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# The Other Side of the Coin: Native Expatriate Teachers in Focus

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the native/nonnative debate from an angle that is often disregarded: the challenges and difficulties faced by native English-speaking teachers who live and work abroad for an extended period of time. We argue that while they often stand a better chance in job application procedures, preferential treatment is secured by political and economic considerations rather than professional ones. Our survey data indicate that despite the seemingly advantageous position native expats enjoy, many of them face discrimination and marginalization in their work context and beyond in terms of their professional status and remuneration. We believe that our knowledge of the native/nonnative debate would be deepened ifboth groups were given equal attention and representation in research. A comparative analysis of the problems encountered and injustices suffered by both natives and nonnatives is hoped to contribute to remedying the present situation.

**Keywords:** *Native Expatriate Teachers, Nonnative*

## Introduction

This paper investigates a particular aspect of the native/nonnative discussion, namely the professional life of native English-speaking expatriate teachers working in different parts of the world.However, the very mention of native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) versus nonnative English-speaking teachers (non-NESTs) may raise eyebrows. For one thing, it is often argued that the separation of speakers of English and, by implication, *teachers* of English, into two distinct groups does not stand up to linguistic scrutiny; apart from definitional problems, there are in-between cases aplenty(Davies, 1991). This form of separation can also be fuelled by ideological and professional considerations. For example, Phillipson (1992) coined the term

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'native speaker fallacy', which maintains that native speakers are born to be better teachers thanks to their native language competence. 'Native speakerism', Holliday (2005) contends, leads to 'othering' teachers from their peers instead of fostering collegial bonding and collaboration amongst them. Objections have also been expressed against the prefix 'non' in the epithet 'nonnative' for it emphasizes the lack of a certain quality, namely a high level of English-language competence (Selvi, 2014). To rectify the situation, the labels 'native speakers' and 'nonnative speakers' are occasionally put in inverted commas as a hint at their misrepresenting the real situation (Holliday, 2014). Furthermore, alternative labels have been offered, but none of them seems to have taken root in academic or classroom discourse; it looks as if the opposing terms, "despite all their drawbacks, are the reality which cannot be simply 'magicked-away'"(Pacek, 2005, p. 243). Paradoxically, even those who vociferously oppose the idea of dividing teachers into two groups abide by the NEST/non-NEST distinction, as a rule (Moussu & Llurda, 2008). Be that as it may, the authors of this paper have decided to stick to the native/nonnative nomenclature, if for no other reason than for the sake of convenience.

It is a widely shared experience that even highly professional and experienced non-NESTs are often discriminated on the job market (Clark & Paran, 2017; Selvi, 2010). Some advertisements go as far as to stipulate that only US or UK passport holders of Caucasian descent need apply; it occurs that no teaching qualification or experience is required of such applicants. Whereas hiring practices of this kind are distinctly visible, it is much harder to reveal and combat discrimination when it is hidden behind a veneer of political correctness.

Acts of unfair treatment inspired TESOL to establish the NNEST Interest Section, whose principal goal is "to create a non-discriminatory professional environment for all TESOL members regardless of native language and place of birth"(Kamhi-Stein, 2016, p. 183). A similar initiative was launched in Europe under the logo of TEFL Equity Advocates and Academy. However, in spite of efforts invested in eliminating inequalities in the ELT profession, the playing field is still far from being level; non-NESTs are often regarded as 'subalterns', to use a metaphor borrowed from the military, who are subordinated to the authority of officers, that is NESTs (Kumaravadivelu, 2016).

Incidentally, complaints about injustices are generally voiced by non-NESTs who are dedicated to promoting the 'non-NEST cause' at international conferences and publications. Their queries are legitimized by autobiographical reports (Canagarajah, 2012), as well as by large-scale surveys (Clark & Paran, 2017; Mahboob, Uhrig, Newman, & Hartford, 2004). Searching the web for articles and book chapters written on the subject of NESTs and non-NESTs, (Kamhi-Stein, 2016) found 356 relevant pieces, in addition to about a dozen full-length books that have been published since Medgyes (1994) blazed a trail with *The non-native teacher* – and the number of related publications is increasing by the day. The majority of studies approach the NEST/non-NEST quandary from the perspective of non-NESTs, analyzing the problems and challenges they face in the course of their professional lives; the plight of NESTs, especially those living and working overseas, is only tangentially analysed.

One of the few papers concerned specifically with NESTs is entitled *The expatriate teacher as postmodern paladin*(Johnston, 1999). In the author's definition, "the term *expatriate teacher* [refers] to any teacher who is a citizen of one country but working in another"(Johnston, 1999, p. 256). *Paladins*, the other noun used in the title, were chivalrous knights in Charlemagne's court in the 8th and 9th centuries, and their successors would peregrinate to distant lands throughout the Middle Ages. Johnston likens expatriate NESTs (henceforth: *expats*)[i] to paladins for several reasons. One feature they share is the do-good mentality. At the same time, both groups were/are led by more down-to-earth motives, such as the lust for travel, adventure, fame and fortune. Native expats, just like medieval paladins, may also be considered agents of the culture whence they come. However, the parallel Johnston draws ends there, for the differences between the two groups are too obvious to be disregarded. Whereas the paladin was primarily led by missionary zeal, the native expat, whom Johnston calls the *postmodern paladin*, is motivated by both professional and personal reasons to relocate and work in a foreign country. Surely, it would be a lot easier for them to fit in and adjust to their new context than it was for the medieval knights. Or would it?

Whereas the way non-NESTs perceive their work conditions has been researched extensively, there is a dearth of publications that examine the plight of NESTs living and working in a foreign country. Of the few available resources, two recent ones are important by virtue of demonstrating that it is not only non-NESTs who have to endure marginalization and injustice in their professional lives; NESTs have been found not much better off. Yim and Ahn (2018) investigated the work experience of a NEST in the Korean context, claiming that expats are often forced to the periphery of the local professional community. They point out that native-speakerism can be a 'double-edged sword': while it eases the process of securing a job, it puts "professional legitimacy into question"(Yim & Ahn, 2018, p. 218). Medgyes and Kiss (forthcoming) explored the experiences of NESTs from the angle of quality assurance. They contend that although NESTs are considered to be the privileged group, they often face difficulties while living in a foreign country. The authors' conclusion is that expats can only become established members of a teaching community if they feel secure in a financial and personal sense, and if their contributions are given due professional recognition as well.

**The Study**

This paper wishes to inject further impetus to the study of expats as they characterize the conditions under which they live and work in the foreign country. Our aim is to offer an empirically-based perspective that contrasts with widely held anecdotal beliefs about the smooth-sailing and trouble-free lifestyle of expats. More specifically, we seek to answer the following two research questions:

1) What major challenges and difficulties do expats face in a foreign country?
2) How does the remuneration of expats compare to that of locals?

We employed a mixed-method, exploratory research design for our investigation. Our primary aim was not to draw far-reaching and generalizable conclusions, but rather to probe the field and

identify possible areas for further research in this relatively new niche. With this in mind, we used an online questionnaire survey to collect the data. The instrument included basic biographical information about the participants, including their professional training and background, teaching experience (local and overseas, general and EFL specific), the foreign languages they spoke, and information about their current teaching context. This was followed by a series of open-ended questions which aimed at eliciting their personal and professional experiences of teaching English in a foreign context.

Our sample consists of only native English-speaking expatriate teachers, whom we selected from our own personal professional network. In order to expand the pool, we asked our recruitsto forward the questionnaire link to colleagues with overseas ELT experience. This form of purposive, convenience sampling proved successful in reaching expats from a variety of geographical, cultural and educational contexts. Although obtaining a representative sample was beyond our scope, we succeeded in gathering information from a total of 79 expats working in 24 countries across Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Although the overwhelming majority were active teachers at the time of the research, we also included a few retired teachers with considerable prior experience abroad.

The EFL teaching experience of our respondents varied greatly from half a year to 40 years. A summary of their experience is presented in Table 1 below, which shows a rather healthy spread across the board.

Table 1
*The respondents' ELT experience*

| ELT experience in years | 0-5 | 6-10 | 11-15 | 16-20 | 21> |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| n=77 | 15 | 21 | 20 | 6 | 15 |

However, when their experience of working abroad was examined, especially their employment in their current jobs, a different trend could be detected (see Table 2). Very few of the respondents reported spending more than ten years in one position, and most of them (73.97%) were working for no longer than five years in their current jobs. This indicates that the participants in our sample seem to have changed jobs regularly or may return to their home country after their first overseas experience.

Table2
*ELT experience abroad*

| ELT expat experience in years | 0-5 | 6-10 | 11-15 | 16-20 | 21 > |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| n=73 | 21 | 19 | 15 | 8 | 10 |
| ELT expat experience in current job in years | 0-5 | 6-10 | 11-15 | 16-20 | 21 > |
| n=71 | 54 | 9 | 3 | 1 | 4 |

The quantitative data helped us understand the qualitative data drawn from the open-ended questions. These were analysed and visualized by the NVivo 11 software used for coding. The

procedure consisted of two stages. In the *thematic coding* stage 70 different concepts, such as 'loneliness' or 'client expectations', were recorded in the data set. In the *pattern coding* stage (Saldaña, 2009) different patterns and categories emerging from the data were identified. For example, 'client expectations', 'marketing' and 'student expectations' were grouped together under 'client expectations' as these all indicated market-driven reasons for the employment of expats. In other cases, a new label was created to express the meaning of a particular configuration.

**Results**

In this section we shall present our findings relating to the research questions. When using illustrative quotations from our data, we shall identify their sources by the code we gave to each participant (for example, [R1] denotes Respondent 1).

**Challenges and Difficulties**

What is the difference between a challenge and a difficulty? Whereas 'challenge' has a forward-looking, positive connotation, 'difficulty' tends to take on a more negative meaning: a hurdle hard, if not impossible, to overcome. Depending on the circumstances in which our respondents lived and worked, our data show that their lives in the foreign country varied between being stimulating and debilitating. When asked about the hardships they faced, an expat jokingly replied, "Too numerous to mention. I can't always buy Irish chocolate for one!" (R13) whereas a Brit quipped that a huge challenge was that local people drove "on the wrong side of the road" (R22). On a more serious note, a respondent noted that in certain countries "extra effort is required simply to cope with basic life" (R40). First, we shall report on the respondents' lives beyond the workplace.

**Beyond the Workplace**

In many countries, obtaining a visa and a residence permit turned out to be troublesome even though recruitment policies favoured expat applications. One respondent [R19] intimated that getting a work permit was facilitated by greasing the palms of public officials. Strict regulations and the need to learn how to get through bureaucratic procedures caused a lot of headache, too. Nor was it an easy job to find suitable accommodation. In some countries, renting a flat was said to be discriminatory, implying that foreigners would be charged two or three times as much as locals, because citizens from Western countries were assumed to be rich by default. Similarly, being overcharged in shops was a fairly common experience.

For expats with a family a formidable challenge had to do with schooling: in several countries foreign children were not eligible for free education even if they happened to be fluent speakers of the local language. Thus the two options open to parents were either to send their children to expensive international schools (if they could afford and if such schools were at all available), or provide home-schooling.

Then there was the human factor concerning cultural differences as well as protectionist and nationalistic policies. One respondent complained about the "much less than welcoming atmosphere, a glaring absence of simple hello's and smiles" (R3) and the suspicious looks he was getting from local people. Some respondents had the bitter experience of being told "to f…k off back to my own country" (R7) whereas another one, while he was out with a local girlfriend, overheard a local man muttering: "Look, another foreigner stealing our women" (R44). While such incidents were few and far between in our survey, most expats reported facing some form of hostility (or indifference) especially when they were visibly not local.

Much more common were complaints about the scant opportunity to 'have a life' outside the work context. Several respondents admitted that they felt lonely in the foreign environment. The best strategy to combat alienation, said a respondent, was "to always keep an open mind and assume the best from each person as a new friend" (R3) and "invest time in building relationships" (R26). However, if the expat's level of proficiency in the local language was not up to par, as was often the case with the newly arrived, their interactions with local people were marred by instances of miscommunication and their social life was confined to their work environment. No wonder international schools often provide counselling to newcomers to help cope with alienation and loneliness.

While expats were often expected "to speak the country's language at C1 level" (R16), they did not have enough opportunity to practice it, because "everywhere I go, people want to practice their English" (R46) and "being asked to do personal tutoring all the time" (R37). While this kind of moonlighting could have added to the expat's income, such services were usually requested gratis.

**At Work**

Several respondents mentioned that discrimination in hiring policies was rampant in certain countries. "Not being a Caucasian have some frowning upon you as a teacher", said an expat, but she added: "Once [the parents] understand and see how well their child is progressing they are usually fine" (R15). What made work life difficult was figuring out the rules and customs of the educational system in which they worked. Many expats reported having to adjust to the educational traditions and work culture of their new context, which significantly differed from their own; unpredictable expectations from bosses and colleagues, little forward planning and suddenly introduced changes were claimed to be most disconcerting. Furthermore, several respondents felt marginalized in the staffroom, as illustrated by such comments:

I will never truly be accepted as a member of the profession here, because I'm a NEST. I will always be other. (R21)

My professionalism is not often taken into consideration. (R29)

I'm left out of staff discussions and meetings. (R57)

Non-NEST faculty […] was discouraged from interacting on a friendly basis with NESTs. (R40)

At the same time, there was often a wide gap in teaching methods between expats and locals.

One of our respondents went into details about his experience: My […] students were champion memorizers to a degree that was almost frightening. But they were not used to taking responsibility for their own learning, they didn't ask questions, they were shy to admit what they didn't understand and afraid to make mistakes, and they hardly ever […] went beyond the minimum of what I asked them to do. (R32)

To make matters worse, the circumstances under which many expats had to work were far from ideal: poorly resourced classrooms, fifty students per class, no textbooks and lots of other undesirable elements. Obviously, these hardships profoundly influenced the choice of teaching methods. It should also be borne in mind that so-called Western educational traditions are not *ab ovo* superior and therefore will not serve as a model in every corner of the world.

**The Remuneration of Expats**

There is a persistent urban myth that expats receive higher, often undeservedly higher, salaries than local teachers. However, our survey revealed a more nuanced picture.

Many respondents admitted that they had no idea of how much locals were being paid, because salary scales were kept confidential. Anyway "I don't feel comfortable asking colleagues about [their earnings]" (R42). The majority of the more informed mentioned that they were getting "pretty much the same" (R44) as locals. If there was any difference in pay-bands, they said, it was due to better qualifications and longer experience – age, gender, ethnicity or nationality were not factors to be reckoned with.

In a number of institutions, however, expats were reported to be better off than their local colleagues. It goes without saying that those who were sponsored by donor organizations, such as the US government or the British Council, took home a great deal more than those who were paid by local institutions. When this was not the case, remuneration was often based on supply and demand: in countries where NESTs were in short supply, employers often went out of their way to attract them. Better pay was a major carrot, because they knew all too well that expats could not afford to work for the same salary as what their local colleagues were getting. Oftentimes, even a double paycheck was not enough to make ends meet owing to tight home constraints: pension contributions and student debts needed to be covered, and flying home to connect with family at least once a year could also be costly.

Their situation was further exacerbated by the dire personal and educational circumstances in which they found themselves. In several countries, expats were offered markedly fewer benefits than locals: no insurance and retirement packages were provided, housing costs tended to be higher, and prospects for promotion or a salary raise were often grim. As one respondent noted, "[t]ransfer to the new pay scales was definitely easier for locals than for foreigners, as locals were more likely to be promoted to administrative posts"(R2). Adding all this up, what was higher in absolute terms may in effect have been lower in relative terms.

Mind you, there were places where expat salaries were lower even in absolute terms. As one respondent curtly said, "considerably lower, for more work" (R22). Many employers regarded expats as cheap labour:"My boss didn't consider me a professional", complained a respondent,

"but 'just a NEST teaching English'and so tried to pay me less" (R21). Blatantly disregarding teaching qualifications, employers often chose to hire 'backpackers', such as university students on a gap year. Oddly enough, in certain countries jobs were advertised for native 'volunteers' as if teaching "were not a profession and we should work for free" (R20).

It is no wonder, then, that the turnover rate of expats could be as short as two years or less. This being the case, they were generally considered short-term visitors, "constantly being treated like a tourist"(R5), even though many of them made conscious efforts to fit in, stay for a protracted period of time and learn the local language. In fact, 90 % of the respondents in our survey spoke at least one foreign language, and more than 56 % two or more (in some cases as many as seven!) foreign languages besides their native tongue.

Considering all the above factors, it is perhaps not unfair to argue that expats deserved (or would have deserved) a better pay than locals – on condition that they were suitably trained and experienced.

**Discussion**

The results of our survey clearly indicate that discrimination, prejudice and professional exclusion are problems experienced not only by non-NESTs, but also by their native English-speaker counterparts. According to our data, beliefs about the privileged life and work conditions of NESTs tend to be no more than urban legends in most countries under scrutiny.

Just like their nonnative peers, NESTs may face discriminatory labour policies and regulations enforced in certain countries. Some respondents even reported latent racism in employment practices whereby a particular racial, generally Caucasian, profile was granted precedence. But even when expats were privileged in employment opportunities, their advantages were ascribable to political and market economy considerations rather than to language education decisions.Provided they were issued a visa and a work permit, most expats made conscious efforts to fit in and many of them went out of their way to learn the local language too. Although the financial constraints imposed upon them and the cultural differences between the host country and their own rendered their day-to-day life hard to manage, it was a challenge most of them were prepared to accept.

The out-of-classroom hardships were aggravated by the signals sent out to our respondents regarding their professional status. Similarly to Yim and Ahn's (2018) study, manyexpats in our surveycomplained that the expertise they brought into the classroom was often ignored by uninformed agents from *outside* the ELT community. Worse still, some expats reported being pushed into the periphery from *within*, that is by the educational authorities and even by their local colleagues, who would be expected to be more knowledgeable about and less biased towards expats. Having said that, frequent incidents of unfair treatmentsuffered by non-NEST professionals and amply reported in the professional literature (see, for example, Canagarajah, 2012, Kahmi-Stein, 2016, Kumaravadivelu, 2016) should not be disregarded either.

As shown above, expats carry a double burden: they have to cope both outside and inside the classroom simultaneously, which is not easyconsidering that quality of life and quality of work

inevitably impact each other (Medgyes & Kiss, forthcoming). It goes without saying that when everyday life becomes a constant struggle, it is difficult to concentrate on professional commitments and deliver quality education in the classroom. Conversely, an unsatisfying and discriminatory professional experience exerts a negative influence on the quality of life.

Finally, we are aware that the small sample size of 79 participants is not representative of the expat NEST population as a whole, and thus the findings in our study cannot be regarded as conclusive. Nevertheless, we hope to have provided an insight into an underinvestigated area of ELT and shatter some of the stereotypes that seem to resist time and logic. Further research is needed to validate (or indeed invalidate) our findings on a larger sample, with a focus on specific geopolitical areas, such as a particular country, as well as to investigate cases of discrimination that non-NESTs and NESTs encounter in their home countries. Only by paying equal attention to both sides can we promote genuine equity in our profession.

## Conclusion

This small-scale exploratory study highlights some of the challenges and difficulties that native English-speaking expatriate teachers face during their extended stay abroad in both their everyday and professional lives. Although far from being representative, the data we collected seem to indicate that these problems are manifold pervading every aspect of their stay abroad. In the light of our results, Johnston's (1999) metaphor of the 'postmodern paladin' as a teacher who often feels insecure and marginalized in the foreign culture appears appropriate.

Another issue to reflect upon is the deep-seated public image of the expat as an unqualified 'backpacker' youngster (usually a male), who takes up a teaching job in order to cover his travel costs as he is gallivanting around the globe. Our survey demonstrates that, perhaps unlike in the past, the overwhelming majority of expats are well-qualified and dedicated polyglots with fairly extensive professional experience.

Whereas the plight of non-NESTs seeking employment abroad has been described in detail in the professional literature – and quite rightly so –, studies on expat NESTs are few and far between. We should bear in mind that unequal treatment – and even racially tainted discrimination on occasion – is meted out to both groups although they may be different in nature. Terminological disputes over natives versus nonnatives should not make us forget that before a definitive judgment is passed on equity issues, a lot of factors need to be taken into account. Studies, more comprehensive than the one we offer here, may help us gain a more balanced and nuanced picture of ELT professionals, NESTs as well as non-NESTs, working abroad.

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[i]When we talk of the 'expat', we are fully aware that there is an increasing number of *nonnative* English-speaking teachers who work in foreign countries. For the sake of brevity, however, in this paper we use the term 'expat' to refer to *native* English-speaking expatriate teachers only.