Empowering non-native English-speaking teachers in Ontario: Challenges and opportunities

By Isil Senturk, Canada

Abstract

This study examines the experiences of Ontario Certified English Language Teachers (OCELTs) who are non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), using Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle to frame their professional strengths and challenges. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach, including surveys, interviews, and reflective journaling, the research highlights NNESTs' unique assets, such as cultural sensitivity, empathy, multilingual skills, and shared learning experiences, which enrich their teaching in multicultural classrooms. Yet, it also reveals persistent obstacles, including discriminatory hiring practices, linguistic disconnects, and inadequate institutional support. The findings suggest that reflective practices, rooted in Kolb's model, can empower NNESTs by fostering professional growth and resilience. The study calls for a shift in Canadian TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) policy to value NNESTs' pedagogical strengths, address systemic inequities, and enhance equity and efficacy in English language education.

Keywords: non-native English-speaking teachers, Kolb's experiential learning cycle, native speakerism, reflective practices, equity, inclusion, experiential learning

Introduction

"To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life." – Ludwig Wittgenstein

That quote speaks to something many of us know instinctively as language teachers: Our words are tied to who we are. For non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), this connection is deeply personal. Many of us have walked the path our learners are on learning English, adjusting to new cultures, and navigating life through a second (or third) language.

And yet, even with strong credentials and rich lived experience, NNESTs often face invisible hurdles, like bias in hiring or assumptions about our ability to teach because of how we speak. These challenges do not take away from our strengths, but they do shape our day-to-day teaching lives.

In this article, I share findings from a small study with Ontario-Certified English Teachers (OCELTs) who are NNESTs. Drawing on interviews, surveys, and personal reflection, I explore what helps and what hinders our work, and how reflective practice—using Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle—can empower teachers like us to thrive in Ontario's classrooms.

Literature review

Across the field of English language teaching, there has been a long-standing preference for teachers who speak English as their first language. This mindset, known as "native speakerism", assumes that native speakers make better teachers simply because of their background (Holliday, 2005). However, this bias can unfairly sideline qualified non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), who often bring a wealth of knowledge and empathy to the classroom (Braine, 1999; Ma, 2012).

Many NNESTs share concerns about their accents or feel less confident using idiomatic language (Liu, 1999). Some say students, even unintentionally expect their teachers to sound "native", which can affect the classroom dynamic. Others have experienced barriers in hiring, where job ads or credentialing systems favour native speakers, even when experienced NNESTs have years of training (Braine, 1999; Mahboob, 2010).

At the same time, researchers highlight the powerful advantages NNESTs bring. Because they have learned English themselves, NNESTs often anticipate the struggles students face and can explain grammar or pronunciation in ways that really click (Medgyes, 1994; Tian, 2018). Their multilingual and multicultural experiences also help them build more inclusive classrooms (Ma, 2012; Tian, 2018).

Furthermore, for NNESTs, navigating the complexities of language teaching can be both rewarding and challenging, especially without adequate institutional support. When NNESTs have access to mentorship and professional development, they are better equipped to overcome doubts and grow in their roles (Tian, 2018; Zareva, 2017). Unfortunately, not all schools or institutions offer this kind of support, and the result is a missed opportunity not just for teachers, but for learners, too.

One helpful tool for NNESTs is reflective practice. Using Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle—concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation—teachers can reflect on challenges and turn them into learning opportunities (Kolb, 1984; Lee, 2009; Yuan & Lee,

2016). This kind of intentional reflection empowers NNESTs to improve their teaching, strengthen their confidence, and ultimately support their students in more meaningful ways.

Methodology

To explore the real-life experiences of NNESTs, I used a mix of methods. First, I surveyed 30 OCELTs who identified as non-native English speakers. Their responses gave a snapshot of common challenges and strengths. Then, I interviewed five of them in more depth, using open-ended questions that let them share their personal stories. I also reflected on my own journey as a NNEST, journaling about classroom experiences and professional hurdles. I used Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984) to analyze this personal reflection—looking at what happened, what I noticed, what it meant, and what I could try next.

Although the sample size was small, the focus was on depth rather than generalization. This kind of reflective, narrative-based approach is valuable for understanding how NNESTs grow and adapt, especially in diverse and dynamic ESL classrooms (Creswell, 2013; Kolb, 1984).

Results

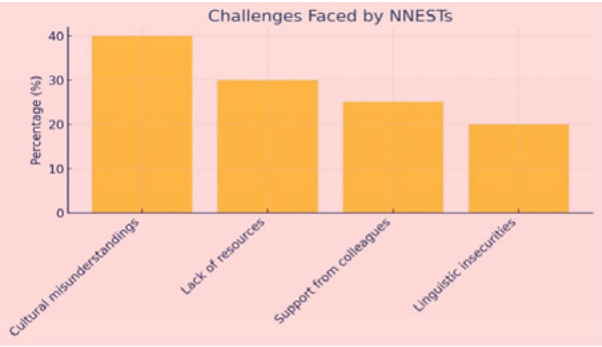

Figure 1: Challenges Faced by NNESTs

Challenges NNESTs Face

These challenges were expanded upon through thematic analysis of interview data. Cultural misunderstandings were consistently mentioned by interviewees, with 60% identifying these as a significant issue. One teacher shared: "Sometimes people believe that if you are not Caucasian and English is not your first language, you are not equipped to teach the language. When I was teaching ELT, I felt that I was questioned and challenged more." Another participant expressed frustration with student preferences for native English teachers: "Students sometimes want a native English teacher," which indicates a bias that impacts NNESTs' teaching environments.

In discussing classroom challenges, many teachers reported feeling that their linguistic insecurities were a barrier to student engagement. One teacher explained: “Some students initially assumed I would be less competent because of my accent, which made me feel like I had to prove my expertise.” Another teacher mentioned, “certain cultural practices, like my emphasis on collaborative learning, were unfamiliar to students who expected more lecture-based instruction.” These comments suggest that NNESTs face additional pressures to prove their competence, especially in classroom settings where students may hold preconceived notions about their abilities based on accent or teaching style.

Moreover, interviewees reported that institutional policies often favoured native speakers, leaving NNESTs to navigate these challenges without sufficient institutional support. One teacher shared: “Sometimes it feels like the system isn’t designed for us. Resources are limited, and there’s little acknowledgment of the unique challenges we face.” However, some teachers also shared positive experiences of support from colleagues. One teacher explained, “My mentor was instrumental in helping me navigate cultural differences in the classroom.”

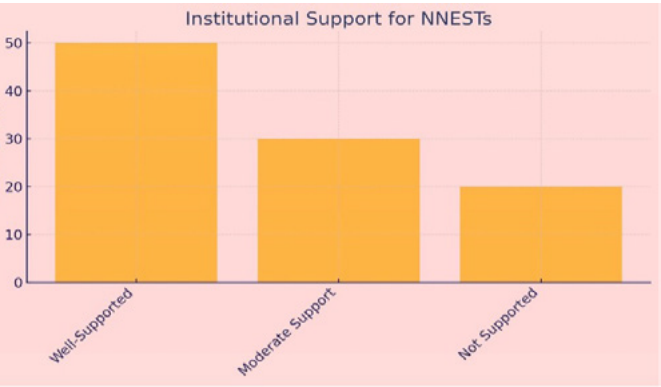

Figure 2: Institutional Support for NNESTs

Strengths NNESTs Bring

Despite the challenges, NNESTs reported several strengths that enhanced their teaching effectiveness. Survey data revealed that 85% of participants viewed their cultural and linguistic backgrounds as assets in the classroom, and 50% of respondents highlighted their multilingualism as a key strength in connecting with students and explaining complex concepts.

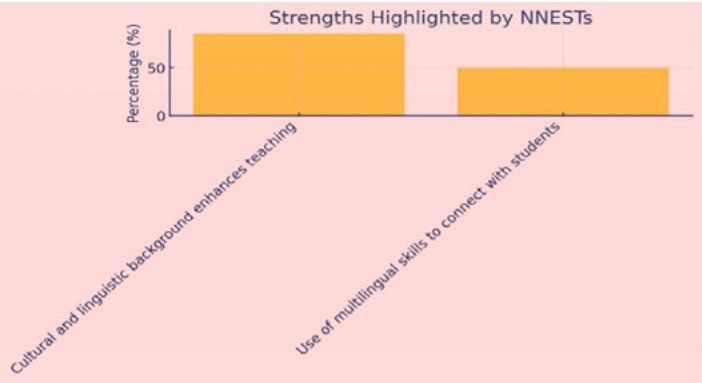

Figure 3: Strengths Highlighted by NNESTs

Furthermore, confidence levels among NNESTs were notably high, with 70% of respondents rating their confidence as *very high* (5/5) and 30% rating it as *high* (4/5).

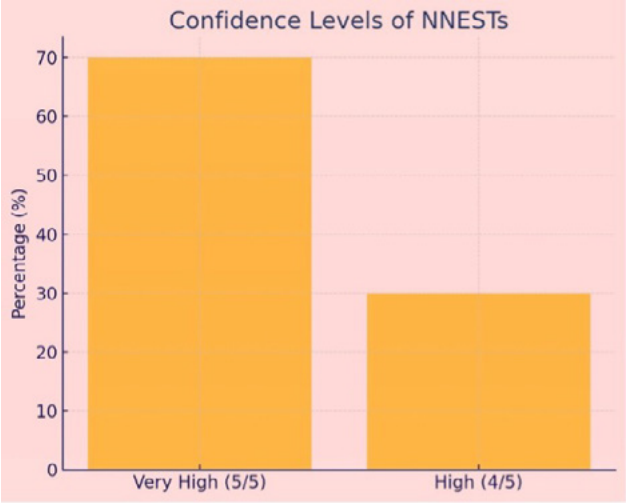

Figure 4: Confidence Levels of NNESTs

Interview data reinforced these findings, with several participants emphasizing how their experiences as language learners allowed them to empathize with their students. One teacher remarked, “I’ve walked the same path as my students. I know how frustrating it can be to learn a new language, so I use my experience to guide them.” Another teacher explained, “I can anticipate the kinds of mistakes my students will make because I’ve been there myself.”

Additionally, multilingual competence was seen as an advantage in anticipating student mistakes and providing more nuanced explanations. One teacher commented, “When a student is struggling with pronunciation, I can often give them examples in their first language or explain a concept in a way that makes more sense to them.”

Confidence among NNESTs was notably high, with institutional support playing a role in boosting this confidence. Teachers who had access to mentorship or professional development opportunities were more likely to express higher levels of self-assurance. One interviewee shared, "When my institution recognized my strengths and provided opportunities to grow, it boosted my confidence significantly."

Reflections as a NNEST

Reflective journal data provided rich insight into the lived experiences of non-native English-speaking teachers. As a NNEST myself, I used Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle to analyze my own teaching journey in Canada, focusing on moments of challenge and growth.

One recurring theme in my reflections was linguistic insecurity, particularly related to my accent and how it might influence students' perceptions of my authority. Despite holding a master's degree in English Language Teaching (ELT), over a decade of university-level teaching experience, and multiple Canadian teaching credentials—including a TESL trainer certificate—I was rejected from a teaching position due to a lack of Canadian experience. This occurred even after completing professional development courses in Canada and the UK. In one instance, my eligibility was questioned based on my nationality, despite my qualifications. These experiences mirror the systemic barriers many NNESTs face, where institutional policies and implicit biases often outweigh demonstrated competence.

Yet, my reflections also highlighted sources of strength. My multicultural background often became a bridge between myself and my learners. In one journal entry, I wrote: *"Students often tell me how much they admire my ability to adapt to Canadian culture and succeed. They see me as someone who has overcome obstacles, which makes them believe they too can thrive in an unfamiliar environment."*

My shared experience as a newcomer fostered deeper empathy in the classroom. I noted: *"I often feel that my background allows me to connect with students on a more personal level. They appreciate that I understand the challenges of resettlement and often seek advice related to both academic and personal concerns."*

This empathetic connection created a sense of trust and belonging, especially for learners navigating similar transitions.

Finally, I observed that students responded positively to culturally informed instruction. As I reflected: *"I can see students becoming more engaged when I bring elements of my own cultural journey into the lesson. They seem to value the varied instructional strategies I use, which are shaped by a multicultural lens."*

Through reflection, I came to see these experiences not only as challenges, but as opportunities to grow—and to model resilience and inclusion for my students.

Connecting the dots

These findings echo what researchers have been saying for years. Bias against non-native English-speaking teachers is real, and it shows up in hiring, classroom dynamics, and institutional structures (Holliday, 2005; Medgyes, 1994). But so are the strengths: multilingualism, empathy, adaptability, and insight into the language-learning process (Ma, 2012; Medgyes, 1994).

What's especially important is how reflection—structured and intentional—can help NNESTs grow. By stepping back, analyzing what happened, and trying new approaches, we become more confident and effective in the classroom (Lee, 2009; Yuan & Lee, 2016).

What this means for the classroom

A key implication of these findings is the need for institutions, schools, and teacher education programs to take a more proactive role in addressing systemic inequities. Biases won't disappear on their own. We need mentorship programs, equitable hiring practices, and more inclusive professional development opportunities. When NNESTs are supported, everyone benefits—teachers, students, and the broader school community.

Reflective practice as a path to growth

One of the most important takeaways from this study is the power of reflection as a tool for professional development. Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle is not just a theoretical concept—it's something teachers can apply in real-time to improve their practice. For NNESTs, this cycle offers a structured way to analyze lessons that went well, make sense of challenges, and test new strategies in the classroom. For instance, a teacher struggling with student engagement might reflect on participation patterns, identify possible barriers, and adapt their approach in future lessons.

Moreover, this model does not just benefit individual teachers—it has the potential to reshape how schools and organizations approach professional growth. Incorporating structured reflection into staff meetings or coaching sessions can foster collaboration between native and non-native teachers, build empathy, and generate inclusive strategies. Reflection tools can also be part of onboarding programs, especially for internationally trained educators who may be adjusting to new educational cultures.

Final thoughts

Non-native English-speaking teachers are a vital part of Ontario's ESL landscape. We bring rich, multilingual perspectives and a lived understanding of what it means to learn and teach in a second language. Yet, many of us still face persistent barriers—from hiring discrimination to daily microaggressions and misunderstandings.

By naming those challenges and highlighting our strengths, we move closer to a more equitable and inclusive profession. Supportive leadership, inclusive policies, and mentorship opportunities tailored to NNESTs' needs all play a role in achieving this goal.

We must shift the narrative: Teaching excellence is not about sounding like a native speaker. It is about making meaningful connections, fostering student growth, and guiding learners with care and empathy. And who better to do that than someone who has walked that path themselves?

Ultimately, embracing diverse linguistic identities and promoting reflective practice can lead to classrooms that are not only more effective, but also more compassionate—for both teachers and the students they serve.

Future directions

This study raises timely questions about the structural dynamics shaping our profession. What would it look like if hiring practices genuinely valued linguistic diversity? How might mentorship and professional development change if they were designed with NNESTs' lived experiences in mind?

Further research could explore how NNESTs' instructional approaches influence student achievement or how learners perceive and respond to linguistic diversity in their classrooms. It would also be valuable to investigate how school leaders—such as principals, program coordinators, and TESL trainers—can actively challenge native speakerism and support all educators equitably.

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