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Struggling to Create Space for Non-Native Teacher Identity: Novice and Experienced EFL Teachers' Perspectives

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Abstract Identity can be a source of marginalization and tension for non-native speaking teachers (NNSTs). To explore NNSTs' perceptions of their non-native identity, two-phase narrative interviews were conducted with four language teachers. In the first phase, the participants were interviewed about their general status as NNSTs in the context of Iran. During the second phase, the interview was conducted on three aspects of non-native teacher identity, namely their bilingualism, learning experience, and instructional competence. The results of the thematic analysis unraveled some competing discourses about their non-native identity. Despite acknowledging the superiority of native speaking teachers (NSTs) due to their high level of language proficiency which was the main source of tension for the NNSTs, they pointed to the advantages of NNSTs regarding their bilingualism, experience of learning, and the equality of NSTs and NNS regarding their instructional competence. This study has implications for teacher educators and institutional administrators to devise plans to redress NNSTs' perspectives towards the NST-NNST dichotomy.

Keywords: *Language teacher identity, Non-native teacher identity, Identity tension, Native speaking teachers, Non-native speaking teachers*

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1. Introduction

There has been a growing interest in the existing literature on the notion of language teacher identity as a construct that is fragmented and dynamic rather than unitary or stable (Kayi-Aydar, 2019). This currently dominant view of teacher identity concurs well with the concept of identity in poststructuralism versus essentialism (Lawrence, 2020). According to poststructuralists, "the singularity (i.e., unity), predictability, and stability of identity are illusions" (Zembylas, 2003, p. 221). Therefore, teacher identity as a multifaceted phenomenon that comprises different dimensions (Flores, 2020) is fabricated in situ under the influence of the dominant historical, social, and cultural ideologies in different contexts (Ahn, 2019; Scrivner, 2024).

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Among various dimensions of identity language teachers develop, non-native teacher identity has received particular attention as it is believed to be the source of tensions for non-native speaking teachers (NNSTs) (Li, 2020; Yuan, 2018). In fact, under the influence of idealization and essentialization (Weekly, 2018), the dichotomy of the identity of native speaker teachers (NSTs) versus NNSTs has been manifested, and the superiority has been given to the former over the latter (Lee & Kim, 2020; Rudolph, 2018). As the prefix of non- indicates, NNSTs have been marginalized (Wernicke, 2020; Yang & Forbes, 2025), and their linguistic and teaching competence has been questioned compared to their native speaker counterparts who have been considered privileged, elite, and superior due to their country of origin and their high English proficiency (Huang, 2018; Tajeddin et al., 2023). However, poststructuralists have problematized the myth of native speakerism (Aoyama, 2023) and strived to reconceptualize the concept of NNSTs' identity, reject NNSTs-NSTs inequity, and portray the very nature of NNSTs' identity complexity as it really is (Aneja, 2018; Scrivner, 2024). They come to value some factors, including NNSTs' experience of learning (Egitim, 2021) and the mother tongue they share with their learners (Weekly, 2018) in establishing a better teacher-student rapport both personally and professionally and running more efficient classes (Yazan & Rudolph, 2018). Therefore, they have emphasized that neither NSTs nor NNSTs are superior to one another, and each group of them has its own strengths and weaknesses (Wang & Fang, 2020).

Although the legitimacy and superiority of NSTs over NNSTs have been challenged by proponents of poststructuralism in the existing literature, there still exist those holding fast to this misbelief (Floris & Renandya, 2020; Selvi et al., 2024). This has resulted in stakeholders' (employers, students, and their parents) discriminatory ideologies in favor of NSTs and intensifying NNSTs' sense of inferiority (Kubota, 2022; Sekaja et al., 2022). Consequently, NNSTs might feel incompetent (Li, 2020) and experience tensions (Seo, 2024; Yuan, 2018), which will have an adverse effect on their teaching and the students' learning process. Therefore, poststructuralists accentuated the significance of illuminating the nature of NNSTs' identity in different contexts more than ever (Aoyama, 2023; Phaethong et al., 2024; Selvi, 2019). Against this backdrop, the current study aims to unpack novice and experienced language teachers' perspectives on their identity as NNSTs.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. A Poststructuralist Perspective on Non-Native Teacher Identity

Among different facets of language teacher identity, there has been an emerging interest in non-native teacher identity in recent years due to the existing discriminatory native speaker ideologies (Colmenero & Lasagabaster, 2024; Lawrence, 2020). What inspired numerous researchers to address this issue was the prevalent dichotomous view towards NNSTs and NSTs, which caused NNSTs to feel inferior (Aoyama, 2023; Li, 2020; Yang & Forbes, 2025) and consequently encounter tensions in their path of professional development (Llurda, 2018). This binary perspective has resulted in the idealization of NSTs based on which native speakers are considered more elite, legitimate, and professional teachers and more ideal models for learners compared with NNSTs (Tajeddin et al., 2018). As a result of this idealization, NSTs, as the owners of the English language, have been privileged, and NNSTs have been marginalized (Akinmulegun & Kunt, 2022; Martínez-Prieto & Lindahl, 2020). Consequently, rather than embracing their multilingualism, NNSTs might undervalue their competence in teaching and ignore their capabilities (Higgins, 2017).

These discriminatory ideologies have been challenged by poststructuralists as they believe that these ideologies have been constructed based on linguistic and possibly social hierarchy rather than being a natural phenomenon (Scrivner, 2024). In their view, NSTs are considered more competent teachers than NNSTs simply because of their language origin, not because of their professional competency (Lee & Kim, 2020). Native speakerism suggests that NSTs are the best teachers and models for learners as they were born in the West, they have grown up with Western culture, and the English language belongs to them (Pérez, 2024). Considering native speaker superiority as a misperception, the advocators of poststructuralism believe that the essentialized native/non-native binary categorization should be dismantled and reconceptualized (Aoyama, 2023). Native speaker fallacy is a term coined as a result of these anti-native speakerism movements (Floris & Renandya, 2020), which suggests that linguistic

competence and instructional competence are two distinct factors and a teacher can be professional regardless of their birthplace (Saba & Frangieh, 2021). In response to the poststructuralists' movement, what seems significant is to problematize the NST-NNST dichotomy, explore NNSTs' identities from different perspectives, and make NNSTs cognizant of their potentials, which even NSTs might lack (Floris & Renandya, 2020).

2.2. Studies on Non-Native Teacher Identity

A number of studies have been conducted on NNST identity through different lenses, including NNSTs' personal life histories and emotional challenges due to the dominant ideological stereotypes and discriminatory perspectives on native speakerism (Yuan, 2018). For instance, Aneja (2018) unraveled the NNSTs' contradictory views about the native/non-native dichotomy. Indeed, while half of the participants accepted themselves as legitimate and qualified teachers, the others considered themselves marginalized and disadvantaged. Both groups also highlighted the linguistic and cultural expertise of NSTs. In another study by Huang (2018), the NNSTs believed that NSTs are superior to them regarding language proficiency and accent as it is their mother tongue. Also, they pointed to their role as lifelong English learners who need to get engaged in the constant process of learning due to their limited knowledge of the target language. Moreover, Weekly (2018) revealed that the participants felt annoyed by their students who assigned a higher position to NSTs. They opposed the view that NSTs are superior to NNSTs and tried to justify their claim by pointing to their strengths, such as the facilitative role of their bilingualism and their ability to establish a better rapport with learners. In another study by Martínez-Prieto and Lindahl (2020), the NNST was demonstrated to develop some in-conflict sub-identities. On the one hand, she tended to achieve a native-like accent as she wished to be a good model for her learners. On the other, she emphasized that an NST with a high level of fluency and proficiency is not necessarily a good teacher.

The findings of a study by Wang and Fang (2020) also revealed that both NSTs and NNSTs have their own strengths, and none is superior to another. More precisely, while NSTs were believed to have a higher level of language proficiency, the NNSTs were shown to be more understanding of the learners' challenges in the process of language learning. Furthermore, the results of Aoyama's (2023) study indicated that NNSTs' identity is the source of conflict. While their participating NNSTs thought highly of themselves as positive role models for their students as they came from the same cultural background, they considered themselves inferior to NSTs regarding their language proficiency as English is not their mother tongue. In another study by Mansouri (2021), the participants were revealed to have two contradictory views about native speakerism. One of them expressed her disapproval of her workplace context in which the native-like teachers were privileged. However, the second participant showed a tendency to follow her institutional demands and tried to develop a native-like accent as she believed in native-speakerism as a privilege. Finally, Saba and Frangieh (2021) showed that being a native speaker does not qualify a person for teaching, and NNSTs are more competent in teaching from different aspects, including bilingualism, experience of learning, and intercultural awareness.

In a study by Akinmulegun and Kunt (2022), it was found that non-native participants were suffering from a sense of inferiority. However, their non-native identity was reconstructed after attending teacher training courses. They came up with the idea that they can empathize with their students, realize their challenges, and establish a better rapport with them as they share the same first language. In another study, Rauf (2022) revealed that although participating NNSTs were cognizant of their strength in empathizing with learners and helping them with their challenges in their process of language learning as a result of their past experience of learning, they were still suffering from a sense of discrimination, marginalization, inferiority, and lack of job security. However, Camacho's (2023) classroom observations and life-history interviews showed that targeted NNSTs felt neither inferior nor privileged due to their status as NNSTs, although the myth of native speaker idealization still prevailed in their society. Rejecting the concept of standard English, they highlighted translanguaging as a medium through which their students were able to improve their language proficiency far from any limitations. Contrarily, the participants in Ershadi et al.'s (2024) study pointed out that they felt a sense of inferiority, marginalization, and NS-NNS inequity imposed on them by institutional stakeholders and policymakers and consequently doubted their instructional competence.

Seo's (2024) exploration of the impact of the dominant native speaker ideology in society on the participating NNST's identity development revealed that it had an adverse effect on his status as a language learner, a language instructor, and even a parent. As a learner, he was struggling to be accepted as a member of the native English speakers' community; as a teacher, he was striving to gain his students' recognition of being a qualified teacher, and as a parent, he expected his children to achieve his dream of developing native-like language proficiency. In another study by Phaethong et al. (2024), it was found that the NNSTs' status was adversely affected by external forces, including colleagues and parents, who weakened their job motivation and self-esteem. However, they managed to keep their confidence high by relying on their proficiency in English, professional qualifications, and teaching experiences. The NNSTs' high level of self-confidence was also shown in a study by Nauryzbayeva (2024), whose participants considered themselves multicompetent language users and teachers rather than deficient users of the English language and, consequently, incompetent teachers. Relying on their status as previous language learners, they considered their experience of learning facilitative in their path of professional development.

The traces of idealized native speakers were observed in Colmenero and Lasagabaster's (2024) study, as it was found that although the participants were cognizant of NNSTs' strengths in different dimensions, including support, assessment, and motivation, they believed NSTs to be more appropriate for advanced levels, which need teachers with a higher level of language proficiency. Moreover, Nigar et al. (2024) demonstrated how a group of NNSTs suffered from the existing hiring discrimination in favor of NSTs. Although they met the criteria of competent English teachers, they remained unemployed under the influence of the prevailing discourses of native speakerism in their society. Concerning NNSTs' sense of marginalization as a result of the prevalence of native speaker ideologies, Yang and Forbes (2025) provided a number of NNSTs with the opportunity to reflect on their status as NNSTs and an intervention phase to enhance their agency to (re)negotiate and (re)construct their identities. The findings proved the significance of awareness-raising to facilitate the teachers' transition beyond the NST-NNST dichotomous view as the participants got engaged in different levels of identity repositioning and power and agency enhancement against a backdrop of the existing ideologies in favor of NSTs.

Numerous studies have been conducted on language teachers' non-native identity, revealing tensions that they experience under the influence of the idealization of NSTs in their professional development. However, the misperception about the NST-NNST dichotomy still prevails in different contexts (Camach, 2023; Ershadi et al., 2024; Floris & Renandya, 2020; Rauf, 2022) and entails the need for further investigation (Aoyama, 2023). The Iranian society, where native speakerism and Western language and culture are still signs of prestige and superiority, is no exception (Pishghadam & Saboori, 2014; Ramezanzadeh et al., 2025). Therefore, shedding light on the nature of language teachers' non-native identity in Iran and the challenges they encounter due to their status as NNSTs will contribute to the existing literature. In this regard, the following research question was pursued in this study: What are novice and experienced language teachers' perspectives on their identity as NNSTs?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

This study is part of a larger study investigating different dimensions of language teachers' identity. To select the participants, we sent emails and invited several novice/experienced and male/female teachers from the available institutes based on convenience sampling. They were also informed of details about the project, including the topic, the average time, and the place of narrative interviews. Then, they were given enough time to give informed consent for their participation. Among the teachers who volunteered to participate, 32 participants were selected through purposive sampling. Half of them were decided to be male and the other half female teachers. Also, half of them were novice teachers, who were selected based on Gatbonton's (2008) definition, which states that novice teachers are the ones who have less than two years of teaching experience. The other half were experienced teachers chosen according to Tsui's (2005) classification, in which experienced teachers are those with more than five years of teaching experience. In our study, they had between six and nine years of teaching experience. In view of the scope of the current study, the researchers worked on the narratives of four participants to present

an in-depth picture of their non-native identity. The demographic information of the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Information about the Participants

Participants	Gender	Age	Degree	Years of experience	Novice/Experienced
Arghavan	Female	29	M.A.	9	Experienced
Alisan	Male	35	B.A.	6	Experienced
Yasaman	Female	27	B.A.	1	Novice
Nikan	Male	29	B.A.	1	Novice

As indicated in Table 1, two of the participants were novice male and female teachers, and the other two were experienced male and female teachers. They were given pseudonyms and remained anonymous to meet the research ethics. They were aged between 27-35 and had B.A./M.A. degrees in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). They were also teachers of adult learners who taught general English based on communicative language teaching (CLT) in a private language institute in Iran.

3.2. Instrumentation

The current study scrutinized four language teachers' narrative accounts of their non-native identity. To give insight into different dimensions of teacher identity as a situated, multiple, and complex construct, the narrative interview has been revealed to be a powerful instrument (Hayes, 2017; Kayi-Aydar, 2018). In fact, through the narrative interview, teachers are provided with the opportunity to reflect on their life history and consequently become cognizant of its tacit aspects (Flores, 2020). Here, the first phase of the narrative interviews was conducted based on a broad question about the participants' general status as NNSTs. According to the participants' responses in the first phase, more narrative interview questions were devised for the second round of data collection and later revised by two experts in the field of teacher education to check their content validity and relevance to the purpose pursued by the study. The pilot study was also conducted on two teachers (non-participants) to check the appropriateness of both the interview questions and the probing technique and to make any required changes. The interview questions are as follows:

1. Did bilingualism impact your identity as an NNST?
2. Did your status as a previous language learner impact your identity as an NNST?
3. Did your status as an NNST impact your instructional competence?

3.3. Procedure

3.3.1. Data Collection

As to the first round of data collection, the participants were interviewed about their general status as NNSTs compared with their native speaker counterparts in the context of Iran to make their belief about native-speakerism more explicit. The third author did this face-to-face interview in Persian, and each session lasted half an hour. Next, based on the participants' responses to the first phase of narrative interviews and the review of the existing literature, three aspects of non-native teacher identity were extracted: NNSTs' bilingualism, learning experience, and instructional competence. Further, the narrative interview questions were devised, revised by two experts, and piloted by two teachers. In the second round of data collection, the narrative interview was conducted by the same author, addressing the devised questions to make the participants reflect upon some aspects of their non-native identity they did not consider in the first round and to scrutinize those unexplored but significant factors. These narrative interview sessions were also run face-to-face in Persian and lasted approximately half an hour for each participant. The whole narrative sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed for data analysis.

3.3.2. Data Analysis

The analyst (the third author) conducted a thematic analysis of the participants' narrative transcriptions based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six reflexive phases. A bottom-up thematic analysis was conducted

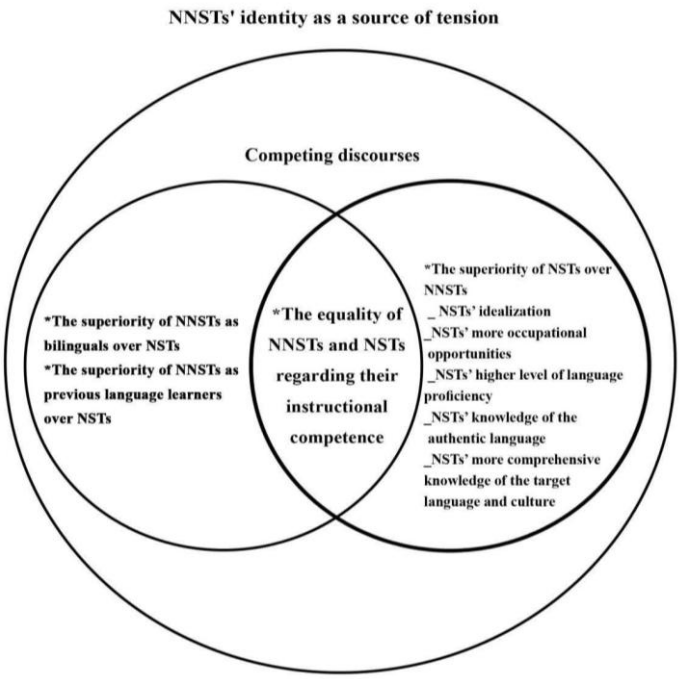
on the narratives gathered in the first phase of data collection, as the analysis was not framed by any prior dimensions. However, a top-down thematic analysis was done on the data collected during the second phase as the analysis was structured by three pre-determined aspects of non-native teacher identity, namely NNSTs' bilingualism, learning experience, and instructional competence. To analyze the data, first, the analyst read and reread the narratives to get familiar with the content and patterns of the data set and to take notes of the potential codes. In the second phase, she identified the meaningful statements within the data set, reduced them into code words, and attached labels to them. For instance, conducting the first two phases of this analysis on the participants' narratives gathered during the first round of data collection led to the following codes: (a) NSTs' idealization in the context of Iran; (b) NSTs' more occupational opportunities and advancements; (c) NSTs' higher level of language proficiency; (d) NSTs' knowledge of the authentic language; and (e) NSTs' more comprehensive knowledge of the target culture. In the third phase, the analyst compared and contrasted the extracted codes and combined them into broader potential themes. In the fourth phase, she checked the initial competing themes against both the extracted codes and the whole data set and discarded, merged, or refined the problematic themes. This phase resulted in a number of credible overarching themes. In the fifth phase, she defined the final themes and gave them informative names. For instance, the aforementioned codes extracted in the first part of the participants' narratives were listed under a broad theme of the superiority of NSTs over NNSTs. In the last phase, the analyst reported the results and the relevant excerpts in detail. It should be noted that the six phases were cyclical as the analyst went back and forth through the phases constantly to come up with consistent and more dependable themes.

4. Results

The results of the bottom-up thematic analysis on the participants' narratives gathered during the first phase of data collection led to one broad theme, namely the superiority of NSTs over NNSTs. Three more overarching themes also emerged as a result of the top-down thematic analysis of the narrative data gathered during the second phase of data collection focusing on three pre-determined dimensions of non-native teacher identity: the superiority of NNSTs as bilinguals over NSTs, the superiority of NNSTs as previous language learners over NSTs, and the equality of NNSTs and NSTs regarding their instructional competence (Figure 1).

Figure 1

NNSTs' Competing Discourses about Their Identity as a Source of Tensions



Overall, the findings unraveled NNSTs' "competing discourses" (Aoyama, 2023, p. 788) about their identity as teachers, which might even be a source of tension in their professional development if they do not endeavor to achieve equilibrium among them (Yuan, 2018). The following sections will be more revealing in this regard.

4.1. General Superiority of NSTs over NNSTs

In the first phase of data collection, the participants were asked to reflect upon their status as NNSTs compared to their native-speaker counterparts. All four participants overlooked their merits as NNSTs and unanimously accentuated the superiority of NSTs: (a) NSTs' idealization in the context of Iran; (b) NSTs' more occupational opportunities and advancements; (c) NSTs' higher level of language proficiency; (d) NSTs' knowledge of the authentic language; and (e) NSTs' more comprehensive knowledge of the target language and culture. To display this issue, some excerpts from the participants' narratives are analyzed below. For instance, when asked about his status as NNSTs compared with NSTs, Alisan (male, experience = 6 years) believed in the general superiority of the latter. In fact, while reflecting on his life history, he remembered his status as a previous learner who had the experience of attending some classes with teachers having a positive impression on him by their nice native-like accent, pronunciation, and fluency:

> *When I was a student, I really enjoyed the classes with teachers whose accent, pronunciation, and speaking style were native-like. So, I think if I were an NST, my students would be more absorbed in class and would desire to have more English classes with me. NSTs' accent is really appealing. Also, I would be welcome in different workplace contexts if I were an NST. Once, I talked to an NST in Iran and he said that 'both Iranian learners and employers worship us.'* [Alisan, male, experience = 6 years]

As Alisan had a good memory of native-like teachers whose mastery of the English language and accent were appealing to him as a student, he concluded that if he were an NST, he would be more successful in absorbing his students into class. Also, he emphasized that if he were an NST, he would be provided with more occupational opportunities and advancements, as he would have more legitimacy among not only learners but also institute principals due to the comprehensive knowledge of the target language and culture. To justify his claim, he referred to his experience of meeting an NST who maintained that Iranians worship them.

Arghavan (female, experience = 9 years) also believed that as English is NSTs' mother tongue acquired unconsciously in an authentic context, their level of language proficiency is significantly higher than hers as an NNST:

> *If I were an NST, my language proficiency would be better by 100%. They don't have the challenges that I have. They were born and grew up in an authentic context, and they know everything about English. However, I need to search for every word and check its accuracy in the context that I want to use. So, my level of accuracy and fluency is lower than theirs.* [Arghavan, female, experience = 9 years]

Here, Arghavan emphasized NSTs' comprehensive knowledge of the target language and culture as she asserted that "*they know everything about English*". Then, she underscored her limited knowledge of the target language as a weakness she has as a NNST. To bridge this gap, she maintained that she had to search for and check the appropriateness of every single vocabulary in the actual context and make sure of the compatibility of the selected form and the targeted function. Similarly, Nikan (male, experience = 1 year) asserted that "*My language proficiency is not even comparable to NSTs*" as English is their mother tongue and they have a more comprehensive knowledge of the target language and culture:

> *English is their mother tongue, and they know all its points and exceptions. Unfortunately, whenever I am observed by our supervisor, one of the major problems that he points out in the observation list is related to my language proficiency level. If I were an NST, I would not have this problem.* [Nikan, male, experience = 1 year]

Pointing to his concern about the negative feedback he receives on his linguistic proficiency and accuracy after each observation, Nikan believed that NSTs whose mother tongue is English do not have these challenges.

Overall, the idealization of NSTs, which seems to prevail in different societal levels in the context of Iran, caused the participating teachers to feel less confident and inferior. Besides, their sense of inferiority partly goes back to their belief in their lower level of language proficiency and limited knowledge of the target language and culture compared to their native-speaker counterparts.

4.2. Superiority of NNSTs as Bilinguals over NSTs

In the second round of the data collection, when asked about the status of NNSTs as bilinguals compared with NSTs as monolinguals, all four participants pointed to their bilingualism as an advantage for the following reasons: (a) understanding learners' produced language and errors arising from the effect of their mother tongue; (b) clarifying points by using examples based on learners' language and culture; (c) establishing a better rapport with learners due to sharing the same language and culture; (d) understanding learners and their problems better due to sharing the same language and culture; (e) knowing the challenging language areas for learners; and (f) providing the lower level students with the opportunity to talk about their challenges with teachers in their mother tongue. To shed more light on this issue, an excerpt from Alisan's (male, experience = 6 years) narrative is analyzed here. Considering bilingualism as an advantage, Alisan pointed to different situations in which he used learners' mother tongue to solve a problem or clarify a point (particularly in lower-level classes), although it was against the teacher education course he took to speak Persian in English conversation classes:

> *Although it is forbidden in our institute to speak Persian with students in class, and we are asked to run monolingual classes, I sometimes speak in our mother tongue with particularly lower-level students to understand their challenges and help them. Also, sometimes it happens that I explain a point in English to my students twice or even more; but they don't understand it. So, I use their mother tongue to clarify it.* [Alisan, male, experience = 6 years]

Alisan believed that as "*lower-level learners do not have a good command of English*", the only medium through which he can establish a good rapport with them and ask about their challenges is their mother tongue. Besides, sharing the same mother tongue and culture with learners is facilitative in his view as he experienced some situations in which he had to use an example from learners' mother tongue to clarify a complicated and abstract concept that was not tangible for learners in English. Further, he talked about his ability as an NNST to understand learners' produced language and errors arising from the effect of their mother tongue:

> *My students sometimes make wrong sentences in English. I, as a NNST, know that some of these errors occur as students think in Persian and just transfer that structure from their mother tongue to the second language they are learning. By making them aware of these types of errors, I facilitate their process of learning.* [Alisan, male, experience = 6 years]

Knowing that many errors made by learners were due to the effect of their mother tongue, Alisan claimed to facilitate his students' learning process by raising their awareness of these kinds of errors and consequently avoiding the possible fossilization resulting from the negative language transfer. Similarly, Yasaman (female, experience = 1 year) claimed to be able to recognize her students' weak points and challenging language areas and to know where they need more support as she shares the same language with them:

> *I understand their weaknesses and challenges and know where they need more practice. Also, it happens that sometimes the students do not understand a point I explain in English and I need to use their mother tongue to clarify it.* [Yasaman, female, experience = 1 year]

Further, Yasaman maintained that bilingualism even facilitates her teaching process as she sometimes elaborates on complicated contents that are not comprehensible to learners in their mother tongue. On the whole, both novice and experienced participating teachers were cognizant of the merits of bilingualism and its facilitative role in both students' process of learning and their teaching practice.

4.3. Superiority of NNSTs as Previous Language Learners over NSTs

As to their previous learning experience, the targeted participants considered it as an advantage over NSTs: (a) knowing the challenging language areas; (b) understanding students' strengths and weaknesses; (c) knowing the challenges students will encounter in their process of learning; (d) being more aware of the target language rules due to their conscious language learning process compared with NSTs; (e) being more able to teach grammatical structures; (f) using their experience of learning in their classes; (g) transferring their learning strategies and experiences as previous learners to their student; (h) following their previous teachers' methodologies and techniques in their classes (i) following their previous teachers' positive features; (j) not following their previous teachers' negative features; and (k) bridging the gaps their previous teachers had.

Looking closely at the following excerpt will be more revealing in this regard. Nikan (male, experience = 1 year) pointed to a situation in which his experience of learning facilitated his teaching practice:

> *As I learned English, not acquired it unconsciously like NSTs, I'm more aware of the rules of this language compared with NSTs and therefore it's easier for me to teach them.* [Nikan, male, experience = 1 year]

Here, Nikan made a comparison between his status as an NNST who underwent the conscious process of the target language learning and that of NSTs who acquired English unconsciously in the real-life context. Indeed, he considered his position more advantageous as conscious learning helped him know different linguistic rules that might still be hidden from NSTs explicitly and, therefore, be more successful in transferring these points and teaching grammatical structures to his students. For instance, Arghavan (female, experience = 9 years) talked about the influential role of her previous teachers:

> *I've been impressed by my previous teachers. Some of them are my role models and I, as a teacher, try to adopt the positive features they had or practice some of their methodologies that seemed to be practical. On the other side, I try not to follow their negative features. For instance, I had a teacher who used to ignore me in class as I was shy and not talkative. As her behavior was bothering and demotivating, I try to pay equal attention to all my students.* [Arghavan, female, experience = 9 years]

Here, Arghavan maintained that she could remember her teachers' behavior towards them as students and their teaching methodologies. Considering her previous teachers as "*role models*", she strived to follow those features and behavior which were more learner-friendly and made her feel more comfortable as a student in the class and adopt those methodologies which seemed to be more practical and facilitative in their process of language learning. On the other hand, she remembered a bitter memory of one of her teachers who used to ignore her in class as she was introverted and made her demotivated to learn. Thus, she asserted that she makes an effort not to follow her previous teachers' negative features and behavior, which seemed to bother her as a student. In the end, Arghavan pointed out that she also transfers her past experiences of learning to her students:

> *Besides, I try to transfer the strategies that facilitated my learning process and I used to apply as a language learner to my students.* [Arghavan, female, experience = 9 years]

More precisely, Arghavan stated that, as a previous learner, she found some learning strategies more useful and practical, enabling her to make more progress; now, as a teacher, she claimed to teach those strategies to her students to accelerate their process of language learning. In general, NNSTs' learning experiences were revealed to be another significant factor that made all participants think highly of their position as NNSTs and superior to their native speaker counterparts.

4.4. Equality of NNSTs and NSTs Regarding Their Instructional Competence

When asked about their status as NNSTs compared with NSTs regarding their instructional competence, the participants believed in their equality in this regard. Indeed, they considered native speakerism a neutral factor in language teachers' teaching competence. For instance, while rejecting the impact of her status as an NNST (who might have a lower level of language proficiency compared with NSTs) on

her instructional competence, Yasaman (female, experience = 1 year) considered other factors including her years of teaching experience, her power of speech, and her art of knowledge transfer influential in her teaching capability:

> *My competence in teaching depends on my years of teaching experience, my power of speech, and my ability to transfer my knowledge to others. So, the role of my status as a NNST is neutral in my teaching ability. Being an NST or a native-like teacher also won't help if you're not able to transfer what you know to your learners.* [Yasaman, female, experience = 1 year]

Further, Yasaman asserted that even a high level of language proficiency equating to that of NSTs would not enhance her instructional competence if she could not transfer the language contents to learners. Aligning with Yasaman's assertions, Alisan (male, experience = 6 years) considered himself talented in teaching and believed that the art of teaching is inherent in him as he emphasized that "*I was born a teacher*" and, therefore, his high level of instructional competence is more character-based in his view:

> *What seems significant is I was born a teacher. My capability in teaching is more character-based. If I didn't know how to transfer my knowledge to learners but memorized all dictionary entries, I wouldn't be a competent teacher. So, even native speakerism doesn't result in a high level of instructional competence.* [Alisan, male, experience = 6 years]

Further, Alisan rejected native speakerism and mastery of the English language as influential factors in language teachers' instructional competence as he believed that even if he were a walking dictionary, it would not necessarily lead to his high-level teaching competence. To justify his claim, he talked about his experience of attending an NST's class as a previous learner and how enthusiastic he was about being provided with that golden opportunity:

> *In the beginning, I really enjoyed listening to a fluent NST with that nice British accent. However, over time, I started to get frustrated as I wasn't learning anything in his class. In my view, he was not a teacher; he was just a native speaker. His class was really discouraging.* [Alisan, male, experience = 6 years]

However, Alisan's past assumption about idealized NSTs was thoroughly reshaped after having a conversation class with an NST. Contrary to his expectations, he did not learn anything, did not enjoy the class anymore, and consequently got frustrated and discouraged over time.

Overall, all four teachers pointed out that native speakerism does not make a person qualified as a teacher and that it is not a decisive factor in teachers' instructional competence. They believed that linguistic competence and instructional competence are two distinct factors, and the latter does not depend on the former.

5. Discussion

Scrutinizing the nature of NNSTs' identity over two interrelated narrative interview phases resulted in many competing discourses about the very essence of this construct. The findings of the first phase indicated that they were so overwhelmed by the prevailing native speaker idealization in their society that they overlooked the merits of their status as NNSTs. Native speaker idealization suggests that native speakers (NSs) are the owners of the English language (Huang, 2018); therefore, they are ideal and superior (Wernicke, 2020). However, NNSTs whose English is deficient are inferior (Weekly, 2018). In language teaching, the dichotomous view of NSTs Vs. NNSTs has forcibly positioned NNSTs as both pedagogically and linguistically inferior to their NS counterparts (Yang & Forbes, 2025). Here, the participating teachers' utterances mainly centered upon the advantages of being an NST, as they pointed out that NSTs have a higher level of language proficiency and more comprehensive knowledge of the target language and culture, as English is their mother tongue. They also believed that NSTs are familiar with the authentic language as they have grown up in that context. Then, they concluded that NSTs are more legitimate from the perspectives of both employers and learners and are provided with more occupational opportunities and advancements. Indeed, they implied that the status of NSTs is generally higher than their position as NNSTs. Their sense of inferiority partly goes back to the

dominant view in society based on which nativeness is a sign of an ideal language teacher (Floris & Renandya, 2020). The status of NNSTs as legitimate teachers has also been challenged by their stakeholders (i.e., employers, students, and their parents), whose main concern is teachers' language proficiency and native accent (Lee & Kim, 2020; Pérez, 2024). NNSTs' linguistic abilities have been considered not fully-fledged and consequently deficient (Colmenero & Lasagabaster, 2024). As a result, the native speaker myth has even been internalized by many NNSTs who come to believe that native speakerism is an advantage that they lack (Wolff & De Costa, 2017). In general terms, the victims of these discriminatory ideologies (i.e., NNSTs) are also overwhelmed by ideological terminologies in favor of NSTs (Nigar et al., 2024), namely elite NSTs, privileged NSTs, and superior NSTs (Huang, 2018). Therefore, they might feel marginalized, disadvantaged, inferior, and less competent and consequently undervalue their strengths (Floris & Renandya, 2020; Martínez-Prieto & Lindahl, 2020; Yang & Forbes, 2025).

The same result was observed in Huang's (2018) study in which the participating NNSTs believed that the English language does not belong to them and they cannot master English fully. In their view, NSTs whose mother tongue is English and who have a high level of language proficiency and native accent are superior to them and, therefore, more legitimate. This also concurs well with Li (2020), who indicated that the participants highlighted NSTs' high level of language proficiency as a merit and, therefore, tended to achieve a native-like pronunciation, accent, and fluency. Aligning with the findings of this study, in a study by Aoyama (2023), the NNSTs expressed their dissatisfaction with their level of language proficiency, felt anxious, insecure, and even inferior due to their imperfect command of English, and therefore desired to achieve a native-like competence. This sense of inferiority was also experienced by the participants in Wang and Fang's (2020) study as they accentuated NSTs' higher level of accuracy and fluency, better pronunciation, and a good command of English.

However, being native-like or even having native proficiency does not guarantee teachers' competence in teaching. Non-native teacher identity is a multifaceted construct embodying some competing factors (Lee & Kim, 2020), including NNSTs' bilingualism, experience of learning, and instructional competence, which were addressed in the second round of data collection here. Regarding the first dimension, the participants remembered numerous situations in which their mother tongue facilitated both their teaching process and the students' learning process. For instance, they maintained that they could understand learners' produced language and errors arising from the effect of their mother tongue, clarify points by using examples based on learners' language and culture, establish a better rapport with learners due to sharing the same language and culture, and understand learners and their challenges better. As a result of this focused reflection on their past experiences in different classes regarding the role of bilingualism, they came to believe in it as one of the strong points that NSTs lack. Instead of devaluing NNSTs' status as deficient users of English and considering them inferior to their NS counterparts, their status as bilinguals should be appreciated (Akinmulegun & Kunt, 2022). The results of most of the previously conducted studies on the role of bilingualism are consistent with this view, as it has been revealed that in a homogenous classroom ecology in which both students and the teacher share the same first language, teachers can facilitate students' process of learning by utilizing their mother tongue in some cases (Li, 2020) and developing a good rapport with them (Camacho, 2023; Llurda & Calvet-Terré, 2024). More precisely, Yazan and Rudolph (2018) valued NNSTs' first language as a medium through which they can understand their students better and establish a good rapport with them both professionally and personally. Similarly, in a study by Weekly (2018), the NNSTs underscored their bilingualism as a significant factor and claimed to be able to establish a more intimate relationship with learners as they can talk with them about their challenges in their mother tongue. Moreover, the NNSTs in Saba and Frangieh's (2021) study pointed out that they can use their mother tongue to clarify complex linguistic points and to recognize the roots of mistakes made by learners under the influence of the negative language transfer and make students aware of them to avoid the possible fossilization.

As to the second dimension of NNSTs' identity, the participants recalled the merits that their learning experiences brought to them as teachers. For instance, they claimed to know the challenges students will encounter in their learning process and understand students' strengths and weaknesses. Also, they added that they could follow their previous teachers' methodologies and techniques in their classes, use

their learning experience to plan their classes and transfer their learning strategies and experiences as previous learners to their students. Besides, they claimed to be more aware of the target language rules as NNSTs due to their conscious language learning process compared to NSTs. This view substantiates previous findings on the prominent role of NNSTs' learning experience in their professional development (Nauryzbayeva, 2024). For instance, the facilitative role of the NNSTs' prior experience of language learning was accentuated by Egitim (2021), who indicated that as NNSTs undergo the same conscious language learning as their students, they are familiar with the pitfalls of English learning, know students' challenges, and devise better teaching methodologies based on their students' needs. In the same direction, Saba and Frangieh (2021) highlighted the facilitative role of the status of NNSTs as the previous language learner in their students' process of learning as they can share those experiences with learners and plan their classes based on them and their previous teachers' methodologies. Wang and Fang (2020) also indicated that NNSTs are more aware of the learners' challenges and difficulties in the process of language learning and are more able to teach grammatical rules as they undergo conscious language learning.

As to the third dimension, when asked about their status as NNSTs compared to NSTs regarding their instructional competence, the participants believed in their equality because they considered native speakerism as a neutral factor in language teachers' teaching competence. The idea that NSs are better teachers as they are teaching a language that is their mother tongue has been rejected in the existing literature (e.g., Phaethong et al., 2024; Wang & Fang, 2020; Weekly, 2018; Yazan & Rudolph, 2018). It has been found that instructional competence is not a matter of nativeness and is subject to individual variation (Colmenero & Lasagabaster, 2024). The findings of the previous studies mainly corroborate the participants' view in this study that NNSTs have their strong points, which make them competent teachers although they might have a lower level of language proficiency compared with their native-speaker counterparts. Linguistic competence and instructional competence are two distinct factors, and the latter does not depend on the former (Phaethong et al., 2024). Therefore, native speakerism does not qualify a person for teaching, and NNSTs might be even more competent in teaching from different aspects other than their language proficiency (Nauryzbayeva, 2024; Saba & Frangieh, 2021). More precisely, Aoyama (2023) revealed that NNSTs can provide learners with a more proper type of instruction as they are familiar with students' needs, wants, and lacks and, therefore, can address them in their classes. In the same direction, in a study by Martínez-Prieto and Lindahl (2020), the NNSTs emphasized that an NST who has a high level of language proficiency is not necessarily a good teacher as other factors such as having teaching experience, having motivation for teaching, knowing how to write a lesson plan, and being familiar with rubrics are important. Mansouri (2021) also revealed that one of the participants expressed her disapproval of her workplace context in which teachers who are highly proficient in English and native-like are the most welcome. In her view, having a high level of language proficiency does not mean that the person is both pedagogically and professionally competent.

According to the discussion above, the major contribution of this study was that it went beyond the participating NNSTs' immediate representation of the very essence of their identity, cultivated their minds deeply, and went through more tacit levels of their self-perception. Indeed, making them reflect upon other aspects of their non-native identity, which remained hidden in the first phase of data collection, yielded a more profound and comprehensive picture of the formation of their identity. On the whole, although they knew about the merits of being an NNST, they ignored it (the first phase) and mainly talked about how advantaged NSTs are in different contexts, as English is their mother tongue. As long as the belief about their English deficiency dominates other competing discourses about the different aspects of their non-native identity in their mind, NNSTs might be emotionally challenged, feel insecure concerning their competency (Li, 2020), and therefore experience tensions (Yuan, 2018). Therefore, a lack of external support and awareness-raising regarding their strengths might make them disempowered and frustrated and hinder their process of professional development (Llurda, 2018).

To conclude, the current study investigated language teachers' perception of their non-native identity over two interrelated phases. During the first phase of data collection, the participants undermined their strong points under the influence of the prevailing native speaker idealization. They mainly talked about the superiority of NSTs in the context of Iran over NNSTs due to their high level of language proficiency, their native accent, their legitimacy among different stakeholders, and, consequently, their

more opportunities for occupational advancements. However, some competing discourses emerged during the second phase of data collection when they were asked to reflect upon three overlooked aspects of their identity. Indeed, some of their innate beliefs about the merits of being an NNST came from the tacit to conscious level as they pointed to the facilitative role of their bilingualism and past experience of learning in their teaching and the students' learning process. Also, they accentuated their equality with NSTs regarding their instructional competence and considered native speakerism as a neutral factor in language teachers' teaching competence. Although they were cognizant of the advantages of being an NNST, they felt inferior as they were overwhelmed by the dominant view of the native speaker myth. This sense of inferiority might diminish their self-confidence and their sense of being a competent teacher, leading to teacher burnout in severe cases. Therefore, avoiding these undesirable consequences and facilitating NNSTs' process of professional growth necessitate an endeavor to tackle native speaker idealization and to value NNSTs' potential.

There are implications for three groups. The first implication is for teacher educators who should have a leading role in changing NNSTs' perspectives towards the NST-NNST dichotomy. Indeed, they should raise NNSTs' awareness of the very nature of their non-native identity, provide them with a more comprehensive image of their status as a NNST, and accentuate their strong points to prevent them from falling into the trap of the native speaker myth and experiencing a sense of inferiority. The second implication is for institutional administrators, who are suggested to run in-service teacher education courses to provide NNSTs with the opportunity for reflection upon their professional roles against those of NSTs, to help them develop a better self-perception and become cognizant of both their weaknesses and strengths, and to enhance their sense of confidence and empowerment to seek continuous professional development. Finally, NNSTs should know that language proficiency and instructional competence are two distinct factors, and neither is dependent on the other. Therefore, rather than feeling disempowered, incompetent, or inferior due to their lower level of language proficiency, which is not a decisive factor in being a good teacher, they need to adopt a more balanced view of native speakerism, be cognizant of their strong points, and continue their path of professional development.

There are also some suggestions for further studies. First, future studies can work on the collaboration of both NSTs and NNSTs to reach a more comprehensive image of the phenomenon under study. They can also explore NNSTs' tensions in their path of identity development and how they deal with it. It is also suggested to explore how stakeholders at different societal levels can mitigate the influence of the prevailing native speaker idealization and enhance the value of NNSTs.

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