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The knowledge base of non-native English-speaking teachers: perspectives of teachers and administrators

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This study explores the knowledge base of non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) working in the Canadian English as a second language (ESL) context. By examining NNESTs’ experiences in seeking employment and teaching ESL in Canada, and investigating ESL program administrators’ perceptions and hiring practices in relation to NNESTs, it identifies the knowledge base of NNESTs that allows them to gain access to the ESL profession and become effective ESL teachers. This knowledge base consists of six categories, which are content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, contextual knowledge, continuity with past experiences, and support knowledge. Strategies to develop the knowledge base of NNESTs are also identified. The study contributes to a better understanding of the professional knowledge of NNESTs working in ESL contexts. It also demystifies the hiring practices of ESL programs and reveals how these practices could affect NNESTs’ job search experience. The findings have implications for teacher educators, language program administrators, and other stakeholders in similar contexts.

Keywords: non-native English-speaking teacher; teacher knowledge base; English language teaching; teacher recruitment; Canada

Introduction

In the past two decades, issues related to non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) have attracted increasing attention in the English language teaching (ELT) field (Braine 1999, 2010; Kamhi-Stein 2004; Llurda 2005; Mahboob 2010). This surge of research interest largely stems from the concern that NNESTs are often not given the credit they deserve although they constitute the majority of the world’s English language teachers (Canagarajah 2005; Moussu and Llurda 2008). Many still believe that the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker. This perception has created serious challenges to qualified NNESTs’ employment and career advancement in the ELT profession.

Since Medgyes’ pioneering work in the early 1990s (Medgyes 1992, 1994), researchers have examined issues related to NNESTs from different perspectives in order to gain insights into the complicated nature of these issues and to seek strategies to empower NNESTs. Various topics have been examined, such as the characteristics, experiences, status, and identity of NNESTs (Árva and Medgyes 2000; Kamhi-Stein 2004; Park 2012), students’ perceptions of NNESTs (Ma 2012; Moussu 2010), teacher education programs for NNESTs (Kamhi-Stein 2004; Singh and Han 2010), and less commonly, English language program administrators’ perceptions and hiring...
practices (Clark and Paran 2007; Mahboob et al. 2004). It is important to note that although many of these studies have addressed the qualifications of NNESTs in one way or another, limited research has focused directly on the professional knowledge of NNESTs, which is one of the most important attributes of qualified teachers and thus deserves adequate attention in discussing the qualifications and empowerment of NNESTs. As Borg (2003) pointed out, much current research on language teacher cognition has focused on native speaker teachers and our understanding of the knowledge, beliefs, and teaching practices of non-native speaker teachers is very limited. Therefore, there is a significant imbalance in our knowledge base. This study sets out to broaden the scope of teacher knowledge research. By investigating the knowledge base of NNESTs working in the Canadian context through the perspectives of both NNESTs and English language program administrators, this study aims to achieve a deeper and broader understanding of issues related to NNESTs and highlight the knowledge, skills, and strategies that can empower NNESTs to be effective ELT professionals working in similar contexts.

Teacher knowledge base and non-native speakers in language teaching

Knowledge base of language teachers

A knowledge base for teachers refers to the repertoire of knowledge, expertise, skills, and understanding that teachers need to possess in order to become effective in their profession (Day 1993; Richards 1998). Since the 1990s, teacher knowledge has attracted increasing attention in second language teacher education research (Borg 2003, 2006; Freeman 2002; Freeman and Johnson 1998; Gatbonton 2000, 2008; Golombek 1998; Johnson 2006; Johnston and Goettsch 2000). Exploring the knowledge base of language teaching can offer important implications for the development of language teacher education programs and the continuous growth of ELT professionals, which will ultimately elevate the status of the ELT profession. Despite the importance of teachers’ knowledge base for the field, there is little consensus as to what effective second language teachers need to know. Following Shulman’s (1987) highly influential work on teacher knowledge base in general education, Day (1993) suggested that second language teacher education consists of four types of knowledge: content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and support knowledge. Richards (1998) proposed six core dimensions of second language teachers’ knowledge base, namely theories of teaching, teaching skills, communication skills and language proficiency, subject matter knowledge, pedagogical reasoning and decision-making, and contextual knowledge. Freeman and Johnson (1998) proposed a re-conceptualized knowledge base framework for language teacher education from a sociocultural perspective that includes three domains: the teacher—learner, the social context, and the pedagogical process. Tarone and Allwright (2005) argued for the inclusion of another key element in second language teachers’ knowledge base: the language learner. All these frameworks aim to delineate the knowledge base that language teachers need to know in order to be effective in their classrooms, but since language teaching is highly contextualized, the knowledge and skills required of teachers working in a certain context should be different, not to mention the diversity within language teachers, such as the distinction between native and non-native teachers. Issues related to the knowledge of non-native teachers in the ELT profession will be reviewed in the following section.
In the ELT field, it is a prevalent belief that native speakers are the ideal English teachers, which Phillipson (1992) termed the ‘native speaker fallacy’. This belief is very harmful for the growth of the profession because it shifts attention from teachers’ professional knowledge and expertise to linguistic status. In order to achieve an objective, in-depth understanding of the qualifications of NNESTs, many researchers have set out to investigate the linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical characteristics of these teachers. A number of studies have identified NNESTs’ pedagogical strengths, such as sensitivity to students’ needs and learning difficulties, and strong metacognitive knowledge of grammar. It has been found that NNESTs’ experience of going through the process of learning English as an additional language affords them valuable insights into the ways in which English is learnt or taught, not to mention that many of them share students’ first language (Ma 2012; Moussu and Llurda 2008). On the other hand, the weaknesses of NNESTs as English language teachers have also been examined. Several studies have reported non-native teachers’ language deficiency, especially in speaking and pronunciation (Árva and Medgyes 2000; He and Miller 2011). Cultural teaching has also been identified as a source of challenge for NNESTs. Some NNESTs are found to refrain from talking about the English-speaking culture (Árva and Medgyes 2000), or deal with cultural topics less satisfactorily than their native English-speaking counterparts (Lazaraton 2003). In terms of pedagogical skills, studies have found that NNESTs working in some contexts tend to have a traditional textbook-bound teaching style, not as skilful as their native English-speaking counterparts in implementing a student-centered communicative classroom (Ma 2012).

In recent years, an increasing number of NNESTs have been found taking up English as a second language (ESL) jobs in English-speaking countries (Clark and Paran 2007; Diniz de Figueiredo 2011). Research has shown that teaching ESL can be a very challenging task for NNESTs (Moussu and Llurda 2008). Apart from the high demands on their linguistic and cultural knowledge, NNESTs have to adjust their teaching practices to fit into the local ESL context and negotiate a new professional identity in this process (Park 2012). They also have to deal with possible discrimination in employment and negative attitudes from students (Braine 1999; Mahboob et al. 2004). Amin (2000) found that non-native immigrant teachers working in the Canadian ESL context had to negotiate their identity and pedagogies based on their non-native speaker status, dealing with complex disempowering issues such as accent, race, ethnicity, and students’ rejection. In Diniz de Figueiredo (2011), the NNESTs had to overcome various professional and linguistic challenges in adjusting to teaching ESL in K-12 schools in the United States. Their bi/multilingual skills and cultural background helped them establish authority and a positive image in the workplace. Although limited in number, these studies provide valuable insights into the challenges that NNESTs may face in teaching ESL and enable us to come up with ways to better assist NNESTs in embarking on a successful career of teaching English in similar contexts.

The above review of NNESTs’ professional characteristics and experiences of teaching English in diverse contexts highlights the strengths and gaps in NNESTs’ knowledge and skills that might affect their qualifications and competence as ELT professionals. Further systematic study of NNESTs’ knowledge might offer more explicit implications for the theory of language teacher knowledge and for language
teacher education programs that prepare NNESTs to be better English language teachers. This study aims to achieve an in-depth understanding of NNESTs’ knowledge base by examining the perspectives of both NNESTs and ESL program administrators regarding the core knowledge and skills that allow NNESTs to find employment and teach ESL successfully in the Canadian context. It addresses the following questions:

1. What kinds of knowledge do NNESTs need to gain access to the ESL profession and become effective ESL teachers?
2. What strategies can NNESTs use to develop their knowledge base in this process?

Method
Participants
The participants were six NNESTs and six administrators working in three typical types of adult ESL programs in Canada, including settlement ESL programs, university/college academic ESL programs, and private language school programs. These programs differ in terms of learner groups and program goals: Settlement ESL programs, including the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program and general ESL, focus on teaching English and life skills to immigrants and refugees so as to facilitate their integration into the Canadian society; university/college academic ESL programs serve mostly international students, assisting them to succeed in their studies; private language school programs mainly serve visa students who usually stay in Canada for a short period of time, improving their language skills and being exposed to Canadian culture.

The administrators had at least five years’ administrative experience with adult ESL education in Canada. The teachers all came to Canada in adulthood from non-native English-speaking countries. They all had teaching experience in their home countries, possessed good educational background, and had at least one year’s experience of teaching adult ESL in Canada. All the participants were given a pseudonym in lieu of their real names in this study. Tables 1 and 2 provide an overview of the background of the participants.

Table 1. ESL program administrator participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Length of time in this position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wayne</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Program consultant in the adult ESL section of a school board</td>
<td>Over 10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Program consultant in the adult ESL section of a school board</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Professor of ESL; coordinator of credit ESL program in a university</td>
<td>Over 10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Faculty member in the English Language Program at a college doing some administrative work; former ESL program coordinator</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Owner of a private language school</td>
<td>8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Former private school owner and operator</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. NNEST participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Current job</th>
<th>ELT in/outside Canada</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farah</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31–35</td>
<td>MA in Second Language Education; BA in English Translation</td>
<td>LINC instructor in a school board</td>
<td>6 years/6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Han</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31–35</td>
<td>Two MA in Applied Linguistics; MEd in Counseling Psychology; BA in English</td>
<td>Adult ESL instructor with a school board</td>
<td>1 year/5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31–35</td>
<td>MA in Linguistics; BA in English and Persian Translation</td>
<td>ESL instructor in a college ESL program</td>
<td>1 year/8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31–35</td>
<td>MA in Linguistics; BA in English</td>
<td>ESL instructor in a university preparation program</td>
<td>2.5 years/4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wu</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>26–30</td>
<td>MA in Second Language Education; BA in English Education</td>
<td>TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) instructor</td>
<td>2 years/4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mustafa</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>41–45</td>
<td>MEd in Education; MA in English Education; BA in English Education</td>
<td>ESL instructor and teacher educator in TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages)</td>
<td>2 years/12 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data collection
A case study approach was used for the study, which allowed an in-depth exploration of the complex and multifaceted nature of issues involved in the study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews supplemented by document collection (e.g. ESL job announcements and job interview schedules).

The interviews were semi-structured. Each participant was interviewed once or twice, averaging 1.5 hours each time. Most of the interviews were conducted in English with the exception of the interviews with the two Chinese participants, which were conducted in Mandarin and later translated into English. All the interviews were transcribed and coded.

Data analysis
The data obtained from interviews and documents were first organized into two major categories: seeking employment and teaching ESL. The data from the administrators and NNESTs were then coded separately within these two broad categories. The coding of the data involved the use of a list of codes derived from the categories of existing paradigms of teacher knowledge base (Day 1993; Lipischak 1977; Richards 1998; Shulman 1987). Then the two sets of data for the administrators and NNESTs were integrated to yield a more holistic understanding of NNESTs’ knowledge base. This knowledge base framework consists of six categories, which are content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, contextual knowledge, continuity with past experiences, and support knowledge (see Table 3). The six-category knowledge base provides a framework for analyzing the findings which will be presented in the next section.

Findings and discussion
In this section, the major findings of the study will be presented according to the six categories of knowledge outlined above. In each category, the perspectives of both administrators and NNESTs will be examined to highlight the knowledge and skills that allow NNESTs to succeed in the process of seeking employment and teaching ESL. NNESTs’ strategies for success will also be described.

Table 3. Definition of the categories of knowledge base for English language teachers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content knowledge</td>
<td>Knowledge of the subject matter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogical knowledge</td>
<td>Knowledge of generic teaching strategies, beliefs and practices, regardless of the focus of the subject matter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogical content knowledge</td>
<td>Specialized knowledge of how to teach the subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support knowledge</td>
<td>Knowledge of the various disciplines that inform one’s approach to the teaching and learning of the subject matter as well as knowledge of how to access resources and support related to the teaching profession and the teaching context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual knowledge</td>
<td>Knowledge of the context in which teachers work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuity with past experiences</td>
<td>Knowledge of how past experiences compare with current context, how this impacts on perceptions/needs/teaching practices, and how one can make connections between past and present experiences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Content knowledge

In this study, the content knowledge of an English language teacher mainly refers to knowledge of the English language and the culture of English-speaking countries. When talking about the qualities they looked for in non-native applicants, the administrators unanimously cited a very high level of proficiency in English. Some indicated near-native proficiency. Several also expressed preference for hiring teachers who are proficient in all language skills and thus are capable of teaching a range of courses. This was especially true when hiring full-time ESL teachers. The requirement for high language proficiency can be a major barrier to NNESTs’ employment as ESL teachers in Canada, especially to those who have limited opportunities to work on their English. But for highly proficient NNESTs like those in this study, they still had a good chance of being hired by ESL programs, especially programs that place more emphasis on the expertise and professionalism of the job applicants rather than their linguistic status.

The administrators were divided in their opinions about the importance of accent in making hiring decisions. Those from college, university or school board tended to think accent was not important as long as it did not interfere with understanding. What they looked for was a clear and intelligible accent. However, the administrators Mike and Mary from the private sector were clear about their preference for native speakers of Canadian or American English. Non-native applicants with a near-native accent could also be considered. They explained that this was dictated by their clients’ preferences. Mary voiced students’ concern about the teacher’s accent:

I’m spending big money to come here from Mexico. I don’t want someone with a Spanish accent teaching English because I get that in Mexico.

This kind of negative attitude toward NNESTs can be problematic, but it does reflect the reality in certain ESL programs. In teacher knowledge studies which are primarily based on native English-speaking teachers (e.g. Johnston and Goettsch 2000), accent does not seem to be a big concern, but in this study, as well as in several studies on NNESTs (Butler 2007; Mahboob et al. 2004), a clear or even near-native accent is often considered a desirable quality of NNESTs by students and other stakeholders, affecting their job chances and credibility as competent English language teachers.

In addition to language skills and a clear accent, non-native applicants were also expected to have some knowledge of Canadian culture because it is ‘part and parcel’ of language, according to the administrator Wayne. Other administrators shared similar views about the importance of cultural knowledge. They believed that NNESTs should be able to navigate through Canadian culture so that they could orient students to life in Canada and help them integrate into the Canadian society.

After obtaining ESL teaching positions, language related issues became the major source of concern for the NNEST participants in terms of content knowledge. When talking about challenging classroom situations they had encountered, most of them cited language related scenarios in which they mistaught the pronunciation of certain words, could not understand the English of some ESL students, felt inadequate in giving students feedback on their writing, and so on. Being very conscious of their linguistic weaknesses as compared to native speakers, they invested a tremendous amount of time and effort improving their English skills and getting exposed to Canadian culture. The most commonly used strategies were socializing with native speakers and watching English TV programs. They also learned to be strategic in dealing with language and culture-related challenges in class, such as drawing upon their advantages of being bilingual teachers.
and culture bridges. These strategies are similar to what Diniz de Figueiredo (2011) has reported about Brazilian teachers working as ESL teachers in the United States and suggest that NNESTs need to develop awareness of and draw upon their unique linguistic and cultural background when trying to establish credibility as qualified English language teachers.

**Pedagogical knowledge**

Sound pedagogical knowledge is an essential qualification for teachers in any subject area. In this study, English proficiency and teaching approach are the two major areas repeatedly mentioned by the administrators in terms of the qualities they look for in non-native applicants. In the hiring process, the administrators usually designed interview questions to elicit the candidates’ pedagogical knowledge and skills. This study identified several types of questions about pedagogical knowledge that NNESTs might find difficult to answer, particularly those from countries with traditional structured teaching environments. Typical questions would pertain to student-centered teaching methodologies, communicative language teaching (CLT), and lesson planning. It is important to answer these questions in a way that demonstrates one’s knowledge, skills, and teaching beliefs compliant with the teaching practice of the ESL program that one applies to.

In some settings such as academic ESL programs, the pedagogical challenge is often a greater issue for non-native candidates than the linguistic challenge because NNESTs who have the courage to apply for ESL positions with these programs usually speak excellent English. As the administrator Margaret pointed out:

> Our program requires CLT, student centered approach. Particularly if NNESTs come from a country that traditionally has a teacher-centered teaching style, their formal teaching style will be revealed in the interview when answering questions. That’s a probably the biggest reason why they are not hired.

Once the NNEST participants started teaching, they had to adjust their teaching practice to adapt to the expectations of the Canadian ESL classroom. Several administrators emphasized NNESTs’ adjustment to the CLT approach when asked about the difficulties NNESTs working in their program experienced. In order to learn the student-centered, communicative Canadian teaching practices, the NNEST participants employed many strategies, such as volunteering, observing classes, and pursuing teaching English as a second language (TESL) certification or advanced education in Canada. Their adjustment experiences parallel the findings of several studies on the transition of NNESTs from their native to English-speaking countries (e.g. Park 2012; Singh and Han 2010).

**Pedagogical content knowledge**

Pedagogical content knowledge in English teaching is the specialized knowledge that makes a teacher a good English language teacher. It is ‘the category most likely to distinguish the understanding of the content specialist from that of the pedagogue’ (Shulman 1987, 4). Normally NNESTs are strong in many areas of pedagogical content knowledge, such as explaining grammatical points and language structures clearly, which gives them an advantage in job application. The Turkish teacher Mustafa attributed his success in getting the current position to his knowledge of English and ability to explain language well, which impressed the interviewers:
I talked to them about these issues, professional, grammar, and so forth. I think they were kind of impressed. Grammar is my field. I can bring good explanations to their questions usually. Once, a Korean student said ‘three weeks more’ instead of saying ‘three more weeks’. One of the teachers came to me, ‘why do we say three more weeks instead of three weeks more?’ I said it is so easy because more is a comparative form of much and many, and much and many are adjectives, and normally adjectives are placed before nouns, not after them. You say many books, or books many, right? If you say books many, it makes no sense. You put adjectives before nouns.

Like Mustafa, several other NNESTs also recounted their strengths in the knowledge of grammar and language structures, and the ability to make English more understandable and more accessible to students. These strengths are also confirmed by the administrators. The administrator Wayne pointed out some excellent qualities of NNESTs as language teachers, especially for low-level classes: They are very patient. They understand students’ learning difficulties. They are sensitive to students’ needs and are resourceful in coming up with strategies to meet their needs. These findings support previous studies about the strengths of NNESTs (e.g. Ma 2012; Moussu and Llurda 2008).

Although all the NNESTs in this study possessed an in-depth understanding of pedagogical content knowledge, teaching ESL in the Canadian context is different from teaching English in their home countries in many ways. These differences sometimes challenged their pedagogical content knowledge and required them to adjust their teaching accordingly. Teaching multilingual classes, finding appropriate materials instead of relying on a single textbook, and using group work effectively are some prominent areas of challenge confronting them. But as they worked hard to adapt to teaching ESL in the new environment, they were able to draw upon their strengths and come up with various strategies to succeed in the Canadian ESL classroom.

**Contextual knowledge**

In this study, contextual knowledge is a broad term covering various contextual factors ranging from the workings of classrooms and schools to the character and practices of communities and cultures. In terms of the job search process, three important contextual factors were identified — knowledge of the educational context, familiarity with the job search culture, and awareness of discriminatory hiring practices. As to the teaching stage, dealing with relationships with students, colleagues, and administrators was a big issue for the NNESTs.

The administrators, especially those from the public sector of adult ESL education, expected their job candidates to have some knowledge of the educational context, i.e., knowledge of the Canadian educational system and the needs of ESL students in this system. The administrator Margaret explained her program’s requirement for the teachers’ knowledge of the Canadian educational system in addition to language and teaching expertise:

The other thing is that a teacher needs to know in our program is that they need to be familiar with North American educational system because our job is to enhance students’ success. So in addition to language training, there are a number of issues around the culture of the educational system: expectations, resources, how the system works. So if a person came and had no knowledge of that, or very little knowledge of that, I think that would influence the decision as well.
Familiarity with the North American job search culture was also important for NNESTs to obtain ESL employment. According to some administrators, this can be as important as NNESTs’ qualifications because some hidden cultural barriers in this process may cause misunderstanding and misjudgment of NNESTs’ ability on the part of administrators and interviewers. The NNEST participants agreed that the job search culture in their home countries was different from that in North America. They felt that those who were not aware of the differences would be at a disadvantage. Even those who realized the differences sometimes found it difficult to adjust their job application practices to the Canadian expectations. For example, the Iranian teacher Ella felt uncomfortable during the interview to ‘sell herself’ and talk about her strengths because in her country, interviewees are supposed to be modest and downplay their qualifications and abilities.

Researchers have argued that NNESTs may encounter discriminatory hiring practices in seeking ESL employment in English-speaking countries (Amin 2000; Clark and Paran 2007; Mahboob et al. 2004). The administrators in this study acknowledged that discriminatory hiring practices did exist in certain ESL programs, but not all ESL programs. On the other hand, they also believed that the native/non-native designation was not a huge deciding factor in hiring in most ESL programs. What mattered most was the teacher’s professionalism and language proficiency. As long as NNESTs had strong qualifications, they would eventually find ESL jobs. Several participants suggested that NNESTs interested in ESL teaching jobs should be prepared to deal with possible discriminatory hiring practices. A good strategy for them was to research the ESL market and find out which programs were more friendly and more likely to hire them. The Turkish teacher Mustafa’s job finding experience testifies to this:

Persist. Be strong and don’t be beaten by some students’ and administrators’ attitude. It’s like a battle to me. Keep trying and eventually it will work. Eventually you will find employers who are fair.

Once the NNESTs overcame the above barriers and obtained ESL employment, they had to learn how to deal with possible challenges in their classroom and in the workplace. Many of them experienced situations where they felt challenged by their students. They had to work hard to prove to their students that they were competent ESL teachers. ‘You have to be really good’. This is what the NNESTs repeatedly emphasized throughout the study. Some strategies they used include designing their lessons carefully, establishing rapport with students, and behaving in a friendly but firm manner when students challenged them in class. Several participants pointed out that NNESTs should have some understanding of the Canadian workplace practices in order to integrate into the Canadian work environment. More importantly, everybody involved in the ESL programs, such as administrators, teachers, and students, should all develop intercultural knowledge and competence so that a comfortable and friendly work environment can be created.

**Continuity with past experiences**

The NNESTs in this study were all immigrants to Canada. It has been well documented that the knowledge and skills immigrants acquire through their foreign education and work experiences are not valued by Canadian employers (CRRF 2000). The findings of the study confirm this issue, as the lack of recognition of foreign experience and credentials made it difficult for many NNEST participants to find ESL work, especially when
looking for their first ESL teaching job in Canada. The Iranian teacher Ella described her feeling of loss when she first arrived in Canada:

I have eight years of experience in my country. I have my degree in my country. I have everything that I should have from before. But then I come here. Looks like I have to start all over again.

This disconnection from past experiences made several NNESTs feel like novices when they first arrived in Canada. They had to overcome many barriers to find ESL employment, many of which were surrounding the notion of Canadian experience. Data from interviews and documents such as job announcements and position descriptions showed that a preference for Canadian education and work experience did exist in the hiring practices of many ESL programs. The administrator Margaret commented on the importance of gaining Canadian experience as good preparation for job application:

I think the issue about Canadian experience and Canadian education is that the person needs to understand what the issues are in Canadian education, in Canadian higher education, because they need to respond to that, they need to know what to address. They need familiarity with that. They don’t necessarily need to have their graduate degree here and they don’t need to have worked there other than usually that’s the way you become familiar with the Canadian educational environment, right?

For newcomer NNESTs, having Canadian qualifications and experience is a very important way to acquire new knowledge and skills and fill the gap between their past and the Canadian context. In this study, except for Farah who obtained her first teaching job without any previous Canadian educational background, all the other NNESTs obtained their first ESL teaching job during or after re-certification or education in Canada, and most of them engaged in volunteering or transitional employment before obtaining good ESL positions. The administrator Bob stressed the importance of engaging in initial volunteering or transitional employment to prepare for future teaching jobs, ‘Once you prove yourself, it will be a lot easier’. He believed this is the best way to learn Canadian practices, acquiring new skills, getting positive references, and establishing contacts in the field.

After the NNESTs started working, their past education and work experiences in their home countries had a strong influence on their adjustment to teaching ESL in Canada. In general, the NNESTs whose past experiences were more similar to the experiences of Canadian-born teachers had an easier time making the transition into the new teaching context. For instance, those who had prior experience teaching English communicatively before coming to Canada tended to have less difficulty adjusting to teaching ESL in Canada than those who taught in a formal style in their home countries.

Several previous studies on the experiences of NNESTs in English-speaking countries (e.g. Park 2012; Singh and Han 2010) have revealed disconnectedness between NNESTs’ experiences in home countries and in English-speaking countries. This study confirms the issue and suggests that for NNESTs working in transnational contexts, the ability to connect the past with the present is a very important domain of their professional knowledge, helping them to make transition to the new teaching context more smoothly. Although the existing knowledge base frameworks for language teachers have not given adequate attention to this knowledge domain, the present study supports the incorporation of it into the knowledge base of teacher education programs that prepare NNESTs to teach English in diverse contexts.
Support knowledge

Support knowledge for language teachers has been narrowly defined by Day (1993) as knowledge of various disciplines that inform teaching, and Richards (1998) as knowledge of theories of teaching. This study expands the scope of support knowledge to include knowledge of how to access resources and support related to the teaching profession and the teaching context. This knowledge is particularly relevant not only to novice teachers, but also to teachers who embark on a new phase of their professional journey, such as the NNESTs in this study who moved to teach in a very different context.

In the job search stage, networking skills were an important part of the support knowledge for the NNESTs. This is because in the ESL profession, part-time jobs are very common, and successful networking can help NNESTs access the hidden job market, where the jobs (especially part-time jobs) are not advertised in newspapers or online. When being asked how teachers could get to know about part-time job openings, the administrator Bob said:

I guess just through the grapevine, just through knowing that there are positions at this university. Because these are not permanent jobs, we don’t advertise.

Several other administrators also suggested that it is essential to build a network of people who can share information and offer assistance in the job search process, especially people working in the ESL field and thus in a better capacity to help. The importance of networking is confirmed by the job search stories of the NNESTs in this study. Most of them got their jobs directly or indirectly through networking.

In addition to successful networking, accessing resources for job information, job search strategies, and other types of information and support could also be useful during the job search process. Several administrators expressed their concern that NNESTs sometimes could not get enough information and guidance regarding the job search process in Canada. Training sessions for immigrants and newcomers usually talk about general job search skills but not the skills specific to finding ESL work.

Once the NNESTs started teaching ESL, they needed ongoing support to help them deal with teaching challenges and grow professionally. Some major sources of support for them included consulting native English-speaking colleagues or friends about language and cultural issues, doing online search to gather information, and engaging in TESL training or pursuing advanced degree in related subjects. These are mainly self-initiated support. As to program-based support, with the exception of school board programs that offered extensive support, administrators from other ESL programs agreed that there was not much specific support for their non-native ESL teachers. This was confirmed by the NNEST participants too, who reported that they had not received much support from their programs. Some NNESTs had very little idea of program-established support and took for granted that they should work on their own. Some would rather turn to colleagues and friends for support than approaching their supervisors if they had questions or needed support, which might be partly due to their concern of the supervisors’ evaluative role. This lack of ongoing professional support was not conducive to the growth of the NNESTs.

These findings about support knowledge for NNESTs run parallel to the suggestions offered by many scholars in their writings related to NNESTs. For example, Wu, Liang, and Csepelyi (2010) offered useful advice to NNESTs for successful entry to the teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) profession, which includes developing expertise and a positive self-image, extending intercultural friendships, engaging in informal networking, and getting involved with the professional community. Braine (2010)
also provided similar suggestions based on his own experience. Sharing these success strategies can empower NNESTs on their journey toward professional excellence.

Conclusion

The above presentation of findings and discussion based on the perspectives of both NNESTs and ESL program administrators reveals some important domains of NNESTs’ knowledge base that can help them gain access to the ESL profession and become effective ESL teachers. For instance, language proficiency and teaching skills were two major qualifications sought by the administrators in various ESL programs as well as two major teaching challenges reported by the NNESTs, indicating that these two areas are the major components of knowledge base that a competent ESL teacher should possess. Because the NNESTs in this study moved to teach in Canada, knowledge of the new teaching context, ability to obtain support, and skills in drawing connections between past and present also became especially important. In addition, knowledge of how to cope with discriminatory hiring practices and challenges from students was also essential. These findings about NNESTs working in transnational contexts differ considerably from teacher knowledge studies carried out with teachers working in their home countries, or studies of native speaker teachers, highlighting the complex, multifaceted, and contextual nature of teacher knowledge.

The findings of this study have implications for teacher educators. Most studies on language teachers’ knowledge have focused on native English-speaking teachers (Borg 2003) and there is a lack of understanding of NNESTs’ knowledge base. This study presents a systematic investigation into the kinds of knowledge that NNESTs need for professional success by exploring the experiences of NNESTs at different stages of career development (job search and teaching) and incorporating administrators’ perspective as well. This will in turn inform teacher education programs about how to better prepare NNESTs for ESL teaching. Teacher educators can take these into consideration when designing effective programs to address the particular needs of non-native teacher candidates. For example, in addition to supporting non-native teacher candidates to improve their linguistic and cultural competence, teacher educators can encourage them to draw connections between their past experiences and current teaching context, developing effective pedagogy based on their strengths as non-native speakers of English and their rich life experiences. They can also create ample opportunities for NNESTs to be exposed to the ESL classrooms, provide useful resources and networking opportunities, and design workshops and activities where teacher educators, non-native teacher candidates, practicing NNESTs, and experts in the field can discuss a multiple of socio-political factors that might affect NNESTs’ employment and teaching career. These initiatives can enhance non-native teacher candidates’ awareness and understanding of the implications of being a non-native ESL teacher and bring to light coping strategies that can help them make informed decisions about how to pursue their professional goals.

This study also has implications for ESL program administrators. In hiring and working with NNESTs, many ESL program administrators have sincere intentions to be fair and equitable, but lack of awareness of the characteristics of NNESTs and challenges faced by NNESTs can make it difficult for them to take effective measures. The findings of the study can deepen our understanding of NNESTs’ knowledge base and identify possible gaps in their knowledge to teach ESL, thus assisting ESL program administrators to take measures to help them grow as ELT professionals.
Currently, reports on the support system for practicing NNESTs are sparse in the literature. Most of the research on support for NNESTs has been conducted in teacher education programs. There is an urgent need to investigate the support needed by NNESTs who are already teaching ESL because lack of ongoing support may limit their professional growth or force them to leave the profession entirely. Involving ESL program administrators in this endeavor can elicit valuable ongoing support for NNESTs in the workplace. Only when all stakeholders focus their efforts can we make the ELT profession a site of empowerment for NNEST professionals.

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References


