. The findings reveal that NNETs often struggle with self-confidence, discrimination, and the pressure to meet native-like proficiency expectations. Additionally, issues such as limited access to professional training and inadequate institutional support exacerbate these challenges. The discussion highlights the implications for language education policies and teacher training programs, emphasizing the need for more inclusive approaches to recognize the strengths of NNETs. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on EFL teaching and offers insights into improving working conditions and professional development opportunities for NNETs. The findings suggest a paradigm shift toward a more equitable perspective on English language teaching (ELT), where proficiency, pedagogical skills, and cultural understanding outweigh nativeness as the primary criteria for effective instruction.

Keywords: Non-native English teachers, challenges, phenomenology, EFL teaching, Dong Nai University

INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization, English has become a crucial tool for international communication, commerce, and education, increasing the demand for proficient English language educators. While NESTs are often preferred in EFL settings, they constitute a significant portion of the teaching workforce. Despite their qualifications and pedagogical expertise, NNESTs frequently encounter challenges that hinder their professional efficacy and growth. One of the primary challenges is linguistic and cultural differences, as each language possesses distinct grammatical structures, phonological systems, and cultural nuances. These differences can lead to feelings of self-consciousness regarding pronunciation and fluency, affecting NNESTs' confidence in instructional settings. Additionally, cultural disparities can cause misunderstandings in the classroom, complicating the teaching-learning dynamic. Another key challenge is the widespread perception that NESTs are inherently better instructors, a bias rooted in the "native speaker fallacy" (Phillipson, 1992). This perception results in discriminatory hiring practices and workplace biases that undermine the professional legitimacy of NNESTs (Mahboob, 2004). Such biases not only limit job opportunities but also impact the self-esteem and job satisfaction of NNESTs. Furthermore, access to professional development opportunities remains a significant hurdle. Studies have shown that NNESTs often receive limited training in English teaching methodologies and inadequate institutional support, restricting their ability to enhance instructional practices and adapt to evolving educational demands (Yuwono & Harbon, 2010). The professional journey of NNESTs is also fraught with psychological stressors, including impostor syndrome—feelings of self-doubt about their linguistic competence (Bernat, 2008). Societal expectations and stereotypes contribute to this marginalization, affecting mental well-being and professional identity, potentially leading to burnout and attrition. In Vietnam, where the demand for English education has surged, NNESTs face additional challenges related to employment discrimination, visa regulations, and societal biases favoring NESTs. Addressing these multifaceted issues requires collective efforts

from policymakers, educational institutions, and the ELT community. Recognizing the valuable contributions of NNESTs and fostering an inclusive teaching environment can enhance their professional experiences and ultimately benefit language learners worldwide

LITERATURE REVIEW

The challenges faced by NNESTs can be analyzed through various theoretical frameworks that highlight the complexities of their professional experiences. One key framework is Medgyes' (1994) NNET-NEST dichotomy, which differentiates between native and non-native English-speaking teachers and argues that while NNESTs may lack native-like fluency, they bring unique advantages such as a deeper understanding of the language learning process and greater empathy with students. This perspective has been reinforced by Mahboob (2010), who highlights the pedagogical strengths of NNESTs, including their ability to anticipate learner difficulties based on their own experiences.

Another relevant framework is the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which explains how NNESTs construct their professional identities in an industry where nativeness is often privileged. This can result in identity conflicts and lower professional self-esteem (Varghese et al., 2005). Phillipson's (1992) concept of linguistic imperialism further elucidates the systemic biases that place NNESTs at a disadvantage by perpetuating the notion that native speakers are inherently superior teachers. These theoretical perspectives provide a lens through which the challenges faced by NNESTs can be examined, including linguistic limitations, employment discrimination, and restricted professional development opportunities.

Many NNESTs experience linguistic biases, where their accents and fluency levels are scrutinized, leading to perceptions of inferiority (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005). This is closely linked to the native speaker fallacy, which falsely assumes that being a native speaker equates to being a better teacher (Phillipson, 1992). Such biases extend to hiring practices, with many institutions preferring native speakers, thus limiting career opportunities and mobility for NNESTs (Mahboob, 2004).

Additionally, NNESTs often face barriers in accessing professional development programs, as these programs are traditionally designed with native speakers in mind, neglecting the unique challenges NNESTs encounter in teaching (Kiczkowiak, 2019). Psychological and social pressures further compound these difficulties, with many NNESTs experiencing impostor syndrome, a phenomenon where individuals feel undeserving of their achievements despite their qualifications (Bernat, 2008).

Moreover, cultural misunderstandings in multilingual classrooms can complicate teaching experiences and affect teacher-student interactions (Moussu & Llurda, 2008). Empirical studies highlight the resilience and competence of NNESTs despite these barriers. Llurda (2005) found that while NNESTs are highly skilled educators, systemic biases often limit their professional recognition.

Similarly, Braine (2010) emphasizes the need for policy reforms to acknowledge the valuable contributions of NNESTs to language education. Recent research suggests that inclusive hiring practices and targeted professional development programs are essential in creating equitable opportunities for NNESTs (Selvi, 2014). Addressing these systemic challenges requires a shift in ELT policies and perceptions to recognize the strengths of NNESTs, ensuring that their contributions to language education are valued and supported in academic and professional settings.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically utilizing a phenomenological approach, to delve into the lived experiences of NNETs at Dong Nai University. Phenomenology, as a research methodology, aims to understand phenomena from the perspectives of those who have directly experienced them, providing rich, in-depth insights into their lived realities (van Manen, 1990). This approach is particularly effective in educational research, where understanding individual experiences can inform broader pedagogical practices (Stolz, 2020).

The study's participants comprise 15 NNETs, each with a minimum of three years of teaching experience, selected through purposive sampling to capture a diverse range of perspectives. Purposive sampling is a strategic method in qualitative research, allowing for the intentional selection of individuals who can provide detailed and relevant information about the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews, a method that balances the consistency of structured questions with the flexibility to explore emerging themes during the conversation (Kallio et al., 2016). This technique is widely recognized for its ability to elicit comprehensive and nuanced accounts of participants' experiences, making it particularly suitable for phenomenological studies (Jamshed, 2014). The interviews were meticulously transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis, a process that involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the data, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Throughout the research process, stringent ethical considerations were upheld. Participants provided informed consent, ensuring they were fully aware of the study's purpose and their role within it. Confidentiality was rigorously maintained to protect the identities and personal information of the participants, adhering to ethical standards in qualitative research (Orb et al., 2001). These measures ensured that the study was conducted with integrity and respect for the participants' autonomy and well-being.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that NNESTs at Dong Nai University face a range of interconnected challenges, including linguistic biases, employment discrimination, professional development barriers, and psychological stress, prompting them to adopt various coping strategies. One of the most prevalent issues is the perception of linguistic inferiority, as many NNESTs report feeling scrutinized for their accents and pronunciation despite their high proficiency levels. This aligns with research by Moussu and Llurda (2008), which highlights that students and institutions often favor native-like accents, diminishing NNESTs' credibility in the classroom. The issue of employment discrimination further compounds this challenge, with many institutions exhibiting a preference for native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), limiting the career advancement of NNESTs regardless of their qualifications (Ruecker & Ives, 2015). Such biases are deeply rooted in the misconception that nativeness equates to superior teaching ability, a fallacy that continues to marginalize highly competent NNESTs (Mahboob, 2010).

Moreover, NNESTs frequently struggle with access to professional development opportunities, as existing training programs are often designed with NESTs in mind, failing to address the unique needs and pedagogical perspectives of NNESTs (Kiczkowiak, 2019). This lack of targeted training impedes their ability to keep pace with evolving teaching methodologies and hinders their classroom effectiveness. In addition to structural challenges, psychological stress remains a significant concern among NNESTs. Many experience impostor syndrome, characterized by persistent self-doubt and fear of being perceived as inadequate despite their evident competence (Bernat, 2008). The pressure to conform to native-speaker norms exacerbates these feelings, leading to increased stress, burnout, and, in some cases, attrition from the profession (Selvi, 2014).

However, NNESTs employ various coping strategies to navigate these challenges, including continuous professional development, networking with fellow educators, and engaging in reflective teaching practices. Building supportive professional communities has proven beneficial, as research indicates that teacher resilience is strongly linked to peer collaboration and institutional backing (Gu & Day, 2007). To address these systemic issues, educational institutions and policymakers must implement more inclusive hiring practices that prioritize teaching competence over nativeness. Additionally, developing professional development programs specifically tailored to NNESTs can help bridge existing gaps in training and enhance pedagogical skills. Promoting a culture of linguistic diversity and inclusivity within ELT institutions can also alleviate psychological stress and improve job satisfaction among NNESTs. By acknowledging and addressing these challenges, the field of English language teaching can move towards a more equitable and effective educational environment that recognizes and values the contributions of NNESTs.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted challenges faced by NNESTs at Dong Nai University, reinforcing broader global concerns regarding linguistic biases, employment discrimination, professional development limitations, and psychological stress. Despite their qualifications and pedagogical expertise, NNESTs often struggle with the perception of linguistic inferiority, restrictive hiring practices that favor native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), and inadequate access to professional development opportunities tailored to their needs. These systemic issues not only hinder their career advancement but also contribute to high levels of stress and impostor syndrome, ultimately impacting their job satisfaction and long-term professional retention. However, the resilience and adaptability of NNESTs, demonstrated through continuous self-improvement, peer collaboration, and reflective teaching, underline their significant contributions to English language teaching. To address these disparities, educational institutions and policymakers must shift towards more equitable hiring practices that prioritize teaching competence over nativeness. Additionally, tailored professional development programs and institutional support mechanisms must be implemented to enhance the teaching efficacy and career prospects of NNESTs. Promoting linguistic diversity in ELT and fostering an inclusive work environment can help mitigate biases, reduce psychological stress, and ultimately create a more balanced and effective educational system. Moving forward, further research is needed to explore long-term strategies for improving the professional experiences of NNESTs and dismantling the deeply ingrained biases within the ELT industry. By acknowledging and addressing these systemic issues, the field of English language teaching can progress towards a more inclusive, fair, and effective educational landscape that fully recognizes and values the contributions of NNESTs.

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