Proficiency and professionalism: Arab teachers' perceptions of professional identity in Saudi Arabia

Fauzia Shamim[1]

Abstract

The study investigates Arab female teachers' perceptions of their professional identity as nonnative speaker teachers of English in the context of higher education in Saudi Arabia, an EFL context. The study was undertaken in response to recent calls for shifting the focus of Non-Native English Speaking Teachers (NNEST) research to the lives and contexts of nonnative English teachers in outer and expanding circles to give these teachers, often relegated to a marginal position in the profession, a 'voice' in professional discourses. The specific objectives were, first, to give these teachers, often relegated to a marginal position in the profession, a 'voice' in professional discourses, and second, to add to the research knowledge about NNESTs. In-depth interviews were conducted with 6 Arab teachers; they originated from different countries but were all working in an English Language Centre at a Saudi public-sector university at the time of the study. Study findings reveal with the participants' confidence in their proficiency and professionalism as well as in their NNEST identity compared to native speaker teachers in the same context. The concepts of 'capitalization' and 'refusal' identified by Jensen, S. Q. (2011). 'Othering, identity formation and agency'. Qualitative Studies, 2(2), 63-78, in his study of ethnic minority men in Denmark as reaction to 'othering' discourses, as well as teacher agency are used to understand non-native speaker Arab teachers' refusal to be relegated to a lower status and their sense of pride in their NNEST identity.

Keywords: non-native English teachers, Saudi Arabia, teacher agency, othering, positive self-image, proficiency, professionalism

1. Introduction

Teachers' beliefs and perceptions of their professional identity affect their teaching-learning principles and pedagogical practices (Borg, 1998, 2003) These

[1] Dean, Faculty of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, Ziauddin University Karachi

are shaped by their contextual realities including personal circumstances and the wider social and political context (Hayes, 2005, 2009a, 2009b, 2010). Due to the pivotal role of context in classroom instructional practices (Hu, 2005), narratives of NNES teachers' lives and struggles have, in the last decade or so, gained a lot of interest in TESOL (see, for example, Hayes, 2008; Holliday, 2005; Simon-Maeda, 2004; Tsui, 2003). This information is deemed essential, particularly for teacher preparation programs to be more effective and relevant to different teaching-learning contexts (Klein-Smith, 2000, 2013).

NNESTs work in at least 3 different kinds of contexts: 1) in inner circle countries such as the US, where they may be pursuing a Masters or Ph.D degree and/or teaching; 2) in 'richer' countries in the outer and expanded circle such as Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, and now increasingly the Gulf countries and China; 3) in developing countries in the outer and expanded circles such as Pakistan and Cameroon (Bashiruddin, 2010, Kuchaah & Shamim, 2018). In the first case NNNESTs study and/or work along with native speaker teachers (even though they might be assigned to teach English to non-native speakers only). Some of these NNESTs choose to stay in these countries and have to struggle to move from the periphery to the Centre (e.g. Braine, 1999, Park, 2012). In the second scenario, NNESTs work with native speaker teachers in their local or other ESL/EFL contexts. However, the native speaker teachers are accorded a 'higher status' as the employers still hold a firm belief in 'naïve-speakerism' as an essential quality of English language teachers. Also, they still face different kinds of discrimination from their employers/government, and often negative attitudes of learners and colleagues (Lipovsky & Mahboob, 2010; Mahboob, 2004; 2009). The third scenario is where ELT is almost entirely entrusted to NNESTs due to various reasons. This includes the country's low socio-economic status and therefore its non-affordability to hire native speaker teachers. These NNESTs vary in terms of proficiency levels, from low to near-native proficiency in English, as well as have varying qualifications and professional expertise (Bashiruddin, 2010). This paper focuses on the second context, i.e. NNESTs working along with native speaker teachers in an EFL context. While a few accounts of NNESTs are available from context in the outer circle such as their initial motivation to teach English in Thailand, an EFL country (Hayes, 2008), or their struggles in the backdrop of a political conflicts in Sri-Lanka (Hayes, 2010), there is dearth of information about how Arab teachers, in particular, perceive themselves as Non-native speaker teachers of English, having themselves learnt English as a second or third language. The current study was therefore undertaken to add to the research knowledge about NNESTs; and second, to give these

teachers, often relegated to a marginal position in the profession, a 'voice' in professional discourses (Braine, 2010; Hayes, 2008, 2009).

2. Literature review

To locate the current study within the context of major discourses in NNEST literature and research, this section will briefly trace the developments in the field, particularly in terms of perceptions of NNESTs as TESOL professionals since the attention of the ELT community was first drawn to NNEST issues through the establishment of the NNEST Caucus in 1999. (It must be noted that several state-of-the-art articles and books are now available on major issues in NNEST research, see for example, Braine, 1999, 2010; Moussu & Llurda, 2008; Mahboob, 2010; Rudolph, 2018; Rudolph, Selvi & Yazan, 2015).

But first, we need to look briefly at the terms native and non-native speaker teachers of English (henceforth NEST and NNEST) still popular in the discourse and research on NNESTs despite the fact that several alternatives to the NES-NNES dichotomy have been suggested (Selvi, 2011) such as, NNESTs embracing ownership of English (Higgins, 2003) and the use of a continuum, "because it also implies a process in moving toward one side or the other" (Liu, 1999, p.175), though it seems that the movement would be more toward language proficiency, and therefore the NS end of the continuum. Liu (1999) suggests, rightly in my view, that the reason for identifying NNESTs (and NES) should be clary articulated, and consequently addressed:

> If it [dichotomy] identifies a non-native speaker as less competent than a native speaker, then the definition and the dichotomy would be political. If it is for employment purposes, then an appropriate language test could be used to determine if the person has the language competence required for the job.

2.1 NNEST in the TESOL profession: Major trends

Three main trends or waves can be identified in the research on NNEST issues in TESOL, particularly the factors affecting the formation of their professional identity and their challenges and struggles in moving from a periphery to a center position in the profession. The concept of waves is used to denote continuity and overlap as no clear cut boundaries can be drawn between the three waves.

2.1.1. First wave: Marganilization of NNESTs due to 'othering'

The ‘othering’ of NNESTs is normally based on race, color and/or language proficiency, and is evident particularly in discrimination in hiring practices

(Amin, 1997; Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 1999; Canagarajah, 1999; Mahboob, 2010; Medgys, 1999; Medgys, 2000; Phillipson, 1992). But it also leads to other challenges in the formation of their professional identity: " Their credentials from the Periphery are questioned, their accents are derided, and they are often marginalized in the profession"(Braine, 1999, 73). This othering is also reflected in attitudes of learners towards their native and non-native teachers (e.g. Butler, 2007, Mahboob, 2004).

2.1.2. Second wave: From marginalization to acceptance (from self and others)

The second wave in the NNEST movement can be identified through a widening of focus from language proficiency to include professionalism in defining a competent teacher of English (Canagaragah, 1999). The pioneering research study done by Reeves and Medgys (1994) played a major role in recognizing the relative strengths and weaknesses of both native and non-native speaker teachers. Following this, many researchers presented the concept of complementarity and native and non-native speaker teachers working together to learn from each other (e.g. Matsuda and Matsuda, 2001). The strengths of NNESTs, particularly their familiarity with the culture and better understanding of the specific problems of their students (especially if they teach a monolingual group) have also are also highlighted (Florence Ma 2012; Maum 2002). A direct consequence of this was a heightened understanding of the strengths of NNESTs, which in turn, led to more positive attitudes towards NNESTs. Developments in Applied Linguistics such as Phillipson's groundbreaking work on linguistic imperialism and questioning the 'native speaker fallacy' (1992) and parallel work in World Englishes and the call for non-native English speakers embracing the ownership of English (Widdowson 1994; Higgins 2003; Jenkins 2006) helped in consolidating the position of NNESTs. This is evident in a change in learner’s attitudes, such as favoring ‘intelligibility’ over ‘nativeness’ (Zinck, 2014). It seems that initially learners start with the ‘native speaker’ myth. However, soon they begin to realize, and as more qualified local teachers are available in Kachrus’ ‘expanding circle’ (1992) contexts , that their non-native teachers have certain advantages over the native speaker teachers (see, for example, Butler, 2007; Florence Ma, 2012), thus moving from marginalization to acceptance of their non-native speaker teachers.

Shamim (2012), highlighting the myriad worlds of NNESTs underlines the need for a change in discourses- i.e. moving from proficiency OR professionalism to proficiency AND professionalism. Furthermore, an acceptance of NNESTs repertoire of skills as bi/multilinguals and multicompetent instead of ‘failed native speakers’ (e.g. Pavlenko, 2003) has led to their growing acceptance both by

learners and fellow professionals. Recent research has also revealed that many variables such as teacher contact time influence learners' attitudes towards both their native and non-native speaker teachers (Al-Omrani, 2008; Cheung & Braine, 2007; Moussu, 2010). However, several NNESTs are still struggling to gain acceptance from employers, administrators and journal editors in their journeys from periphery to the center, both in the Center and periphery countries (Flowerdew, 2001; Mahboob, 2010.

2.1.3. Third wave: From acceptance to celebration

More recently there has been a growing interest in the development of NNESTs' personal, professional and multiple identities (e.g. Simon-Maeda, 2004;). Teacher agency in the face of several odds had led to NNESTs having a higher self-image (Braine, 2010) and a sense of pride in being a non-native speaker English teacher, particularly in inner circle countries (e.g. Park, 2012).

At the same time, the lives and professional identities of non-native speaker English teacher in contexts outside the inner circle countries has also gained a lot of interest in the last 10 years or so (Braine, 2010; Hayes 2005, 2008, 2009, 2010; Holliday, 2005; Klein-Smith, 2013). Similarly, their beliefs about target varieties (Which English? Whose English?) have been investigated with the conclusion that, "Global realizations of EIL/ELF will only emerge from fine-grained, 'up-close' understandings of local contexts achieved by and for key participants: the teachers and learners who constitute that context" (Young & Walsh, 2010:136), thus assigning the NNESTs a central role in directing the future of English in their countries at least.

Despite the developments noted above, many NNESTs still face the negative attitude of employers and administrators (Selvi, 2011).

Majority of early research work on NNESTs was undertaken by NNESTs working in the US (see, for example, Braine, 1999; 2010). Many of these studies were carried out within graduate programs in the US and focused on NNES teachers in training (e.g. Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 1999; de Oliveira, 2011; Kamhi-Stein, 1999, Park, 2012). However, a few stories of English teachers' lives from the outer and expanding circles have also been documented to highlight NNESTs' struggles and successes (Hayes, 2005, 2008, 2009; Kuchaah & Smith, 2011). These studies highlight the role of teacher agency against various odds. However, the paucity of research on NNESTs in their varied 'local' contexts such as the Arab world (or MENA region) is still noteworthy.

3. The study

3.1. Context and aims of the study

Saudi Arabia, like many other nations in the world, wants its citizen in this era of globalization to be proficient in the English Language for higher education and to participate in economic and other activities at the international level (Alshumaimeri, 2001, Phan & Barnawi, 2015). For this purpose, all universities in the Kingdom offer a 500-600 hour mandatory English language program to prospective students, during the preparatory or transition year between high school and university. This program is normally offered by an English Language Centre, and is largely dominated by models imported from the West, in terms of curriculum, learning objectives and textbooks. A preference for 'nativeness' is also reflected in employment criteria and hiring practices where native-speaker teachers are both preferred over non-native speaker teachers and paid a higher salary. Additionally, for native speakers, a lower level of qualifications is usually acceptable compared to non-native-speaker teachers.

With this backdrop, the aim of the study was to investigate the Arab teachers' perceptions of their professional identity in the context of the preparatory year English language program at a public-sector university in the KSA.

3.2. Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Arab teachers perceive themselves as NNESTs in the KSA?
2. What explains their perception of their professional identity as an English language teacher in the KSA?

Following subsidiary questions helped to trace the participants' trajectories as teachers and learners of English:

a. What are their experiences of learning English??
b. What are their views about different varieties of English?
c. Why did they choose to become teachers of English?
d. How do they perceive themselves as teachers, particularly in terms of their language competence and pedagogical skills?
e. What are their future career plans and aspirations?

4. Methodology

Six female Arab teachers teaching English in an EFL setting -the prep year program at the English Language Centre of a Saudi national university- were selected using purposive sampling. The teachers belonged to six different Arab

countries in the MENA region, i.e. Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia and Saudi Arabia. They had all been teaching for more than 5 years and at least for one year in Saudi Arabia. Three of the participating teachers had post-graduate qualifications in English while two had Bachelors in English Literature and/or Language. The sixth teacher was a qualified mechanical engineer but had been working as an English teacher for more than twelve years in the KSA. Three of the participants were 'direct hires' (employed by the university with a rolling contract) while the other three were 'company' teachers, hired on yearly contract basis by a company for the university. Their teaching experience ranged from 6-23 years.

All the teachers were interviewed individually by the researcher. A semi-structured qualitative interview format was used to gain in-depth understanding of their perceptions and experiences of being a NNEST in the EFL context of Saudi Arabia. The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Participation in the study was strictly on voluntary basis.

The participants were asked direct questions about their language learning trajectory; also, they were asked to self-assess their proficiency in English on a given rating scale. However, their beliefs regarding different aspects of teaching-learning and details about their practice were elicited indirectly through their reaction to two scenarios and asking them to agree/disagree with given statements. The participants were also encouraged to describe and reflect on specific lessons- one 'good' lesson and one that, in their view, did not go very well. Finally, they were asked how they would feel if the label of NNEST was used to refer to them by learners or their employers and colleagues.

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Chenail, 2012). Additionally, the theoretical concepts of ‘othering’ and ‘agency’ (Jensen, 2011) were used to make sense of participant’s personal and professional identity construction as NNESTs in an EFL context. Data analysis was ongoing and undertaken as a dialogue between theory and data.

After getting permission from the institutional Head to conduct the study, all ELC teachers were informed, through email and informal contact, of the purpose of the study and invited to participate. The venue and time required for the interview was also shared at this stage. The teachers who volunteered to participate in the study were given ‘informed consent forms’ to protect their rights as study participants. Several teachers were a bit concerned about signing the form and

what it would entail. Hence, they were asked to sign the form *after* the interview to help them understand their rights as study participants. All efforts were made to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of data, such as by locking the data and not discussing individual participants' views in informal or formal conversations.

My position was of a non-native speaker teacher working in the same context. During the interviews, while being careful not to create a feeling of 'us' vs 'them', I sometimes indicated empathy with the teachers, for example, by saying: "we are NNESTs in KSA . " This was done to put them at ease to share their views candidly.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. Proficiency in English

Medgys (1999) argues that "for non-native speaker English teachers to be effective, self-confident, and satisfied professionals, first, we have to be near-native speakers of English" (p.178). The increasing use of the term 'near- native proficiency' these days acknowledges that it is possible for non-native teachers to acquire a high degree of proficiency in English and therefore be entrusted with responsibilities such as examining/scoring international tests of English that were earlier considered the forte of native speakers only. This increasing acceptance of NNESTs with 'near-native' proficiency for teaching English may also be a response to the high demand for English teachers in the outer and extended circle countries such as China, Malaysia, Pakistan etc. due to the phenomenal increase in teaching-learning of English around the world (Graddol, 1997).

All the teachers in the study rated their proficiency in the four language skills and grammar as *very good* or *excellent* as can be seen in table 1 below. Moreover, they were confident that their employers/managers and colleagues would agree with their self-assessment regarding their proficiency. One teacher quoted the results of an external international exam to support the self-assessment of her language skills. Mainly, the problems noted, if any, were in regard to speaking.

Teacher	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Grammar
Hadeer	5	4	5	5	5
Sarah	4/5	4	5	5	5
Nouf[2]	4	3/4	5	4/5	4/5
Mariam	5	5	4	3.5	4.5
Eman	5	4	5	5	5
Amani	5	4	5	5	5

Table 1. Teachers' self-assessment of their proficiency in English

This confidence of the study participants in their language skills is not surprising in terms of their trajectories of learning English in 'privileged' EFL/ESL environments (private lessons, learning English from native speaker teachers etc.). Some of them also had opportunities to spend some years in the UK, either in their early years or later in adult life. For example, although Hadeer[i] started learning English formally in grade 6 in Syria, she had private lessons in conversation and was later sent to Lebanon to improve her proficiency in English. Subsequently, she had the opportunity to travel to the UK with her husband and stay there for 6 years. This helped her improve her language skills further. Similarly, Sarah had the opportunity to travel with her parents to the UK when she was in grade 5. She stayed there for two years. Interestingly, though she had started learning English in grade one in a private school in Egypt, she was first introduced to idiomatic language use in her school in the UK: "[Travelling to the UK] enforced [sic] English. I said to myself so I need to use English what I've learnt. And for the first time I started hearing expressions that I was not taught like 'making my bed'.

Amani started learning English at age 11 in Jordan. However, as she had very good teachers, she was soon able to gain proficiency in the language. Similarly, Mariam also started learning English in secondary school in Tunisia[3]. Her personal motivation as well as her teachers made this an “exciting experience something interesting- I want to learn- I want to I was motivated a lot- it was such motivation and also the teacher was also motivating and later when I studied at university also I enjoyed that”. Only one of the study participants, Nouf, did not

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[2] Nouf did not get any extra tutoring or support to learn English except from her teachers in Tunisia- a francophone country.

[3] She shared that that was 10 years ago. Since 2000, the situation has changed and English is now introduced in grade one.

get any 'extra' opportunities and learnt English from her teachers only in a francophone country.

Majority of the participants recalled the experience of learning English with fondness. They shared that they had enjoyed learning the language, whether it was due to the encouragement of their family or teachers and/or their own aptitude for the language. More important, all except Nada, who was better at speaking than writing, having learnt it at a young age from her family, were top of their class in English (and other subjects): “I was always among the first or the best students and this may be motivated me to carry on and to continue and to have my MA in general linguistics and to work on my Ph.D.” (Mariam). Additionally, their ownership of English (Widdowson:1994; Norton, 1997), even though they did not explicitly express this, was evident when they shared that it was more important to speak and write English that is clear and intelligible, than use a specific variety of English.

The recognition of other varieties of English and a focus on ‘intelligibility’ led these teachers to accept their own variety of English, *Arab* English, thereby developing their confidence in their own English language skills:

> To be clear-to make people understand what do you want-and to understand what do they want from you- I mean this is the most important thing for me-pronunciation- no one can like- we are Arabs like we are non-natives- we can't reach to like perfect pronunciation to be honest and I think that no one can in this case- but we try our best to be clear when we talk- and this is the most important thing.(Amani).

The teachers in the study were unanimous in their view that there was a need for an English teacher to be proficient in the language and that their own relatively high levels of proficiency in English had a positive influence on their teaching.

> If I'm confident about my language- my knowledge of the language- my proficiency- about everything in the language I will be a better teacher-if I'm not confident I think the students will doubt me-they won't trust me as a teacher-(Hadeer)

She shared that often, advanced level students tend to 'test' the proficiency of their non-native speaker teacher, in particular, by pointing out 'errors' in their language.

5.2. Professionalism

To gauge the teachers' professionalism, they were asked to describe ONE 'good' class and ONE 'not such a good' class. They were also encouraged to reflect on what, in their view, made these lessons effective or ineffective. Additionally, they were given one scenario and two statements about teaching-learning to react to. Finally, they were asked to share one problem they faced in their classes and ways in which they addressed it.

The teachers were unanimous in their view that a good class is characterized by students' active participation in class activities. The participants described a good lesson as where the teachers use a set of strategies and learning aids to motivate their students. They all agreed on the importance of planning to make their lessons more interesting and engaging for their students. There was evidence in their accounts of their sensitivity to their local context of teaching-learning and making contextually appropriate decisions in the KSA compared to what may be generally considered helpful for students in other settings. In contrast, a 'not such a good' lesson was typically described as the one where the students were not engaged, their participation level was low and there was little or no interaction in the classroom.

Interestingly all of the participating teachers considered themselves not only proficient in the English language but also 'good' teachers.

> Because I'm motivated- because I like to be a good teacher- I want to. I search for ways for being a good teacher and I – like being a good teacher is not just an idea in my mind- I pursue it from time to time (Hadeer).

The teachers' perception of their professional identity as NNESTs was also evident in their responses to the question about how they would feel if the label NNEST was used for them. For example, all of them shared being described as a NNEST did not make any difference to them because they were confident of their own proficiency in language as well as their knowledge and skills for teaching English. While these teachers agreed that they may not be as fluent in the English language compared to native speaker teachers. However, they felt that their higher level qualifications compared to many NESTs in their specific context helped them become good teachers. One of the teachers shared that teaching English as a non-native English speaker actually made her feel 'special', . . . so this can make you feel good about yourself but I always feel like it's a challenge- I have to develop- I can't stop. . . (Hadeer)

> Let them refer- it doesn't matter to me. if I'm confident I know I'm good at my job as a teacher- . . . no- it doesn't make a difference. *If I'm more qualified I know what I'm doing*.(My emphasis) (Eman)
>
> No problem- no problem with that. I AM a non-native speaker.. . . Maybe –native speaker is more fluent speaker- maybe not more proficient but she masters the language more than NNS –this is the reality and we have to admit that. (Nouf)
>
> Maybe I would ask- what do you mean by this (non-native speaker]-I wanted her to give me justification- why did she say that- . . .all of them even NS need training-maybe they are perfect in language but maybe they have some difficulties in dealing with students (Amani)
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> For me personally- I would have no problems with it [someone using the label NNEST]. . . .[But] it's more about how you perform- some teachers are native speakers but they don't know how to teach – . . .[a student] came and said well they need a bilingual teacher- (Hadeer)

The teachers shared that any impact of their being non-native teachers on their teaching effectiveness can only be positive due to their closer affinity with the students' cultural background:

> I think I have the ability to give this knowledge to people with the same mentality-the same mother tongue-this will help them to learn more because we have the same ideas [cultural background]-the same mentality-the same culture almost- my students- I think I have the ability to communicate with them more than the native teachers-because the native teachers-this is different community different culture [for them]. . . this is an advantage. (Sarah).

6. Discussion

The term non-native speaker of a language normally brings to mind in Saudi Arabia, as in most EFLsettings around the world, a less than proficient speaker compared to a native speaker, and hence deficient in some sense. Many see evidence of this deficiency in an identifiable 'non-native speaker' accent. Canagaragah (1999) argued for widening the base of ELT from 'accent and pronunciation' as the only qualification for being an English teacher to include "a sense of professionalism that orientates to language learning and the language learner in a holistic sense" (p. 84). This, in his view, would not only be more beneficial for the learners but also be more inclusive of NNESTs from the periphery countries. Additionally, Canagarajah (1999) pointed attention to the fact that in most periphery countries, "expertise is defined and dominated by native

speakers" (op.cit, p. 85). Canagaragah further contends that the 'legitimization of the Centre norms and competencies through the native speaker fallacy-including the concomitant dominance of Centre professionals in the development of expertise, professionalization and production of teaching materials- makes Periphery teachers look up to the Centre for professional advancement and assistance. This has serious implications for their identity construction". Ironically, the situation does not seem to have changed in many EFL contexts such as Saudi Arabia[ii] 18 years after Canagaragah wrote his article.

In the KSA, as mentioned earlier, English language teaching is largely dominated by 'native-speakerism' (Holliday, 2006) both in hiring practices and selection of curriculum and materials. Also, trainers from the inner circle countries are looked up to for professional advice, particularly by the employers. Nevertheless, all teachers- native and non-native speakers- are expected to be professionals. In other words, while there may be differences in proficiency among native and non-speaker teachers of English, professionalism may be the equalizing factor amongst them and even in some case, tilt the scale in favor of qualified NNESTs (e.g. see Park, 2012).

So an important question that arose from the findings was: What makes the Arab teachers perceive themselves as good teachers/ have a positive self-image of their professional identity?
In this section I will use the concepts of 'othering' and 'agency' (Jensen, 2011) to understand Arab teachers' high self-image in an EFL setting. Jensen defines othering as:

> . . . discursive processes by which powerful groups, who may or may not make a numerical majority, define subordinate groups into existence in a reductionist way which ascribe problematic and/or inferior characteristics to these subordinate groups. Such discursive processes affirm the legitimacy and superiority of the powerful and condition identity formation among the subordinate. (p.65)

In contrast, agency is defined as "the capacity to act within as well as up against social structures (p.66)". Two forms of agency are identified: *Capitalization* and *refusa*l. "Capitalization, "relies not on refusing othering discourses per se but by appropriating elements of them . . .[for] symbolic value. Resistance here takes the form of refusing to be devalued" (p.66) . Refusal, on the other hand, "relies on articulating distance from the category [assigned by othering] . . .and on refusing to occupy the position of the other. As the data above suggests, Arab teachers in

their interviews displayed almost a nonchalant attitude towards the label of NNEST applied to them. In fact, they were all confident of being 'good' teachers and highlighted their qualifications and professional training and experience as their strengths and by extension, the weaknesses of the native speaker teachers in that context. More important, they identified other areas in which they were superior to their native speaker counterparts such as empathy with the learners, sharing the cultural background of their students and therefore being able to understand their needs better. Similar to the ethnic minority young men in Jensen's study their reactions to being labeled as non-native English speaking teachers was manifested in capitalization to change their alleged marginality into a positive image for self and others However, unlike Jensen's young men, they did not refuse to accept the othering most prominent in discourse of recruiters and senior university administration in the KSA. In fact, they accepted that they were non-native speakers, "this is the reality, we have to accept it". However, a recognition of their strengths helped in having a positive self-image and largely ignore the effects of othering on their morale or teaching practice. In fact this marginalization led to teacher agency- more effort and hard work to prove that they were as good, if not better, than the native speaker teachers in the same context (also see also Rudolph, 2018).

Interestingly, there was no evidence in the study of Arab teachers refusal to occupy the space of NNESTs in their current teaching context, ie. KSA. As shared earlier, a differentiation between native and non-native English speaker teachers is apparent not only in hiring practices but also status and salary structures in KSA as in many other Arab countries, particularly the GCC countries. However, instead of accepting the negative connotations associated traditionally in this context with non-native speakerism, they highlighted their value as NNESTs for their learners, in particular.

Jensen argues on the basis of his empirical data that while othering is essentially an either/or position highlighting 'dichotomy', there is a "third space, which is not defined by firstness and otherness, but transcends the dichotomy: simply as normal human being . . ." (p.74). Hence, Jensen concludes that "when used in the analysis of concrete identity formation, the concept of othering works best when used in a dialogue with concepts more suited for grasping agency" (p.74). The positive self-image of the Arab teachers as 'qualified' NNESTs with good to excellent proficiency in the language, allowed them to create space for their agency to gain recognition for their professional expertise and excellence.

It has been observed that the 'othering' of NNESTs on the basis of race, ethnicity and linguistic proficiency/accents led to teacher 'agency' or their refusal to be relegated to a subordinate position. Park (2012), for example, notes the transition of Xia, an NNEST from China to the US educational context as a transformation from her “self-perceived marginalization as an NNES to the celebration and acceptance of her NNEST identity” (p.129). She concludes that, "The NEST/NNEST dichotomy, essentially an 'othering', minimized and overlooked the multiple identities of NNESTs, who could potentially identify themselves as multicompetent bilinguals, generation 1.5, multilinguals or World English Speakers" (p.129). Similarly, Lee (2010) gives a touching account of the reappropriation of his professional identity as a qualified NNEST in the US, transforming from a ‘disenfranchised’ to a ‘respected’ teacher.

Similar to NNEST in Park’s study (2012) and Lee (2010) in the US, the teachers in the study seem to capitalize on their ‘cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991) as qualified professionals, as well as their knowledge about the culture of their students (all Arabs). This capitalization in reaction to ‘othering’ discourses validated their professional identity as ‘good’ English language teachers. Similarly, their recognition of the need for intelligibility more than a native-speaker accent led to an ‘ownership’ of their own variety of English- the Arab variety, as legitimate in addition to the British and American varieties of English. This in turn, gave them confidence in their own proficiency in the English (even if they could not boast a native-speaker accent).

7. Conclusion

Recent research on NNESTs has led to several questions and concerns about the relevance of TESOL programs in the US for NNESTs (Kemhei-Stein, 2000). Consequently, there is a call among TESOL professionals for designing strategies for: a) making the TESOL programs more relevant to the needs of the NNESTs, as a large number of NNESts are participants in these programs; b) empowering NNESTs (e.g. de Oliveira, 2011; Kamhi-Stein, 2000, 2013).

The growing acceptance of the professional expertise of 'qualified' non-native speaker teachers in their own countries and abroad, may be related to economics of supply and demand, particularly in outer and expanding circle countries. However, the agency of NNESTs has definitely played a role in the formation and recognition of their professional identities within the mainstream academic community in the North as well as in other contexts as exemplified by the six participating teachers in this study.

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[i] Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to protect the identity of the participants.

[ii] A news item published on in the Arab News titled 'US experts to train Saudis in English language teaching' (November 24, 2013).