

An Investigation of Strengths and Weaknesses of NESTs and NNESTs: As Seen From TESOL Students' Perspectives

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This article examines how NNESTs and NESs in learning-to-teach contexts (L2 teacher education programs) perceive their own strengths and weaknesses as ELT professionals. By examining the issue of native versus non-native speaker in the ELT field, this study aims to shed light on the pedagogical uniqueness exhibited by these two linguistically distinctive groups. This study adopts semi-structured in-depth interviews to elicit four NES and three NNEST participants' understanding of themselves and their worlds which determines their self-identification as ELT professionals. The semi-structured interviews were analyzed through a thematic content analysis to locate themes regarding positive and negative aspects of NESTs and NNESTs. The overall findings suggest that different cultural and linguistic backgrounds between NESs and NNESTs differentiate linguistic, socio-cultural and pedagogical strengths and weaknesses. In addition, the results also indicate that the presence of NESs seems to raise NNESTs' awareness of their "non-native" status in terms of what they can offer versus their perception of what ideal English teachers should possess, and vice versa. With the findings, this study directs attention to the pedagogical contribution of both NNESTs and NESTs by addressing the ideological issue of the native speaker fallacy surrounding the ELT field.

[pedagogical strengths and weaknesses/NESTs/ NNESTs/ TESOL students/
/ / /]

I. INTRODUCTION

Language teaching is a sophisticated and complex art requiring a teacher to have

expertise through sufficient professional preparation and experience. A lack of awareness of this complexity has contributed to falsely equating a language teacher's professionalism and expertise with his or her ethnic and linguistic background. In other words, despite the scholarly efforts to debunk native speaker ideology (native speakers are ideal teachers of English), it still remains prevalent in English teaching industries. Hiring discrimination is rampant solely based on teacher applicants' native speaker status without any further attention to qualifications and credentials: native English speaking teachers (NESTs) are often readily hired because of the "automatic extrapolation from competent speaker to competent teacher based on linguistic grounds alone" (Seidlhofer, 1999, p. 236) whereas non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) have difficulties finding teaching positions in ESL/EFL contexts. This unequal power relation between native and nonnative teachers of English calls for raising awareness of the distinctive contributions and pedagogical uniqueness of both groups of language teachers. Along this line, several studies (Clark & Paran, 2007; Selvi, 2010; Wang & Lin, 2013) have argued that discrimination in terms of hiring and promotion of NNESTs is still perpetuated in the English Language Teaching (ELT) field. This long-standing NEST and NNEST dichotomy has been vigorously criticized by several scholars on the ideological grounds that it places NESTs in a position of absolute authority over NNESTs worldwide, reinforcing native speaker ideology. This study attempts to underscore the positive qualities and contributions that both NESTs and NNESTs bring to the ELT field by examining pedagogical strengths and weaknesses through teachers' own self-identification. It should be noted that difference does not imply superior or inferior and it should be acknowledged that both NESTs and NNESTs can make great contributions to the ELT field. Understanding native English speaking (NES) and non-native English speaking (NNES) teacher trainees' self-perceptions of their strengths and weaknesses as ELT professionals is imperative in shaping their future classroom practices, as well as the planning of teacher education programs that are tailored to the different needs of student teachers with distinct language backgrounds.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

With the rapid globalization of English and the recognition of English varieties, the dichotomy between NEST and NNEST has been challenged and vigorously debated. However, Medgyes (1994) is of the opinion that NNESTs and NESTs are "two different species" (p. 27) by advancing four hypotheses: NNESTs and NESTs differ in terms of (1) language proficiency, and (2) teaching practice (behavior), that (3) most of the differences in teaching practice can be attributed to the discrepancy in language proficiency, and that

(4) both types of teachers can be equally good teachers on their own terms. What follows is a synthesized discussion on research that examines the relative merits of NNESTs and NESTs.

The foremost strengths of NESTs lie in their linguistic competence. In Arva and Medgyes's (2000) study, the authors found that NESTs possess the capability of spontaneous language use along with a stock of colloquial expressions and idioms that are more wide ranging than those of NNESTs. In addition, NESTs are regarded as more flexible in their teaching methods: they are more informal and innovative, and superior in terms of teaching pronunciation and target language cultures due to their first-hand cultural experience (Arva & Medgyes, 2000; Barratt & Kontra, 2000; Medgyes, 2001). NESTs are often regarded as linguistic and cultural representatives due to their being "authentic, walking, breathing resources about their cultures" (Barratt & Kontra, 2000, p.20). With regard to the weaknesses of NESTs, most of them have scanty knowledge of grammar and the structure of English. In addition, Medgyes (2001) noted that NESTs may feel "handicapped" for not speaking their students' first language. Ma's (2012) study also found that NESTs' weakness in their insufficient proficiency in students' L1 may result in NESTs' inability to effectively cope with students' learning difficulties and needs. Furthermore, NESTs may exhibit a lower level of empathy with language learners due to their higher expectations since NESTs have not experienced the English learning process that their students are undergoing (Medgyes, 2001).

In his pioneering work in the area of NNESTs literature, *The Non-Native Teacher*, which became the benchmark for subsequent NNEST-related studies, Medgyes (1994) discussed the dark and bright sides of being a NNEST. The dark side of being a NNEST mostly lies in a lack of target language competence. In particular, Medgyes focused on the "linguistic deficit" (p. 33) of NNESTs especially in the area of oral fluency, vocabulary, and pronunciation (Medgyes, 1994; Reves & Medgyes, 1994). Medgyes maintained that by being aware of their "linguistic deficit," NNESTs hope to move toward near-native level through hard work and dedication, but "to achieve native-like proficiency is wishful thinking" (p. 33). Medgyes advanced his position by stating that "the main reason why non-natives cannot turn into natives lies in the fact that they are, by their very nature, norm-dependent" and that "their use of English is but an imitation of some form of native use" (p. 343). In a similar vein, in their study, Samimy and Brutt-Griffler (1999) found that their NNEST participants revealed that they were concerned about their lack of native-like proficiency in English and regarded NESTs as accurate users of English by identifying them as those who "know subtleties of the language," and "use authentic English" (p. 140).

To counterbalance the disadvantages of being a NNEST, Medgyes emphasized the positive qualities. In particular, in his discussion of NNESTs' unique strengths, Medgyes (1992) enumerated six pedagogical assets: 1) NNESTs can benefit from sharing the

learners' mother tongue, which is more applicable when NNESTs share students' native language such as in a monolingual EFL classroom (e.g., Korea) rather than in multilingual ESL contexts (e.g., United States); 2) NNESTs can anticipate language difficulties because of their own learning experience; 3) NNESTs can teach learning strategies more effectively because NNESTs have adopted language-learning strategies during their own learning experience; 4) NNESTs can be more empathetic to the needs and problems of their learners since they also encounter difficulties similar to those of their students and thus can be more sensitive and understanding; 5) NNESTs can serve as imitable models of the successful learner of English because they have been learners of English themselves; and 6) NNESTs can provide learners with more information about the English language because during their own learning process, they have obtained knowledge of and insights into how the English language works.

Medgyes regarded that as a result of having taken analogous English learning paths as their students are pursuing, NNESTs have a better chance of developing greater sensitivity toward students' learning difficulties. In this regard, NNESTs are believed to be adroit in articulating the features of English (explicit knowledge about English or metalanguage skills), since they have deliberately learned English and thus amassed a wealth of English knowledge from an analytical outlook. This stands in stark contrast to NESTs since they subconsciously acquired the English language and thus they may not be cognizant of the internal mechanisms regulating language structures. After examining the dark and bright sides of NNESTs, Medgyes maintained his position as follows: "I contend that NESTs and non-NESTs are potentially equally effective teachers, because in the final analysis their respective strengths and weaknesses balance each other out" (p. 76). Medgyes (2001) further stated, "whereas NESTs have better intuitions about what is right and wrong in language use, non-NESTs have deeper insights into what is easy and difficult in the learning process" (p. 437).

Pedagogical strengths of NNESTs have also been recognized in several studies regarding NNESTs' self-perceptions of their strengths and weaknesses as well as students' perceptions of NNESTs. For example, Cheung and Braine's (2007) questionnaire study, which examined Hong Kong university students' attitude toward NNESTs, showed that a majority of the student respondents displayed a positive attitude toward learning English from NNESTs. The students identified NNESTs' strengths as follows: similar L1 (Cantonese) knowledge and shared educational (examination-oriented) background, their ability to code-switch for complex explanations, and their empathy with students. In particular, Cheung and Braine's study indicated that on account of NNESTs' own English learning experiences and their knowledge of the local education systems, they are better able to understand the needs of Hong Kong students than NESTs. Studies on NNESTs' self-perceptions also provided some valuable insights into NNESTs' strengths and

weaknesses. For instance, Ma (2012) conducted a mixed study of the strengths and weaknesses of NESTs and NNESTs from the perspectives of local NNESTs in Hong Kong. With the use of semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, the participating NNESTs located their strengths as follows: their bilingual teaching ability (using students' L1 to explain new vocabulary items, difficult grammar rules or concept), their familiarity with the exam-oriented education systems, the ease with which students understand their instruction, and their understanding of Hong Kong students' learning needs. Ma noted that NNESTs and NESTs possess unique pedagogical strengths and weaknesses, many of which seem to be complementary and that combining strengths of both categories of teachers can "present the best package for students" (p. 11).

To create effective and optimal learning environments, there is a need to acknowledge distinctive strengths that NESTs and NNESTs possess as pedagogical resources. The present study investigates these strengths and weaknesses of NESTs and NNESTs as perceived by NES and NNEST TESOL students. By delving into the similarities and differences between NNESTs and NESTs, this study hopes to add to the literature an understanding of the unique contributions of the two teacher cohorts in ESL/EFL classrooms.

The overarching research questions that guided this study were as follows:

- 1) How do NNEST participants perceive their own strengths and weaknesses as NNESTs?
- 2) How do NES participants perceive their own strengths and weaknesses as NESTs?

III. METHOD

1. Contexts and Participants

The research context of this study was a TESOL program, offered by the Learning and Instruction department in the Graduate School of Education, housed in a large, research-intensive university located in Western New York. In this TESOL program, usually NNESTs and NESs take the same courses and are given various forms of collaboration opportunities such as group and pair work. Such experiences enable both NNESTs and NESs to make comparisons of their own and (non-)native counterparts' strengths and weaknesses. The participants in this study were three international students and four domestic American students. Among these international students, only Chinese interviewees were recruited since these constitute the majority of the international students in the program and there was no Korean TESOL student at the time of the study (spring semester of 2016). To preserve confidentiality, the names of the participants have been

anonymized as follows: Won, Gong, Jung (all Chinese, international students), Steve, Leah, Amy, and Jimmy (all American, domestic students). The demographics of the participants in the study are summarized and displayed in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Demographic Information of Participants

Participants	Undergraduate Majors	Gender	Age	Nationality (Native Language)	Years of Teaching
Won	English	Female	Mid-30s	Chinese (Mandarin)	15 years
Gong	Chinese Education	Female	Mid-20s	Chinese (Mandarin)	2 years
Jung	Chinese Literature	Female	Mid-20s	Chinese (Mandarin)	7 months
Steve	Drama and Voice Performance	Male	Mid-40s	U.S. citizen (English)	9 Years
Leah	German and Inclusive Adolescent Education	Female	Late-20s	U.S. citizen (English)	2 Years
Amy	English	Female	Early-50s	U.S. citizen (English)	1 Years
Jimmy	English and Cinema History	Male	Late-30s	U.S. citizen (English)	2 Years

2. Data Collection and Analysis

This study examines the participants' personal perceptions of their own strengths and weaknesses based on their native speaker status. To attain an in-depth understanding of the meaning of these less obvious phenomena associated with the self-perception of teachers, this study employed in-depth semi-structured interviews. Along this line, Cousin (2009) mentions that semi-structured interviews enable researchers to probe deeper into participants' experiences and perceptions. Hence, the semi-structured interview fits well with the purpose of the current research since it allows for flexibility for interviewees to direct and shape the conversation. The semi-structured interviews centered on NES and NNES participants' perceptions of their own strengths and weaknesses as being either NNESTs or NESTs, their language learning experience with NNESTs and NESTs in the past, and experience with (non-) native English speaking peers. Each individual participant was interviewed in approximately 45-to-60-minute segments. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. To seek common patterns and differences between NNES and NES participants, the interview data were subjected to a thematic content analysis in which they were coded according to these four categories: NNESTs' strengths, NNESTs' weaknesses, NESTs' strengths, and NESTs' weaknesses. The commonalities and differences between NES and NNES participants under the categories of strengths and weaknesses of NESTs and NNESTs were examined. The analyzed data were further compared to previous literature to identify similarities between the study findings and existing research as well as to yield implications from a broader perspective. To strengthen

the internal validity of this study, member checks were carried out to ensure the accuracy of data transcription. To illustrate, after each interview was conducted and then transcribed, the written interview transcripts with clarification questions were electronically mailed to each participant. The participants sent their responses back via email and the supplementary comments were used in clarifying vague comments or identifying some information gaps.

IV. FINDINGS

Richards and Farrell (2005) state that “only the teachers that are able to monitor and assess themselves can achieve sufficient understanding and control over their own behavior” (p. 34). In this respect, given their unique in-between status in becoming ELT professionals, it is crucial for student teachers to become aware of their own fortes and shortcomings. Revolving around the native speaker status issue, the following section will address the student teachers’ perceived strengths and weaknesses in relation to L2 teacher identity. The analysis and discussion of the study findings are presented in the following order: (1) NNESTs’ strengths, (2) NNESTs’ weaknesses, (3) NESTs’ strengths, and (4) NESTs’ weaknesses.

1. NNESTs’ Strengths

1) Shared L1 Backgrounds With Students and Code-Switching

Among the six advantageous qualities of non-NESTs outlined by Medgyes (1992), the fifth indicates that “Non-NESTs can be more empathetic to the needs and problems of their learners” (p. 347). Conforming Medgyes’s position, Gong believes that she can better understand and empathize with Chinese students’ errors than NESTs because she has experienced the same problems in understanding and learning a new language:

If I teach Chinese students, I can explain some points in Chinese and they would understand more easily. Natives will not understand why we are making certain mistakes over and over again because they don’t know Chinese. But, I can know why because I know the difference between Chinese and English. I mean, the connection between L1 and L2.

Gong introduced the first person plural pronoun, “we,” to invoke a collective membership of Chinese group identity. Gong believes that her first-hand experience in

English learning along with her own experience in contrastive cross-linguistic analysis between Chinese and English allow her to intuitively understand why Chinese English learners make certain linguistic mistakes. In this respect, Gong believes she can be in a more optimal position than NESTs, who have subconsciously acquired English as their mother tongue. The last strength listed by Medgyes is that “only non-NESTS can benefit from sharing the learners’ mother tongue” (p. 346). This may be a distinctive attribute that only NNESTs with a shared background with their students can bring to the class. In this respect, Won locates the common ground with her students, the Chinese language; the vehicle is believed to give leeway to not only her but also to her students. With her Chinese identity, Won thinks that she can be in an advantageous position when it comes to the affective domain of English learning:

My advantage is that I can know my students’ backgrounds, right? Chinese. And I can make use of Chinese, I can use Chinese sometimes in class so that students can learn better. And, when students are really struggling, and they don’t know how to express their words, I will use Chinese to communicate with them. That will help them to reduce anxiety maybe because there is a connection.

Won believes that her shared cultural and linguistic background with Chinese learners is a major benefit: she can explain in multiple ways and reassures students in their shared L1 (i.e., Chinese) whenever needed. In fact, the use of L1 in the classroom was a new experience for Won. While teaching English in China, Won had conducted English-only lectures grounded in monolingual orthodoxy college policy. However, after exposing the benefits of using students’ L1 from the TESOL program, Won became a proponent of a cross-lingual approach. Won believes that using her students’ first language, Chinese, will lower their affective filters (learners’ anxiety), providing them with a more relaxed learning environment.

2) Sharing Learning Strategies and Learner Models Through Empathy

Conforming to Medgyes’ stance, Jung indicates that she can be a model for her students. From her own experience in the Chinese education system, she can draw on her past learning experiences and share her strategies with her students:

For high school students, I can give some advice how to learn English from my own experiences. I mean different people have different learning styles but I will try to provide as many strategies to help them as possible. China is so

exam centered so English education is more focused on the national exam, the college entrance exam. So, teachers teach strategies for the test, not real English, like find the right answers from the tests. So I will just try my best to help them to acquire those strategies... Native speakers cannot fit into our curriculum so I think I am more advantaged.

Jung first brings up the larger educational culture in China of which she is a part. Being a Chinese English learner herself, Jung believes that she knows what types of grammar issues may be problematic for Chinese students and she can target those areas by sharing strategies. In addition, understanding the exam-centered education system in China, Jung can know what types of questions will be asked. Jung's perceived benefit is in line with the second forte enumerated by Medgyes (1992): "Non-NESTS can teach learning strategies more effectively" (p. 346).

2. NNESTs' Weaknesses

1) Relatively Low Linguistic Competence

The NES participants' perceived advantage of using English spontaneously turns into a perceived shortcoming for NNEST participants. In describing her perceived disadvantage as an NNEST participant, Gong contrasts her own micro-teaching experience in a pedagogical grammar course with those of her NES peers:

In my grammar course, I feel like the native speakers, they can freely make sentences to match the grammar points and their examples are very good. But I feel like for us, we are struggling. For me, I cannot make sentences freely just like the native speakers. I have to look into dictionaries to find the right sentences and then I feel safe to teach my students when I need to make sure that my samples are correct and grammatically accurate.

Gong realized that she lacked the same level of proficiency in formulaic and idiomatic expressions that NES peers presented in class. Gong spent more time preparing and her examples were probably less dynamic and part of everyday language because she relied on the dictionary. She might therefore feel less capable as an English teacher compared to NES colleagues.

Jung also problematizes her inability to use English impromptu. As a result, in Jung's recollection of a practicum experience in her previous California TESOL program, she said that she had to write English lesson scripts for her one-hour teaching performance,

memorize them, and practice them multiple times: “Because it is not my language, I cannot speak English naturally. So I had to write English scripts for the lesson.”

Apparently, language teachers’ language proficiency is an integral dimension of their teaching performance and there appears to be no established threshold of language proficiency level for teachers. However, if language teachers have not reached a certain level of proficiency, then they may have to largely resort to teaching materials and may not be able to conduct improvisational teaching (Medgyes, 2001).

2) Lack of “Authentic English”

The NES participants’ strengths turn out to be the NNES participants’ weaknesses. For example, when Won was asked about her weakness as an ELT professional, she claimed that her Chinese- influenced English is not “authentic.” Won was ill at ease with using English appropriately, which became even more conspicuous when using English with native speakers:

My weakness is... my English is influenced by my Chinese because I am not speaking authentic English, the real English that is used here when they are talking. For example, like I was in the library and I was trying to borrow some books and I said to the librarian ‘I want to borrow this.’ And he said, ‘you mean, you want to check out?’ and I soon realized that ‘oh, I should use this phrase if I want to borrow some books!’ And if you want to return those books, then it is ‘check in!’ But, in China, I mean I knew these phrases ‘check in’ and ‘check out’ but in China, I taught my students that these are the phrases [i.e., check in and check out] that you use in a hotel or restaurant. And I also said ‘oh, you are so humorous.’ And the native person said, ‘I don’t know what you mean. Oh, you mean that I am very funny?’ and I realized that there is a difference in using words.

Won realized that a simple utterance, “check out” can have multiple meanings depending on the context. She also learned that some semantically similar words, which are listed as synonyms in a Chinese-English dictionary (e.g., “humorous” and “funny”) can have different sociolinguistic usages. Although Won and the librarian used English to communicate, they did not share the same linguistic repertoire. Jung also reported that her English is often outdated since she uses textbook language that does not always correspond to real life needs:

The English that I learned was only from textbooks. So when I came here

most of the textbook English I cannot use in my daily life. Some words, they don't use them in daily life and like their language and culture cannot be separated from each other.

Textbook language has a different register which is usually more formal than day-to-day conversational language. In this line, Jung also shares an embarrassing moment that happened in the United States. One day, Jung said to one of her professors in California, "Professor, you had better read this" in a very polite manner. Jung did not know that semantically similar modals can have different sociolinguistic meanings. The professor corrected her by letting her know that the modal, "had better," is used when giving direct advice, and is usually used by older people. To her bewilderment, Jung came to realize that there is a significant gap between textbook language and "real English."

In the article, Cross-cultural pragmatic failure, Thomas (1983) defines pragmatic competence as "the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context (p. 92)." Clearly, both Won and Jung used grammatically correct sentences, but they did not fit the context. Sociolinguistic competence is essential for successful communication and a lack of it may cause cross-cultural misunderstanding. As Jimmy indicated above, teaching grammatically correct language may not be sufficient these days. This change should be reflected in the curriculum and teaching practices. A wide range of studies have underscored the lack of EFL students' communicative skills regardless of their high level of linguistic knowledge. At the same time, it is questionable whether socio-linguistic competence can be taught in class, especially when textbooks do not reflect real-life English and more importantly, when teachers themselves do not possess socio-linguistic competence. Based on Jung's account, her language input largely consisted of the language used in Chinese English textbooks. In this respect, teachers may supply other types of material such as videos, articles, and newspapers as a first step toward familiarizing students with real-life English.

3. NESTs' Strengths

The people who speak English as their native language undoubtedly have an advantage over those who learned it as a second or foreign language. As expected, all NES participants saw their English competence as a major advantage, which supports previous research findings (Medgyes, 1994; Moussu & Llorca, 2008).

1) Spontaneous Use of the Target Language

Steve thinks that unlike NNESTs, his capability of using English spontaneously grants

him the privilege not to be self-conscious about his language use or mistakes he would make while teaching:

I think as a native speaker, I don't have to think about what I am saying. I do not need to go through that process by thinking 'am I speaking the right things? Am I making mistakes in grammar?' those kinds of things. Those things do not come to my mind.

NESTs' high command of English thus makes them more confident in their use of the language. It allows them to perform English lectures with more flexibility and introduce more various conversational phrases. If the grammar-translation or audio-lingual method had been prevalent as instructional approaches, the mystique of native speaker ideology would be less important. However, as more and more attention is paid to promote English communicative skills, the ELT industry places more weight on fluency than ever before. To be compatible with the current trend, not only in ESL settings but also in many EFL contexts, NNESTs are often asked to prepare English-only lectures. This causes problems because it may make take more time and thought to produce spontaneous utterances for NNESTs. Moreover, NNESTs with linguistic insecurity may more rigidly stick to textbooks in a more prescriptive and inflexible manner.

2) Grammaticality Judgments From "Native" Intuitions

Comparing himself to NNESTs, Steve also points out that he has a stronger sense of linguistic intuition and competence and it easy for him to determine what is appropriate in contexts of language use:

I think as a native speaker, you have that innate knowledge why something works and why something does not faster. I think a lot of people who study English might know better grammar than I do, but innately, like I can't tell you why that's right or wrong but I just know that is wrong or in a certain situation, that timbre of words, that connotations of certain words that may not come across to non-native speakers. So that's some of the benefits.

Owing to his extensive experience as an English speaker, Steve seems to regard himself as a reliable linguistic informant, who can judge the correctness of English usage. By taking on the subject position as an NES, Steve positioned himself against the NNESTs, who studied the English language. As a result, Steve is negotiating his teacher identity by contrasting his advantage as an NES (i.e., innate knowledge of the language) to the

advantage of NNESTs (i.e., explicit knowledge of the grammar rules). In line with this, Leah views her native language intuition as a professional asset:

As a native speaker, I can say that ‘it is just the way it is.’ Like, if students ask ‘why is this like this?’ then I would say ‘it is because it is English and it is the way it is!’ I think non-natives would say, ‘one minute, one minute let me get the answer, oh, that’s because it is the past progressive and this is that...’ So, they [NNESTs] would be more likely to explain it. So I think the advantage is that we can get away by saying that ‘it is because it is!’ and that gives me more confidence.

Leah regards her native intuition and the way it allows her to evade explaining the rules as assets. However, from a pedagogical standpoint, this may not be an advantage if she teaches English learners. In my view, teachers are supposed to provide more quality and comprehensible input to students. If teachers cannot spell out what they teach to students, it may create barriers for students’ language development at a given point.

3) Sociolinguistic Competence (Pragmatic Competence)

Being a native speaker, Jimmy points to his sociolinguistic competence as his strength. Jimmy thinks that as an NES, his grasp of and comprehension of idiomatic and colloquial expressions can be richer than that of NNESTs who learn English inside classrooms:

Being a native speaker, you are familiar with the undercurrent, the implied things. Sometimes, grammar by itself is not enough. If you want to interact with people, then you need a little more than just grammar. Like, what is appropriate and what is not, when and why, the subtleties and the nuances. English has a lot of idioms and sayings, little groups of words. If you read a newspaper and if you see a movie, there are examples of slang and humor. There is how to be polite, how to be sarcastic, all these little unofficial things. They are very difficult to explain and you have to pick them up as you interact with people. You can’t learn them from a textbook. Maybe you can see the definitions or read what Americans do when they joke about things. So, as a native, you know the language as a native then that is kind of a big advantage.

Jimmy highlights his sociolinguistic competence by approaching it from a pedagogical standpoint. Jimmy thus believes that for language to function as a communication tool, language teaching languages should encompass far more than targeting surface

grammatical systems. As a native speaker, Jimmy considers himself an informant who is acquainted with those invisible and informal aspects of the English language that are difficult to acquire or teach in view of their subtlety and complexity. Interestingly, when asked about his advantage as an NES, Jimmy draws on the second person pronoun “you” rather than “I” to generalize traits common to most NESs. Jimmy regards his knowledge of the subtle nuances of English and his ability to comprehend jokes and produce colloquial expressions as his foremost strength.

If you are planning to teach just grammar, then I don't think you have to be a native speaker. But if you want to teach deeper things, then you would have a real advantage. Like, especially using a movie as an example. If there is something particular in the movie, and if the teacher is not a native speaker and students ask, ‘why they are saying that, what does some odd little saying mean,’ if the teacher is not a native speaker and has not learned English outside of the classroom, then they may not know.

As an NES, Jimmy believes that the cultural and sociolinguistic aspects of the English language are unconsciously ingrained within him. The informal expressions or invisible rules that govern the English language (i.e., “some odd little sayings”) used in a movie may not be immediately obvious to NNESTs. In this regard, Jimmy thinks that these subtle elements would be enrichment materials when it comes to teaching English. Given that language is intricately connected with the target language culture, Jimmy may be right in that teachers' sociolinguistic competence influences the quality of instruction. That is, teachers may need an adequate level of sociolinguistic competence so that they can convey and comprehend pragmatically appropriate English expressions. This may call for promoting NNESTs' sociolinguistic competence to a certain extent. If NNESTs have some access to colloquial language, then it would bring more dynamics in class. In addition, if teachers can use more informal language then they could be regarded as more approachable for students.

To note, his quote also seems to reintroduce a sense of difference or separation. Jimmy believes NESTs have a “deeper” understanding for the language whereas NNESTs can only teach the surface with grammar, which can be biased up to the point. Details can be important but that may not devalue the teaching expertise of NNESTs when it comes to the general concepts of knowledge. In a like manner, Steve furthermore connects language with cultural awareness:

I think the problem that many non-native teachers have is that they don't know much [about] cultural aspects, like things that happened in the United

States and a lot of idioms. To explain idioms and to express other expressions that might come up because of my experiences in the culture. That can be very helpful.

As an ESL teacher, Steve frames his values of communicative repertoires within the United States: he can bring localized language varieties into play that are not commonly taught in formal classroom environments. However, EFL learners may not need to know about “things that happened in the United States”; EFL teachers with contextually-appropriate repertoires such as cultures related to China or Korea may be more valued.

4. NESTs' Weaknesses

1) Lack of Metalanguage Awareness

Language proficiency should be differentiated by language awareness because language teachers may have one but not the other. For example, a highly proficient language teacher may have very little knowledge of grammar (i.e., explicit language knowledge). Reversely, a language teacher who possesses a great deal of grammar knowledge, may not be a fluent speaker of the target language. Among the shortcomings reported in the NES participants' repertoire, language awareness, especially grammatical knowledge, was the most frequently mentioned. When asked about her weakness, Leah pointed to a lack in language awareness by lamenting that she is not always aware of how her native language functions:

The weakness is... We don't know how our language works. Like sitting in the grammar course, I don't know anything. But, the international students, who don't participate in class, they like know everything! They may be like, 'why are Americans so dumb?'

In her statement, Leah introduced the pronoun “we” to create identity boundaries between NES students and international students, revealing the “us and them” dichotomy. By juxtaposing international students and American students, Leah highlights that NNEST students know “everything” about her native language. Of course, the international students must not have known “everything” about English grammar and it is probably not true that she did not know “anything” about it. While irrespective of native speaker status, it is almost impossible to know “everything” about grammar rules of a language, Leah associated NNESTs with experts who are more knowledgeable of her own native language. Steve also confessed that his weakness lies in his lack of grammar knowledge:

My weakness, I would definitely say that it is my grammar but I keep trying to work on it. I am always trying to improve my grammar because I know that I am not the best at grammar and I know that.

Acknowledging personal and professional shortcomings can be starting points for professional growth since it can create a space to take an integral step toward self-improvement. Conscious of his shortcomings, Steve constantly seeks opportunities to enhance his grammar knowledge. That is, Steve is an active participant in his professional development to become a better ESL teacher. Steve also points to other disadvantages that NESTs might encounter. Steve believes that NESTs' high level of proficiency in the classroom may put language learners at a disadvantage:

I think some of the disadvantages may be that they speak too fast. They may not be able to actually slow down their speech or clarify their speech at the students' level. I think sometimes, they are not sensitive to someone who is learning another language, and do not understand what students are going through.

Steve's decision to use different pronouns is pivotal in the change of footing in relation to his affiliated NES group. His flexibility in using pronouns in presenting himself reflects multiple selves that exist in affiliative, oppositional, or neutral relationships to himself as a part of NEST collective identity. In this context, Steve uses the third person plural pronoun "they" to distance himself from other NESTs who are not usually sensitive to students' levels of proficiency. This perceived disadvantage of NESTs (i.e., "speaking too fast") can be understood by Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis. Teachers in the classroom are the foremost and major sources of language input for students and this input has to be tailored to students' levels. If a teacher either speaks too fast or uses terms that are far beyond their current level of language competence, the input is not pedagogically appropriate. In other words, to provide quality and comprehensible input, a teacher should be sensitive to students' levels by modifying his or her own language level toward that of students.

2) Lack of Shared L1 knowledge With English Learners

The other disadvantage that Amy reported was her deficient knowledge of English learners' L1 and their native cultures:

The disadvantage for me is that I don't know the language that my students use, because it is not required for me to have a second language. So I can go to

China or Japan, wherever, then I would not? be required to know the students' languages. So for me, I feel like I am kind of missing out for not knowing the language. It would be nice to be able to communicate with them, in the classroom, I am like teaching them the majority of the language but outside of the class, like meeting them in their home languages, it would be nice. It would be a different level of communication and I kind of feel like that it is a disadvantage.

Medgyes (1992) notes that "the ideal NEST is the one who has achieved a high degree of proficiency in the learners' mother tongue" (p. 348). In this line, Amy is right in that second (or learners' native) language proficiency is not required to become an ESL/EFL teacher. Amy feels that if she knew her students' L1, she could be more empathetic to them and would have more cultural affinity.

V. DISCUSSION

1. NNESTs' Strengths

In his discussion of NNESTs' unique strengths, Medgyes (1992) enumerates six pedagogical assets and among the six advantageous qualities, the NNEST participants' responses corresponded to the first three NNEST participants' strengths in the aforementioned Medgyes's list: 1) use the students' mother tongue; 2) anticipate language difficulties; and 3) teach language learning strategies.

The first strength listed by Medgyes is that "non-NESTs can benefit from sharing the learners' mother tongue" (p. 346). This may be a distinctive attribute that only NNESTs with a shared background with their students can bring to the class. Won and Gong pointed to their ability to make use of L1 in class as their major strength. Ellis (2002) distinguishes two ways of using L1 in class: "tacit use" and "overt use" (p. 82). Tacit use encompasses a teacher drawing on the knowledge of the L1 to predict learning difficulties, such as negative transfer (or language interference), stemming from difference language structures. Overt use involves direct use of L1, such as actual verbalizing or writing. In this context, Won mentioned that she would code-switch from English to Mandarin to facilitate communication (i.e., overt use). Won believed that using her students' first language, Chinese, would lower their affective filters (learners' anxiety), providing them with a more relaxed learning environment. Won also regarded the vehicle of the shared L1 would give leeway to "struggling" students by explaining the concepts in Chinese and reassuring them with "connection" through code-switching whenever needed. Gong reported that she could

draw on her Chinese knowledge to identify “why [Chinese students] are making certain mistakes over and over again” (i.e., tacit use). Gong regarded her metalinguistic awareness of both L1 and L2 as a pedagogical resource in anticipating Chinese students’ learning difficulties. This result supports previous empirical studies conducted in EFL contexts (Arva & Medgyes, 2000; Cheung & Braine, 2007). For example, in Cheung and Braine’s (2007) study, which was conducted in Hong Kong, the researchers found that the use of L1 in class was the most frequently cited merit of Hong Kong local teachers of English.

For her strength, Jung mentioned that she could share the learning strategies by identifying students’ learning needs. Jung believed that one of the reasons for students to learn English is to take a college entrance exam; her hands-on learning experience accustomed to the Chinese exam-oriented systems would be advantageous. Jung’s perceived benefit is in line with the third strength enumerated by Medgyes (1994): “Non-NESTs can teach learning strategies more effectively.” All Chinese participants pointed to their assets by contextualizing in EFL (i.e., Chinese) contexts, in which a largely homogenous group of students often share the same cultural and linguistic backgrounds with their teachers. That being said, in a multilingual class, such as ESL teaching environments where English is the sole medium of instruction, their perceived strength, especially being double agents or experts in two languages (Seidlhofer, 1999), may cease to be a forte.

2. NNESTs’ Weaknesses

In her article, “Native speakerism affecting nonnative English teachers’ identity formation: A critical perspective,” H. K. Kim (2011) argues that the linguistic hegemony of NES norm, especially the myth of authenticity, can pose a threat to NNESTs’ identity constructions. All NNESTs participants in this study were indeed concerned about their target language competence. The most frequently referred weakness was their lack of “authentic” English: Won indicated “Chinese-influenced English” as her major weakness; Gong said, “my English is not standard English accent”; and Jung pointed to her English as not “real English.” In particular, Won’s narrative revealed how native speaker ideology has affected her. It seemed that Won’s perception of her Chinese-accented English structured her negative self-evaluation of teaching credibility in the eyes of her students by telling them “please forgive me if I speak Chinese English sometimes. Not so much American English.” This finding is corroborated by previous research. In the research studies on students’ perceptions about native and non-native teachers, non-standard pronunciation or accent has been a criticism of students of NNESTs (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005; Mahboob, 2004). In this line, the three NNEST participants also pinpointed it as their main disadvantage of being as NNESTs.

In addition, the presence of NES peers in the same program seemed to let the NNEST participants become cognizant of their weakness. When they voiced their weaknesses, the participants readily compared themselves to NESs and pointed to their English competence, pragmatic aspects of language or local colloquialisms, and lack of target culture knowledge as their major weaknesses. Phillipson (1992), however, maintains that several qualities native speakers possess, such as “facility in demonstrating fluent, idiomatically appropriate language, in appreciating cultural connotations of the language” (p. 194), are something that can be developed and acquired through training. This may call for promoting NNESTs’ sociolinguistic competence to a certain extent through offering courses. If NNESTs have some access to colloquial language, then it would make the class more dynamic. In addition, if teachers can use more informal language, then they could be regarded as more approachable to students.

3. NESTs’ Strengths

The NES participants in this study regarded their English competence as a major advantage, which supports previous research findings (Medgyes, 1994; Moussu & Llorca, 2008). For example, Steve pointed to his language competence enabling spontaneous production and comprehension as his strength. Steve further indicated that he has a stronger sense of linguistic intuition than “non-native teachers who study English,” which allows him to judge the correctness of English usage “faster.” Leah also deemed herself as a reliable linguistic informant, thinking that her native intuitions about English would grant her to make grammatical judgements by saying that “it is because it is English and it is the way it is.”

Both Steve and Jimmy pointed to their sociolinguistic competence as a professional asset by approaching it from a pedagogical standpoint. Owing to their extensive experience as English speakers in the United States, Steve and Jimmy believed that socio-cultural aspects of English are unconsciously ingrained within them. They regarded their cultural awareness as an enriching pedagogical resource when it comes to teaching “deeper” things. Steve said it is a “problem” that NNESTs do not possess much about the cultural knowledge, such as “things that happened in the United States and a lot of idioms.” Jimmy and Steve may be right that language teachers’ sociolinguistic competence influences the quality of instruction. That is, teachers may need an adequate level of sociolinguistic competence so as to bring more dynamics in class. However, their views seemed to be biased up to a point, as they carried a sense of difference or separation. Subtle elements can be important, but that may not devalue the teaching expertise of NNESTs when it comes to the general concepts of knowledge.

4. NESTs' Weaknesses

Among the shortcomings reported in the NES participants' repertoire, language awareness, especially grammatical knowledge, was the most frequently mentioned. Steve, Leah, and Jimmy all pointed to their lack in language awareness of English as a weakness. NESTs' high command of English makes them more confident in their use of the language. However, language proficiency should be differentiated by language awareness because language teachers may have one but not the other. For example, a highly proficient language teacher may have very little knowledge of grammar (i.e., explicit language knowledge). Conversely, a language teacher who possesses a great deal of grammar knowledge may not be a fluent speaker of the target language. Most people who have language teaching experience would agree that command of a language is not sufficient for teaching. When a student poses a question on particular language issues, and if a teacher responds, "I can't tell you why that's right or wrong" (Steve), "I don't know, what are you talking about?" (Jimmy), or "It is because it is!" (Leah), then the teacher's response may not be quality or comprehensible input to students, thereby creating barriers for the student's language development. If teachers are equipped with a sound theoretical knowledge of the target language system, they will teach language in a more professional way. By extension, it can help students develop a deeper understanding of English. The study found that the NES participants feel the need to have explicit knowledge about language as a solid foundation for teaching language, and this result challenges the misconception that anyone who can speak English can teach English.

VI. CONCLUSION

The distinctiveness of this study lies in a research context in which both NES and NNES teacher trainees are preparing themselves to become ELT professionals. The overall findings suggest that professional self-identification of strengths and weaknesses are relationally constructed through interaction with others (either NESs or NNESs) who can mirror how they are similar to or different from the others who participate in the same situated context. The social and context-dependent nature of professional self-identification is also well illustrated by J. Kim's (2015) qualitative study, which examined NNESTs' contextualized understanding of the self, working at a secondary ESL level. J. Kim addressed the native speaker fallacy by problematizing the fact that "linguistic membership is enacted to define the ideal English language teacher based upon one's country of origin and first language (L1) rather than teaching preparation" (p. 108). It should be noted that ESL/EFL teaching is a profession, which requires a certain type of expertise that has to be

learned through sufficient professional training and education. One extremely obvious but often overlooked fact is that native status does not necessarily equate with teaching competency. The continuous association between native status and pedagogy has weighty ramifications for not only how NNESTs view themselves but also for the quality of ELT instruction, which influences students' learning achievement. Along this line, Phillipson (1992) claims that "the untrained or unqualified native speaker is in fact potentially a menace because of ignorance of the structure of the mother tongue" (p. 14). Likewise, Samimy and Brutt-Griffler (1999) advocate for "multidimensionality and expertise" instead of "nativeness and authenticity" in ELT teaching (p. 142). Samimy and Brutt-Griffler further emphasize that teaching effectiveness does not hinge on nativeness, but on professional knowledge, skills, training, experience, and personality. This study sheds light on pedagogical strengths and contributions of not only NESTs, who possess native intuition in English, but also those of NNESTs, which seem to be underestimated in the ELT field. By doing so, this study intends to raise "collective consciousness" (Samimy & Brutt-Griffler, 1999, p. 127) of the pedagogical significance and assets that both NESTs and NNESTs can bring to the classroom.

The study findings provide pedagogical implications for TESOL programs in incorporating the strengths and weaknesses of NNESs and NESs. The findings suggest that native speaker status did play a pivotal role in self-identification for language teachers. The NES participants regarded their target language competence and idiomatic knowledge of language as their strengths. The NNES participants saw their abilities to use students' L1 in class and the sharing of language learning strategies as their advantages. Both groups of participants elaborated on how they could capitalize on their strengths as teaching resources. As implied by the abovementioned finding, teacher educators can support teacher trainees' professional identity formations by assisting them to locate their own strengths and encourage them to ponder about how they can adeptly utilize their strengths as pedagogical resources. Once teacher trainees, especially those whose first language is not the target language (i.e., NNESTs), can identify their own assets, then they can further inspire English learners to become more active in their learning processes.

In terms of weaknesses, the study findings indicate that NNES participants feel a need to improve their sociolinguistic competence, whereas NES participants want to develop more in-depth declarative linguistic knowledge of English. In this context, different courses may need to be offered that are more tailored to the specific needs of the various students. For example, NES teacher trainees may need additional grammar courses to develop explicit linguistic knowledge, whereas NNES teacher trainees may need courses that focus on pragmatic aspects of language use or local colloquialisms to improve their sociolinguistic competence. As a way to assist NNES teacher trainees in developing a fluent and idiomatic use of the English language, L2 teacher programs may encourage

them to do a systematic examination of the target culture by letting them work on idioms, registers, colloquial language and word connotations.

Although this study makes contributions to the literature, there are certain limitations, which open up venues for further research. To reiterate, all participating NNEs were Chinese, which does not represent the full range of NNEs. The majority of international graduate students in this L2 teacher education program were Chinese. As a result of the restricted capacity of participant selections, only Chinese participants were recruited, which carried both strengths and weaknesses. The anonymity of the Chinese participants can be assured due to the large proportion of Chinese students in the program. At the same time, however, the findings can be partial and contextually-limited based upon Chinese participants' subjective worldviews. Hence, future research broadening the analytical focus by including more diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of NNEs would be more beneficial.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Level: Tertiary Education

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