Bahraini Teachers' Perceptions of Teaching Differences with Native English Speaker Teachers of English

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Abstract: Investigating the non-native speakers'(NNEST) perceptions of their native-speaker colleagues has become a controversial issue in TESOL. In this research, the researcher will show that Bahraini teachers' (BELT)perceptions of their native-speaker (NEST) colleagues, as solely those who belong to Anglo-Saxon society, have led them to perceive many differences than similarities when teaching English

Keywords: Teaching, Teachers, Native-Speaker, Perceptions.

Introduction

In the area of the teaching of English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), a need has arisen to understand teachers' knowledge by exploring their perceptions, beliefs and teaching approaches. There are two different groups of teachers, the native-speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS), and there have been more calls to investigate the NNS teachers' perceptions than their NS teacher colleagues', for two main reasons. First, because overt discussion of the non-native-speakers' perceptions about the native-speakers is rare in language teaching and a better understanding is needed (Llurda, 2006; Cook, 1999; Braine, 1999). Second, as a result of the increased awareness of the importance of teacher knowledge and its influence on teaching performance (Johnson, 1999), an argument has been established in TESOL regarding the design of teacher education programmes in relation to whether they should prepare 'language teachers' or 'language educators' (Troudi, 2005; Pennycook, 1994).

In the Bahraini context, very little is known about how the Bahraini English language teachers (BELTs) perceive their native English-speaker teacher (NEST) colleagues. No study has been conducted so far to investigate this issue and most studies carried out in Bahrain focus on one aspect of teaching English, which is the pedagogical practices (Al-Wadi, 2007). This study, therefore attempts to fill this gap in knowledge as it aims to establish an understanding of how BELTs perceive their NEST colleagues who teach with them in the same educational institutions in Bahrain. This understanding may help identify role aspects that require immediate attention and focus on future professional development programmes for both the NNESTs and NESTs. In addition, by sharing this understanding with BELTs, it aims at raising the awareness of the broader dimensions of native teachers' practices, its dynamic nature, and the need to adopt new concepts that emphasise the importance of local teachers of English as initiators of change in their own societies.

Study problem

While there is ample research around the world on the issue of 'native and non-native speaker' in the area of TESOL (e.g. Llurda, 2006; Jones, 2003; Sleeter, 2001; Barratt & Kontra, 2000; Kubota, 1999; Liu, 1999; Cook, 1999; Kramsch, 1997; Boyle, 1997; Braine, 1999; & Raddaoui, 2000), some questions still remain unanswered. This study is , therefore, hoped to lead to useful knowledge, especially with regard to Bahraini English language teachers' (BELTs) perceptions, as non-native English speaker teachers (NNESTs), of the native English speaker teachers (NESTs) in their non-native English speaking context. The major question to be answered in this study is: **What do the BELTs perceive as the main similarity/difference between themselves and their NEST colleagues?**

Theoretical Framework of the study

There are four components that shape the conceptual framework for this study. These components are meaning construction, social interaction, cultural, and the teaching contexts. In this regard, this study conceives the views of the individual participants as actively constructed and reshaped (Daniels, 2001). This is because every individual fundamentally constructs his or her own knowledge or understanding of the world and the situation he or she is faced with in his or her own way. However, these created meanings are not always fixed as they can constantly change over time and across contexts (Williams & Burden, 2000).

Participants

Ten BELTs , four males and six females took part in this study. The criteria for choosing them were based on both purposiveness and accessibility. First of all, they all have been teaching in Bahrain for more than 10 years. This fits the issue under investigation in this study, which was the none native English-speakers' knowledge of their native practices; since the latter represent the stereotype of the English speaker and also that they have been working in Bahrain for a period of time which is considered not short. In addition, These BELTs are colleagues to several NESTs who have been working with them in the same English departments and so it was significant to investigate those BELTs' views on how they find their NEST colleagues' teaching with them.

Limitations of the study

This study findings are limited to three possible limitations. First, the number of participants wasn't large and hence the results cannot be totally generalized to other groups of BELTs in Bahrain. Secondly, although there were many stakeholders involved in the teaching-learning process of English as a foreign language (e.g., non-native teachers of English from other nationalities, Head of English department Bahraini students) this study investigated only one dimension of it, the BELTs' perceptions of differences in teaching with their NEST colleagues. Finally, a common drawback of using interviews might have been the difficulty of ensuring that the answers from the respondents were highly reliable. However, I hope that the present study will shed some light on having a better understanding of some aspects that construct the professional knowledge of the BELTs as NNESTs in their context of teaching and learning English as a foreign language.

Data analysis:

As interviews were solely the major instrument for data collection in this study, the data were collected by analysing both; the participants' responses for each question in the interviews by breaking down the participants' answers into quotations to be classified in certain categories. In addition, the participants' responses to the questions were quantified to detect cultural aspects of difference in the process of learning-teaching English as a foreign language in the Bahraini context.

Findings

As I shall argue in this section, the participants' perceptions of the NESTs as solely those who belong to an Anglo-Saxon society where English is the mother tongue have led them to perceive more differences than similarities with their NEST colleagues in the area of English teaching in the Bahraini EFL/ESL context. This view was influenced by their perception of themselves as NNESTs who differ from the NESTs in certain aspects, such as language proficiency, career opportunities and qualifications

Through the interviews, I asked them how they – as NNESTs – compare themselves with their NEST colleagues and about the advantages and disadvantages of being NNESTs or NESTs. The participants' responses were classified into categories as follows:

Qualifications & preparation

The majority of the interview respondents (n=8) perceived differences between themselves and their NEST colleagues regarding qualifications. The NESTs, the participants claimed, were chosen to teach English on the basis of "being NESTs" (T7) although, according to those participants, they - "hold lower qualifications than BELTs" (T11). The same participants pointed out that, in spite of the fact that "BELTs usually hold

higher qualifications" (T5), NESTs are normally "preferred" (T3) because they are perceived as "presenters of the original cultural background of the language" (T10).

This view is supported by researchers. For instance, Canagarajah (1999) argues that NESTs can act as 'reflectors' of the target language culture. He also adds that NESTs might be better in EFL contexts, because of their unique cultural knowledge, whereas NNESTs could be better in ESL contexts, because of their multicultural experience. Hence, the participants' perception in this regard can be understood since the present study's ELT context is considered EFL rather ESL by the majority of the BELTs (Al-Anssari & Lori, 2001). In addition, it is a fact that most English departments in the major universities in Bahrain teach British and American literature. Therefore, it could be argued that this perception of difference, of the NESTs' being preferred for their L1 despite their lower qualifications, refers to the greater contribution NESTs can make as regards culture compared with the BELTs. This interpretation is supported by the findings of other studies. Llurda and Huguet (2003) found that Catalan teachers still give greater value to knowledge of British culture than to their own culture or that of other European countries. According to the researchers, this is probably related to the fact that university departments in Spain are still devoting greater attention to traditional NS cultures and literatures (i.e. British and American) than to those of other countries where English is also used.

Overall, although the participants perceived the superiority of their NEST colleagues in their familiarity with the target language culture, their perceptions of difference in qualifications and experience with their NEST colleagues reflected feelings of confidence that they could teach the language better than their NEST colleagues. Firstly, some respondents asserted that they were prepared to teach English "academically and professionally" (T2) while they claimed that most of their NEST colleagues "lack the educational preparation" (T3). As one of the participants explained:

Most of the NESTs in our department don't hold a degree in education because they were not trained to be teachers. (T5)

Other participants perceived their NEST colleagues as different from them in terms of the teaching experience in higher education. Those participants believed that they "have been teaching in higher education more than their *NEST* colleagues" (T15). They also pointed out that they went through several stages during their career starting from "teaching in the elementary education" (T1) to being "senior teachers in secondary education*"* (T12), the stage from which many of them moved to teaching in higher education institutions.

In addition, two participants reported that both their qualifications and experience were different from their NEST colleagues in the way their qualifications were relevant to *"the domain of ELT"* (T8) as well as to "the Bahraini context" (5). The following quotation explains this view:

BELTs in higher education are required by law to specialise in ELT to be eligible to teach English in higher education plus that their study should be concerned with developing the Bahraini ELT context and its learners' characteristics (T12).

The above perceptions of differences with the NESTs in terms of the academic degrees and educational preparation on the part of the participants corroborate what Llurda (2006 b) states: that most NNESTs go through intensive teacher education and academic study programmes in order to be eligible to teach the language. Kamhi-Stein (1999) argues that the inclusion of educational and professional preparation in the NNESTs' teacher education programs is meant to empower the NNESTs as qualified teachers of English who can successfully manage to teach English as either a foreign or second language. It can be inferred therefore that these perceptions of the participants reflect a sense of 'equality' – if not 'eligibility' - to be treated in the same way as the NESTs, especially when they perceive themselves as 'more qualified' and 'educationally oriented' than NESTs. These findings indicate that the participants feel that they should be respected and treated equally to NESTs in terms of salary, promotion, and employment.

However, somewhat contradictory to these opinions, the participants viewed themselves as still lacking experience and confidence in teaching the language in their own context. This was highlighted when I asked them how they perceived the roles and responsibilities of their NEST colleagues. In spite of the 'lower qualifications' they claimed their NEST colleagues have, many of the participants considered the NESTs as "fundamental partners" (T7) who can "develop the BELTs' professional skills in different ways" (T9). One of

those ways was by being "transmitters of professional experience" (T2) to their BELT colleagues and also "linkers" (T8) between the language teaching context in Bahrain and the latest developments in the language education area in the West. The following quotation summarises this view:

NESTs can supply us with their professional experience in teaching the language … and know ways to teach the language or deal with certain problems (T13).

This contradiction on the part of the participants, that, despite their perception of themselves as qualified educators, they still regard NESTs as performing 'fundamental' roles which are 'irreplaceable', is reflected in some research findings. For example, Passoa and Sacchi (2004) found that, despite the participants' acknowledgment of their superior qualifications and educational background, it was hard for them to perceive themselves as equal to the NESTs in language teaching. As one of the respondents in this study stated: "We [as BELTs] cannot replace NESTs" (T7).

Generally, the findings in this study suggest that the BELTs have a high level of confidence in their own qualifications and teaching knowledge, but perceived the NESTs' practices as more successful than theirs. Significantly, there have been no specific studies to investigate the NESTs' roles and duties, either in the Bahraini context or in neighboring contexts in the Gulf region. Yet it can be argued that the participants' contradictory feelings might have resulted from the way their learners in their context view them: not as 'much preferred' as the NESTs. Two recent studies by Coombe & Al-Hamly (2007) and AbdulMajeed (2005) are relevant to this finding. According to Coombe and Al-Hamly (2007), learners prefer to be taught by NESTs rather than NNESTs in both the UAE and Kuwaiti contexts. They explained that most of the learners justified their preference for the NESTs in terms of their beliefs about the mastery of language and status of the NESTs as original deliverers of the language. AbdulMajeed (2005) reached the same conclusion: that the majority of the students in higher education in Bahrain found studying with NESTs more beneficial because they could teach better than BELTs.

Interestingly, four respondents indicated that they perceived similarities with their NEST colleagues regarding qualifications. Those participants explained that they found themselves equal to their NEST colleagues in terms of academic degrees and professional background because they all "hold PhDs in language education" (T9) and they have "developed in career till teaching in higher education" (T4). The same respondents found similarity with their NEST colleagues regarding their context knowledge as it depended on the amount of knowledge they "had received in their home context" (T1). They believed that experienced BELTs and the NESTs who worked in similar contexts were similar in their teaching styles and practices as students' needs and interests would be similar. An example was given in this regard:

I and my NEST colleagues who served in Kuwait find a lot in common, such as agreement on some students' weaknesses and how some skills should be taught … like writing (T6).

One of the four respondents felt that both BELTs and NESTs should be similar because "education colleges and institutes follow similar programmes in preparing their EL teachers" (T2).

With reference to the nature of the teacher education programmes in Bahrain, these perceptions might be applicable. According to Al-Nahar (2001), most teacher education programmes in Bahrain follow international trends in their format and content. This arises from the way these programmes, which are offered by either the Ministry of Education or colleges of education, are taken from British and American international institutions and organizations according to academic agreements between these organizations and those in Bahrain. Some researchers corroborate this similarity in teacher education programmes, specifically in the field of TESOL. Kamhi-Stein (2006) reports that most teacher education preparation programmes in TESOL have similar courses and objectives in preparing their future TESOL educators, regardless of their language status, in terms of both language knowledge and procedural knowledge. Moreover, Moussu and Llurda (2008) state that in spite of the fact that many programme administrators recognize the linguistic and cultural differences between NESTs and NNESTs, they do not see a need for special adjustments to accommodate either group's needs.

Teaching methods/styles

The NESTs were perceived as implementers of innovative and progressive modern teaching methods/styles that were normally preferred by the majority of their BELT colleagues. This view was

revealed by an analysis of the participants' responses towards their NEST colleagues' methods/styles of teaching.

Several participants (n=7) perceived their NEST colleagues' teaching as "more free" (T3) than theirs, which they perceived as "traditional" (T7). They also saw their colleagues' teaching methods as "more modern" (T5) and "close to their learners' reality" (T10). An example of the NESTs' modern teaching was seen in the way they "put a big emphasis on using IT in their teaching" (T1), which helps attract the learners to their classes. Conversely, the participants perceived their own teaching as "classical" (T8) and "limited to the course books only" (T3). This was clearly shown in the way they "focus on memorising the textbook and learning solid grammatical rules" (T7). One reason behind this view of difference was found in the association between the NESTs' culture and models of free thinking and interaction. This was evident throughout the participants' replies. The following two replies are examples of this:

We've to be traditional because this is relevant to our culture (T1),

and:

Culturally… textbooks are known as the most important tool for learning (T6).

Nevertheless, culture was also perceived by the participants as the factor that determines both BELTs' and NESTs' relationships with their learners. Several respondents pointed out that "NESTs deal informally with students" (T4) but BELTs usually "keep some distance with the students" (T1). They justified this type of difference in the way it is considered a "type of respect" (T5) according to the participants' culture. Some respondents expressed the view that BELTs and NESTs differ in their treatment of their learners while teaching. They claimed that NESTs allow their learners to "decide with them on the way they prefer to learn the language" (T7) and they also "treat [their learners] in a more informal way" (T3). Conversely, the participants perceived themselves as being "strict in treating the students" (T5) and "don't prefer them [students] to take part in the teaching method" (T9) because they considered it "not students' business" (T10). The following quotation illustrates this clearly:

There are always cultural constrains that restrict our movements, but the NESTs are more free as their culture is more open-minded (T7).

Three respondents reported that their NEST colleagues differ from them in the way NESTs use "only English with their students" (T8) while BELTs "mix between Arabic and English sometimes" (T3).

The above data analysis reflects the influence of socio-cultural factors which seem to have a bearing on the participants' perceptions of the differences between their teaching methods and styles and those of their NEST colleagues. For example, most of the study participants perceived a difference regarding implementing modern techniques in teaching the language. In addition, the respondents emphasised the difference between themselves and the NESTs in terms of their roles with their learners in the classroom. The findings reflect a more stringent role on the part of the BELTs than NESTs. These distinctions were mainly attributed to culture. Moreover, the differences between the participants and their NEST colleagues regarding discipline, and the type of relationship with their students, were also perceived to be a result of cultural values such as the degree of respect and obedience that should be maintained between the BELTs and their students. Finally, the perception of difference regarding ability to communicate and interact with learners can also be claimed to be a result of similar cultural and language backgrounds shared between the participants and their learners. This influence of culture is emphasised by Holliday (1994), who states that any learning context is influenced by socio-cultural factors within the educational institution. This was evident in some participants' responses:

It is a cultural perception that people [in Bahrain] always prefer English to be taught by NESTs as they believe that NESTs can practise more free and successful ways of teaching/learning styles with the learners (T10).

Nevertheless, some respondents' responses show an influence of these socio-cultural factors from a wider view. For example, some respondents perceived that NESTs' teaching was different from theirs because they were prepared and trained on an international standard. The following quotation represents this view:

NESTs' teaching methods are different from us in the way they suit any learning context all over the world because NESTs are prepared on international basis (T7).

Holliday (1994) addresses this view as well by claiming that the same local socio-cultural factors usually go beyond their local context to the wider social, educational, political, economic and global factors that exist in a society. Some studies acknowledge this finding. Butler (2007) found that 60% of her 112 respondents, who were Japanese English teachers, supported the claim that NESTs are the best ESL/EFL teachers because they reflect a more global trend in their teaching while only 13% did not. I would argue at this stage that in spite of the mentioned wider socio-cultural factors that affected the respondents' perceptions of differences from their NEST colleagues in this study, the local culture which perceives the NEST as the professional language teacher has a greater influence on the participants' views of their differences in teaching with the NESTs. This can be justified in the way most of the respondents (n=9) in the interview indicated a strong desire to learn the successful teaching methods from their NEST colleagues. They also believed that NESTs act as role models in their departments and that they should attempt to perform like them. The following quotation reflects this sentiment:

We've learned and been informed about all the new methods of teaching by the NESTs in the department who help us a lot in teaching proper English (T4).

One possible explanation of this perception of the NESTs' performance is that in the local social context of this study, as AbdulMajeed (2005) finds, NESTs, especially those from Anglo-Saxon origins, are considered 'owners of English' as well as more successful and authentic in EFL/ESL teaching/learning. I agree with AbdulMajeed's finding, since the findings of my recent research study regarding the NESTs' perceptions of themselves in the Bahraini context (Al Wadi, 2007) indicated that NESTs perceived themselves as experts in language teaching who were accorded privileges in the Bahraini context.

On the whole, the participants' perceptions of differences in teaching methods/styles from their NEST colleagues in this study are similar to the results of other studies (e.g. Canagarajah, 2005; Samimy & Brutt-Griffler, 1999; Reves & Medgyes, 1994; Medgyes, 1994) that NESTs and NNESTs differ in their teaching behaviour in several ways, such as their teaching styles and methods and also their interaction with learners. These studies also support the findings indicated in this study. That is, most NNESTs perceive that their NESTs are better in teaching the language and consider them as role models that they wish to emulate. However, I believe that these perceptions of the NESTs are a logical consequence of the low self-esteem these BELTs have. This low self-esteem results from the view these participants hold of themselves as NNESTs who are in doubt about their teaching performance. This was significantly reflected in the way they perceived the NESTs as the ones who are assigned particular pedagogical responsibilities, such as developing BELTs' teaching methods and styles, suggesting new ways to communicate with students and improving the BELTs' ability to implement information technology in their teaching. Nevertheless, I believe that it is the participants' perception of NESTs as more highly language proficient that led them to consider their NEST colleagues as more capable of playing certain roles which none of BELTs was able to do, such as teaching the advanced courses. In sum, I can argue that this belief in the NESTs as better implementers of teaching methods/styles was the cause for these respondents to perceive themselves as having limited abilities and in need of their NEST colleagues' assistance to develop and achieve in their teaching career.

Findings from a number of studies such as Pessoa and Sacchi (2006) support this interpretation by reporting that one of the impacts of being a NNEST was that these teachers found themselves unable to achieve without assistance from the NESTs, who were considered the perfect model for language teaching performance. In addition, the second impact on the NNESTs' performance reported by these researchers was the NNESTs' feeling of being reluctant to take the initiative or participate in discussions in the English teaching profession when with NESTs. This may be because they are hesitant to share their ideas or display their abilities as they perceive their own teacher identity in a negative light as 'illegitimate' owners of the English language, while the NESTs are not. These researchers stated that this perception of the NESTs as better practitioners in language teaching affected the NNESTs' performance by leading them to be passive agents rather than active participants in the TESOL community. This is also what the present study findings indicate: NNESTs (BELTs in the study) tend to assign fundamental responsibilities and major roles to the NESTs to an extent that makes NESTs the key players in developing the language teaching process in the

participants' own context, while they are acting passively in the same context. The following quotation represents this view:

The NESTs are our source to know how to implement new practices in language teaching (T10).

Nevertheless, the remaining four respondents had the self-confidence to see themselves as being equal to their NEST colleagues. These respondents believed that both BELTs and NESTs share more similarities than differences in their teaching. They explained this similarity by the international trend of considering English teaching as "an international profession, where EL teachers share different teaching approaches with each others " (T2). In this regard, they perceived that both "BELTs and NESTs implement the communicative approach" (T9) in their teaching because they have to "use only English in their teaching and interactions with their learners" (T6). BELTs were also seen as similar to the NESTs in teaching some courses, such as the "specialised courses" (T2) because "there are definite techniques for the teachers to practise with the students like writing techniques" (T4). Finally, the four participants perceived both BELTs and NESTs similar in the way they both "should follow their department's policy in conducting lessons based on problem solving" (T6). In addition, both groups were believed to provide their students with problem-solving situations to practice the language in. This sentiment can be seen in the following two quotations:

BELTs are able enough to carry out any responsibility that concerns with enhancing the language teaching and learning (T9)

and:

I believe that any capable BELT can do what is assigned to him [or her] same as what the NEST might do as long he [or she] is professional enough in his [or her] specialisation. (T2)

This perception has been examined in other research. Braine (1999), Liu (1999), and Llurda (2006 a) state that the international standards of most English teaching preparation programmes and the escalating demands in English instruction have resulted in the majority of ESL/EFL teachers being NNESTs. Although research has indicated that students can learn good English from either NESTs or NNESTs, regardless of the setting in which English is being taught (e.g. Mahboob, 2004; Moussu, 2002), Kamhi-Stein (2006) and Bailey (2002) call on the NNESTs to participate actively in the cultivation of new approaches to and methods of language teaching in order to enhance their professionalism. This is exactly what was perceived by those participants who indicated that the contextual knowledge they already possessed led to their being "more experienced in the Bahraini learning context" (T4) which would enable them to be "more capable in designing materials" (T9) and "implementing suitable teaching methods" (T5) that fulfill their students' needs and interests.

Language proficiency

This is an emergent category that has resulted from the perceived differences in teaching methods/styles between BELTs and NESTs in the way the latter were perceived by the former as assistants in teaching certain courses, particularly the advanced ones. According to the interview responses, most of the respondents (n=8) considered the NESTs different from them in the way NESTs enjoy "higher language competency" (T7) than BELTs. Those participants justified their perception from several perspectives. Some attributed it to the "proper linguistic knowledge" (T3) their NEST colleagues have as they are believed to have a "higher quality of language use and practice" (T6). Others justified it as a natural result of the "cultural background" (T10) the NESTs come from in which English is considered their "mother tongue" (T7) that "they [NESTs] use it [English] in their daily interactions with people" (T3).

As a result, on the one hand, respondents saw their NEST colleagues as different from them in their ability to "better deal with difficult courses" (T3) which require a high language competency for "explaining complicated linguistic structures and expressions" (T1). They asserted that NESTs had the ability "to explain any questions raised by the students" (T7). On the other hand, some participants mentioned that NESTs are preferred to teach advanced or higher level courses because they also have "sufficient experience in teaching this type of course" (T2). This view was corroborated in other responses in which several added that "NESTs are the best assistants in teaching certain skills like speaking and listening" (T5). A justification of this perception was seen in the way NESTs "can teach correct English and tell the right pronunciation" (T1).

Consequently, several participants reported that the use of English as the only means of interaction and teaching on the part of the NESTs "provides the students and BELTs as well with more exposure to the language use and practice" (T4). These respondents emphasised strongly that NESTs were perceived differently as they were seen to perform an integral role by being "experts of practising the language in both teaching and learning" (T7). Teacher (10) justified how the NESTs are different in fostering language practice from the BELTs:

We [BELTs] might use Arabic in the class but with the NESTs, students have to use only English as these teachers speak and understand only English.

The perceived difference in language proficiency between BELTs and NESTs corresponds with what Coombe and Al-Hamly (2007), Boyle (1997), Reves and Medgeys (1994) reported in their study. These researchers indicated that NESTs were perceived as superior to NNESTs in their capacity to use the language spontaneously and in the most diverse communicative situations. On the other hand, the NNESTs were seen in the same studies to have a faulty command of English because it was considered a learnt language.

Regarding the participants' perception of difference in pronunciation and speaking between themselves and the NESTs, to the advantage of the latter, other research has corroborated this finding. For instance, Tang's study (1997) indicated specific differences between NESTs and NNESTs especially in speaking, pronunciation, listening, vocabulary, and reading. In addition, Mahboob (2004) conducted a study of ESL students' perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs and found that the oral skills and vocabulary of NESTs were the linguistic factors that received remarkably positive comments from students as compared to those of NNESTs. These studies support the perception of the respondents in this study that their NEST colleagues differ from them in the way they act as promoters of the language because they have better oral skills and vocabulary.

From a critical stance, the participants' perception of their NEST colleagues' linguistic competence should not affect their own pedagogical practice or status in their context as language teachers. Although language competency might have a great influence on teaching skills, having good command of the language in itself does not necessarily make one, whether NEST or NNEST, a better teacher. Awareness of the language and the ability and skills to teach it are the real criteria for considering such teachers to be professional and successful (Braine, 1999). In this regard, Cook (1999) suggests that professional orientation is as important as language proficiency because it supplies the teachers with the target pedagogic skills and teaching attitudes that assist them in carrying out their duties. Other research supports this, such as the study by Samimy and Brutt-Griffler (1999), which indicated that the more NNESTs are trained in language teaching, the less their limited language competency might affect their teaching. This is indeed the opposite to what the participants said in this study when they explained that "the major difference between [them] and NESTs is language proficiency because all other differences result from it" (T10), such as their frequent cautions "during teaching to avoid making mistakes" (T1).

Interestingly, three participants did not consider language proficiency a major difference between BELTs and NESTs. They stated that BELTs could compete with their NEST colleagues in language skills as they "have the same level of language proficiency as their NEST colleagues have" (T2). Based on this perception, this group of respondents asked for shared responsibility between BELTs and NESTs in teaching advanced courses as they believed that "BELTs are able enough to carry out any responsibility that concerns enhancing the language teaching and learning" (T9). The same view is reported in some studies. Kamhi-Stein, Aagard, Ching, Paik & Sasser (2004) found that both NESTs and NNESTs seemed to be confident in their language competence and skills. Surprisingly, the researchers indicated that NNESTs did not rate their pronunciation and communicative skills as negatively as expected; instead they considered them either on the same level with or better than their NEST colleagues. Similarly, Llurda and Huguet (2003) asked 101 NNESTs in an EFL context (Spain) about their perceived language and pedagogical skills in relation to the NS-NNS debate. Generally, the study indicated that the majority of participants held a positive attitude towards their level of language and pedagogy as NNESTs and they expressed a lower dependence on the NESTs as the ultimate model in language teaching. Finally, in Turkey, which can be considered close to this study's context, Dogancay-Aktuna (2008) asked 21 NNESTs about their status as non-native speakers of English, professional identities, and self-perceived skills. Most of these participants rated their language skills and competences in English as high.

Overall, these perceptions of the participants regarding superiority of the NESTs' language proficiency reflect the great improvements which have been achieved in the EFL/ESL contexts in general, and the Bahraini ELT context in particular, regarding making the NNESTs' competences, particularly the linguistic competence, more visible in the TESOL community. Here, with reference to the context of this study, it can be argued that the participants' perceptions can be considered a logical result of the language teacher education in-service programmes provided by both the Ministry of Education and colleges of education in Bahrain which focus on developing linguistic competencies similar to the NS, especially in pronunciation, speaking and colloquial language expressions, more than on learning effective ways of implementing these competencies to fulfill target learners' needs (Al-Wadi, 2005).

Therefore, although the "native speaker superiority" myth among both native and non-native speaking TESOL professionals in Bahrain is still, to a large extent, deep-rooted, it can be challenged, through efforts. These efforts, as I believe, should start from the pre-service ESL/EFL teacher education programmes which are provided for both candidate teachers and more experienced ones. One of the effective strategies may be to specifically address issues relating to NNES professionals in these programmes and courses. Since the number of NNESTs surpasses that of their native speaking counterparts, it would not be unreasonable to mandate that TESOL programmes in Bahrain, as well as in other native-speaking contexts, include some readings related to NNES.

Understanding students' problems

Interestingly, there was only a slight difference in numbers between those who perceived differences (n=8) and those who found similarities (n=7) between BELTs and NESTs regarding understanding their students' problems and needs, which reflects a divergence of views among the participants in this regard. Overall, this slight difference between the two groups can be explained by the common perception expressed by the majority of the respondents who considered "both NESTs and BELTs as teachers who were trained to deal with the different psychological characteristics of their learners" (T2). Yet, the perception of difference expressed by the eight respondents regarding this issue sprang from the belief that "BELTs share a similar social background" (T9), "similar cultural values" (T3) and "belonging to the learners' context" (T4), which all were considered "an advantage for BELTs" (T5) in that they could understand their students better. These aspects were illustrated in the participants' responses. To start with, some believed that BELTs could identify their students' language mistakes more accurately than NESTs because they "know more about the most common grammatical mistakes their students might make because they share the same mother tongue" (T4). In addition, some participants clarified that NESTs cannot deal with Bahraini students in the same way BELTs do, as the latter "know the educational background of their students" (T2) and "how and what they studied in English" (T10) which could help them more in their teaching. Nevertheless, some participants perceived BELTs to be more "welcoming to provide help to their students than NESTs" (T9).

The literature echoes some of these perceived differences with NESTs regarding understanding students' problems. Khami-Stein et al (1999), find that NNESTs are believed to have better empathy and better understanding of their students' needs because they share similar social and cultural backgrounds with their learners. This corroborates the finding revealed in this study where the participants perceived themselves as more understanding of their students' needs due to the similar social and cultural backgrounds. In this regard, Auerbach (1996) indicates that teachers and students who share the same language and cultural background usually tend to have similar understanding of their learning interests. This was also reflected in the finding that BELTs considered themselves more capable of understanding the common mistakes of their learners within the background of their learning context. This might also justify why those participants perceived BELTs as more willing than their NEST colleagues to solve their students' language problems because they have learned English as an EFL and so they could share with their learners the experience and challenges of EFL learning they have already gone through. NESTs, however, are seen as unable to do this as they do not have this insight, based on their lack of knowledge of Arabic. Celik (2006) confirms this finding by stating that NNESTs have a better grasp of the factors involved in the English teaching/learning process than the NESTs because they have had the experience of learning English themselves unlike the NESTs who had acquired the language naturally, although they might have studied it formally later. A number of research studies support this finding. For instance, Samimy and Brutt-Griffler (1999), Liu (1999), and Lasagabaster and Sierra (2006) indicate in their studies that students showed more positive experience when learning

English with their NNESTs because they found that their NNESTs display a more sensitive attitude towards their common language learning experience and their problems with it.

This perception of their understanding of learners' problems entailed ways of helping their students. This was shown in the belief of the same participants that their NEST colleagues are "too strict enough with students" (T10). In assigning homework they "don't negotiate deadlines, cancellation, reducing the amount of homework" (T7) and implement university or college regulations in the way that "they never accept excuses that don't match with the interior regulations' code of practice of the university" (T1). This type of treatment was justified by the participants in that NESTs would consider it "a professional performance to apply the regulations" (T12) while BELTs would consider it a means of "helping students whether it was with or against the regulations policy" (T8). Arva and Medgyes (2000) and Barratt and Kontra (2000) indicate similar results regarding the advantages and disadvantages of being NNESTs or NESTs. The results of their studies showed that NESTs were often unable to empathise with students going through the learning process because of their lack of cultural knowledge and the characteristics of the learners in their ESL/EFL contexts. The researchers considered this a major reason for the belief that NESTs are less tolerant in dealing with their students' problems in the ESL/EFL contexts.

The study findings also revealed that some participants perceived no difference between them as BELTs and their NEST colleagues in terms of understanding their students' problems. One reason for this perception of similarity was justified by the participants in the way students' problems were considered a teacher's responsibility; that all teachers regardless of their origin should "share similar awareness about students and their problems" (T14). The same respondents believed that both BELTs and NESTs were also similar in dealing with their students' problems. This was expressed by the respondents who reported that they and their NEST colleagues "share similar treatment because students' problems are usually the same" (T12).

In fact, this view is in line with the current trend in the TESOL area where it is suggested that a unified approach be maintained by all teachers, regardless of being NNESTs or NESTs, to collaborate in solving their learners' problems. In this regard, Matsuda and Matsuda (2001) explain that, rather than comparing competencies or deficiencies, an ideal model for both NNESTs and NESTs would look at all teachers in terms of being involved in a cooperative learning community. However, this trend in TESOL has not received sufficient investigation by researchers as there are still obstacles (Llurda, 2006).

Implications

The indicated findings in this study show that BELTs working in some governmental universities and colleges in Bahrain perceived their NEST colleagues as different from themselves as English language teachers. Generally, they reported holding narrow views of the concepts NS/NEST and NNS/NNEST. These narrow views appeared to lead most of them to hold negative perceptions of themselves as NNESTs. Though not perceived critically and often not questioned on their academic backgrounds, NESTs were perceived as more capable and were favoured to teach the language; they were believed to be better than BELTs, who seemed inferior due to their status as NNESTs. This was evident throughout the findings, particularly in the areas of language proficiency and teaching pedagogy.

The immediate implications that arise out of these findings seem to directly concern the BELTs themselves. One question springs immediately to mind: should they take any action in order to increase their confidence in themselves as language educators in their context? According to the current trend of teaching English in Bahrain, which focuses on teaching English as an EFL/ESL in higher education, the answer seems to be 'yes'. Llurda (2004) states that NNESTs in EFL/ESL settings do not usually seem to be aware of the new opportunities that are opening up for them, and are still anchored in the old NS/NEST dominated framework, in which British or American norms have to be followed and NSs/NESTs are considered the ideal teachers. BELTs should take action by letting the decision makers in their organisations know that this way of thinking is changing rapidly as language teaching theory incorporates the consequences of accepting the global status of English as an international language (Llurda, 2004; Crystal, 1997). Based on this, language teachers will no longer be called to act as presenters of the target language culture. Instead, they are responsible for presenting the multifaceted reality in which language is used and for helping the learner express their own identity through this newly acquired voice (Cook, 1999). In this regard, I believe that teacher education programmes in Bahrain should consider paying special attention to the expertise of

teachers and how teachers' self perceptions are influenced by their status as either NESTs or NNESTs, their experience and their expertise.

There are also certain implications for BELTs that can be drawn from the findings related to the perceived similarities and differences with NESTs. These might also be of relevance to other NNESTs working in a university setting in Bahrain or similar contexts. Where applicable, implications relevant to NESTs are also suggested.

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