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## **What, How and Why? A Multi-Dimensional Case Analysis of the Challenges Facing Native and Non-Native EFL Teachers**

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### **Abstract**

On a multifaceted basis, this paper explores the challenges experienced by native and non-native English language teachers (NESTs and NNESTs) in a tertiary-level EFL setting in Turkey. Adopting a qualitative case study design, the data were gathered from five NESTs through interviews and from five NNESTs through hand-written accounts based on the template for challenges in ELT (TCELT), and analysed through deductive thematic analysis. The findings showed that the NESTs and NNESTs perceive similar as well as different challenges in the language preparatory program where they are co-teaching. Student-related and institutional parameters accounted for the NNESTs' problems, whereas on the part of the NESTs, teacher-related and cross-cultural factors accompanied these parameters. The findings were furthered by the teachers' elaborations on the causes and pedagogical consequences of the challenges, and their strategies for coping with them. In light of the teachers' accounts, the paper concludes by offering several suggestions for the

elimination of the perceived challenges in an attempt to improve the effectiveness of the program.

**Keywords:** native and non-native English teachers, English language teaching, cross-cultural challenges, deductive analysis

## Introduction

In the English language teaching (ELT) profession, the position of English language teachers with specific regard to their native-nonnative status has been addressed for several decades now. While earlier arguments tended to position native and non-native English-speaking teachers (NESTs and NNESTs) based on their linguistic proficiency (Medgyes, 2001), expertise (Canagarajah, 1999) and credibility issues (Maum, 2002), later stances had a shift toward favoring the cooperation and mutual sharing between both teacher groups thanks to their differential strengths and weaknesses, portraying a contemporary reconceptualization from *either-or* to *both-and* approach (Matsuda & Matsuda, 2001). Recent research endeavors, therefore, rather than make NESTs and NNESTs the controversial subject of theoretical arguments (e.g. Chomsky's linguistic theory), and *who is worth more* (Medgyes, 1992) debates, have been grounded mainly on revealing pedagogical differences between these teacher groups. These include, for example, differences in their teaching behaviour (Árva & Medgyes, 2000), scaffolding techniques (Díaz, 2009), corrective feedback practices (Yang, 2010; Demir, 2016), other interactional patterns (Yi & Jian, 2009; İnan, 2012) and discourse styles (Reynolds-Case, 2009). As a matter of course, in addition to pedagogical differences, some of the studies (e.g. Medgyes, 1994; Reves & Medgyes, 1994) further distinguished between NESTs' and NNESTs' inherent advantages, such as superior English proficiency of the former, and sharing learners' L1 for the latter. While the investigation of such inherent advantages and their effects on pedagogy is a useful research practice, equally important to uncover is if and how this inherence (i.e. native-nonnative status) and its sociocultural outcomes brought to the learning environment by NESTs and NNESTs serve to understand the difficulties facing them in the context they are teaching. The present study rests on

the assumption that NESTs and NNESTs may differ in terms of the challenges they perceive to encounter in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts owing to their distinct cultural and pedagogical backgrounds, and the resultant parameters such as variations in established conventions of learning and teaching, hierarchical structures of institutions and pedagogical expectations. Student-, teacher- and institution-bound factors help to gain deeper insights into the understanding of the challenges confronting teachers when coupled with these background influences. With such a perspective, this study seeks to analyze in a multi-pronged manner the challenges faced by the NESTs and Turkish NNESTs teaching tertiary-level English in a Turkish EFL setting.

### **An Overview of the Challenges Concerning the Teaching of EFL: NESTs and NNESTs**

It has now become commonplace to see a lot of employed NESTs working in EFL contexts in cooperation with their local colleagues. Like many other countries where English is spoken as a foreign language, as the context of the present study, Turkey has also welcomed a significant number of NESTs over the years (Üstünlüoğlu, 2007), especially in the body of private universities, schools and language courses to co-teach with their local partners. While this employment practice can be viewed as a worthwhile investment to take advantage of the strengths and make up for the weaknesses of the both, such a context potentially accommodates two different sets of challenges pertaining to diverse cultures, affecting and affected by the teaching context in a reciprocal manner.

To begin with NESTs teaching EFL, based on the relevant literature, Rao and Yuan (2016) identified three major types of problems regarding them: insensitivity to students' linguistic problems, conflicts in teaching and learning styles, and unfamiliarity with local cultural and educational system. In their view, insensitivity to learners' linguistic problems is caused by two factors: NESTs' lack of experience of learning English as a second or foreign language, and their ignorance of the students' L1. This lack of experience, naturally, makes it difficult for NESTs to predict their learners' potential linguistic problems and difficulties. In addition, NESTs' ignorance of learners' L1 might dispel

the advantageous cases when the use of mother tongue could be conducive to L2 development as an essential tool (Cook, 2001). Another tension in NESTs' teaching, i.e. conflicts in teaching and learning styles, is the corollary of their notably different cultural background from the local context. And what is more, NESTs' unfamiliarity with the local cultural and educational context may lead to a number of mismatches in terms of pedagogical expectations and behavioral patterns within the classroom and institution. In Ma's (2012) study, the local NNEST colleagues reported that the NESTs' lack of local cultural background and knowledge of education system are likely to cause problems such as their unawareness of students' likes and dislikes, difficulties and misunderstandings in the development of close relationships with their students, students' discomfort in talking to NESTs, as well as the problems with maintaining classroom discipline. These inherent weaknesses of NESTs might be the strengths of their non-native counterparts by default. However, considering the boundaries of the present study, NESTs and NNESTs are described throughout with a special reference to the challenges they are surrounded by rather than the virtues available with them.

As addressed above, challenges encircling EFL NESTs are largely germane to cross-cultural measures and variations. Nevertheless, this should not leave aside student- and context-bound problems in addition to NESTs' potential weaknesses in pedagogy. As regards their non-native counterparts, challenges in teaching EFL seem to be shaped and therefore discussed mainly around pedagogy, with particular emphasis on the difficulties in implementing communicative language teaching (CLT). The past few decades have witnessed the dominance of communicative methodology in the teaching of English all over the world. The pedagogical transformation over time from the mere application or amalgamation of guru-led language teaching methods to teaching the use of English for communicative purposes as demanded by CLT has required NNESTs to have high linguistic command and well-respected proficiency in English. For NNESTs, target language proficiency is central to their professional confidence (Murdoch, 1994) and development (Richards, 2017), and the lack of this proficiency may be one of the reasons for their reluctance to implement the communicative approach (Amengual-Pizarro, 2007). However, NNESTs'

perceived lack of English proficiency is not the only barrier to the smooth implementation of CLT in EFL settings. Several other problems have also been reported by the NNESTs. To mention but a few, Li (1998) investigated South Korean NNESTs' perceived difficulties in implementing CLT. In addition to difficulties stemming from their own dynamics, they also reported student-linked problems. These included students' low level of motivation and English proficiency, and their resistance to class participation alongside the contextual problems including large classes, grammar-based examinations, insufficient support and funding. Not the least important of the Korean NNESTs' complaints was CLT's inadequate account of EFL teaching. Having been conducted in the same context as in the present study, Özşevik (2010) explored Turkish EFL teachers' perceived difficulties in implementing CLT, reporting teacher-, student-, CLT-related and systemic problems. The Turkish NNESTs also stated lack of quality input and input-rich environments as a barrier to implementing CLT.

Hitherto, the available research on the challenges regarding teaching EFL, to a significant extent, has attended to NESTs and NNESTs discriminately. These studies reported challenges encompassing either NESTs or NNESTs in their own specific contexts, precluding a contrastive and cross-cultural portrayal of the reflections from these co-teaching groups together. With this gap in mind, the present study seeks to explore the difficulties experienced by the NESTs and NNESTs co-teaching in the English preparatory school of a state university in Turkey. To this end, the following research question was developed: What are the multi-pronged challenges experienced by the NESTs and NNESTs teaching in a tertiary-level EFL setting in Turkey?

## Method

With its specific concern and contextual particularity, the present study serves as an *intrinsic case* in itself which is usually unrepresentative of other cases or a broader trait for investigation (Tavakoli, 2012). If not necessarily representative, "the case study approach to research is most usefully defined as an intensive study of a single unit or a small number of units, for the purpose of understanding a larger class of similar units" (Gerring, 2006, p. 37). Therefore, this study has adopted a qualitative case study design in its

bid to explore the challenges facing a cohort of NESTs and NNESTs in a tertiary-level Turkish EFL context. Qualitative case study allows for collecting interviewees' special stories, unique experiences and descriptions of an episode or linkage (Stake, 1995).

### ***Context of the study and participants***

The context of the present study is the language preparatory program of a higher education institution in Turkey. The program provides one-year-long English course for tertiary-level students before they proceed to their departments where English is the medium of instruction in certain subjects. Within the body of a recently founded institution, the preparatory program employs a dozen of Turkish NNESTs. Considering the large number of students totaling around 400 to 450 and constantly increasing, this teacher population is often considered inadequate by the teachers themselves and the administrative staff. Therefore, in order to reinforce the program with more teachers as well as to gain pedagogical benefits from their nativeness, the presidency of the university and the program paved the way for the contractual employment of a number of American NESTs in the body of the Fulbright U.S. Student Program for three successive academic years between 2013 and 2016. The Fulbright program offers fellowships for graduate students and college seniors to study, carry out research and teach English abroad. When the NESTs attended the English preparatory program in the present research context, they co-taught with their local Turkish partners, sharing responsibility by teaching the same classes. Given their native English speaker status, the NESTs were mainly assigned to speaking/listening classes in addition to integrated courses.

The participants included five NESTs and five NNESTs. In this study, these teachers were defined based on the operational principles that native speaker is someone "for whom a particular language is a first language having been acquired naturally during childhood... about which a speaker will have the most reliable intuitions" (Crystal, 2003, p. 308), while non-native speakers are those "who at one point of their life, in addition to speaking a first language, have (consciously) learned an academically accepted form" (Moussu, 2006, p. 10) as a second or foreign language. The number of NESTs who attended the preparatory

program in 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 academic years was two and three, respectively. They all participated in the study along with five Turkish NNESTs who were purposefully chosen from among a dozen based on their availability and openness to provide rich data. While the NESTs were graduates of non-TESOL departments such as international relations, philosophy, sociology, the NNESTs were all ELT graduates. The NESTs were a young inexperienced cohort, aged 23 on average. On the other hand, The NNEST participants had an average teaching experience of nine years, and they were aged between 26 to 40. Pseudonyms were used for representing the NESTs and NNESTs throughout data reporting to ensure anonymity.

### ***Data collection: instrument and procedure***

The data for this study were collected through the template for challenges in ELT (TCELTE) constructed by the researcher. The TCELTE developed out of a thorough scrutiny of the related literature with specific regard to the challenges, difficulties and problems encountered in the teaching of English. As a result of intensive reading sessions and concurrent note-taking practices, the TCELTE came up with a repertoire of potential challenges. This tentative form of the TCELTE was then made subject to the reviews of a field expert in addition to two other NNESTs teaching in the same program as the research participants. This was because their contextual familiarity could help better diagnose and enrich the repertoire of the potential challenges. Following the discussions and suggestions received, new challenges were added in the TCELTE. The final version proposes 25 challenges in total, classified under three main categories: student-related, teacher-related and institutional challenges. Embracing the considerations of both the related literature and the research context, the TCELTE included challenges such as learners' lack of motivation and autonomy, unwillingness to speak English, frequent use of L1 (student-related); teachers' potential burnout, lack of teaching experience, classroom management skills, pedagogical knowledge (teacher-related); big class sizes, curricular problems, heavy workload (institutional) and so on. As the teaching of any discipline could accommodate immense challenges, sometimes in an unpredictable and idiosyncratic manner, apart from the challenges suggested, the TCELTE also included a part asking about



the presence of other challenges, their causes and how the participant teachers cope with them. Moreover, in order to serve as an exemplar and follow-up to the teachers' stated challenges chosen from the template, the TCELT concluded with a prompt asking the participant teachers to state a specific problem they remember having experienced in their classes, and the strategies/solutions they put into practice in reaction to it.

Data collection procedure through the TCELT, at the first step, required the participant teachers to tick off the challenges in the template facing them, and then to think deeply about and to elaborate on the details including the perceived causes and consequences of the challenges specified, and their strategies for coping with them. Having received their consent to participate in this study, firstly, the TCELT was emailed to the NESTs so that they could take their time to determine and think over the proposed challenge areas. Then, based on their availability, either the following day or week, they were interviewed face to face both individually and in small groups. The time the interviews were held with the NESTs during 2015-2016 spring semester, two of them had been teaching in Turkey for one and a half years, while the other three had been teaching for only half a year. While the NESTs' previously-chosen challenges and contemplated explanations dominated the interviews, the researcher did not think twice to insert additional questions to further and enlighten their comments. The same procedure was applied to the NNESTs, with the exception that they delivered hand-written accounts at their earliest convenience instead of interviewing, due to time constraints resulting from their postgraduate endeavors and heavier schedule in comparison to the NESTs. The NNESTs were therefore particularly requested to work through the chosen challenges in detail and provide thorough written accounts with a view to making up for the failure to interview them.

Table 1: A set of sample data extracted from the subchallenges under the related categories

| <b>Category</b> | <b>Subchallenge</b>                              | <b>Sample data</b>  |
|-----------------|--|---|
| Student-related | My students fall short in learning autonomously. | Some of them try to work in pairs even in writing or speaking activities. They don't have enough vocabulary or can't activate their schemata. Self-confidence is also a big reason in adult groups.   |
| Teacher-related | I often have difficulty managing the class.      | It is very common for me to reprimand a student, or even yell at a group of students for talking, and the second, they finish apologizing, they begin talking again. I have tried a number of things to get them to effectively stop talking, including seating rearrangements, extra homework assignments, and kicking them out of class. But nothing has really worked. |
| Institutional   | The classes are overcrowded.                     | I believe that language classes need to be composed of at most 20 students. Most of the time we have 25 or more students in our classes. In order to use the language communicatively, the number of students in classrooms should be lowered.  |

### **Data analysis**

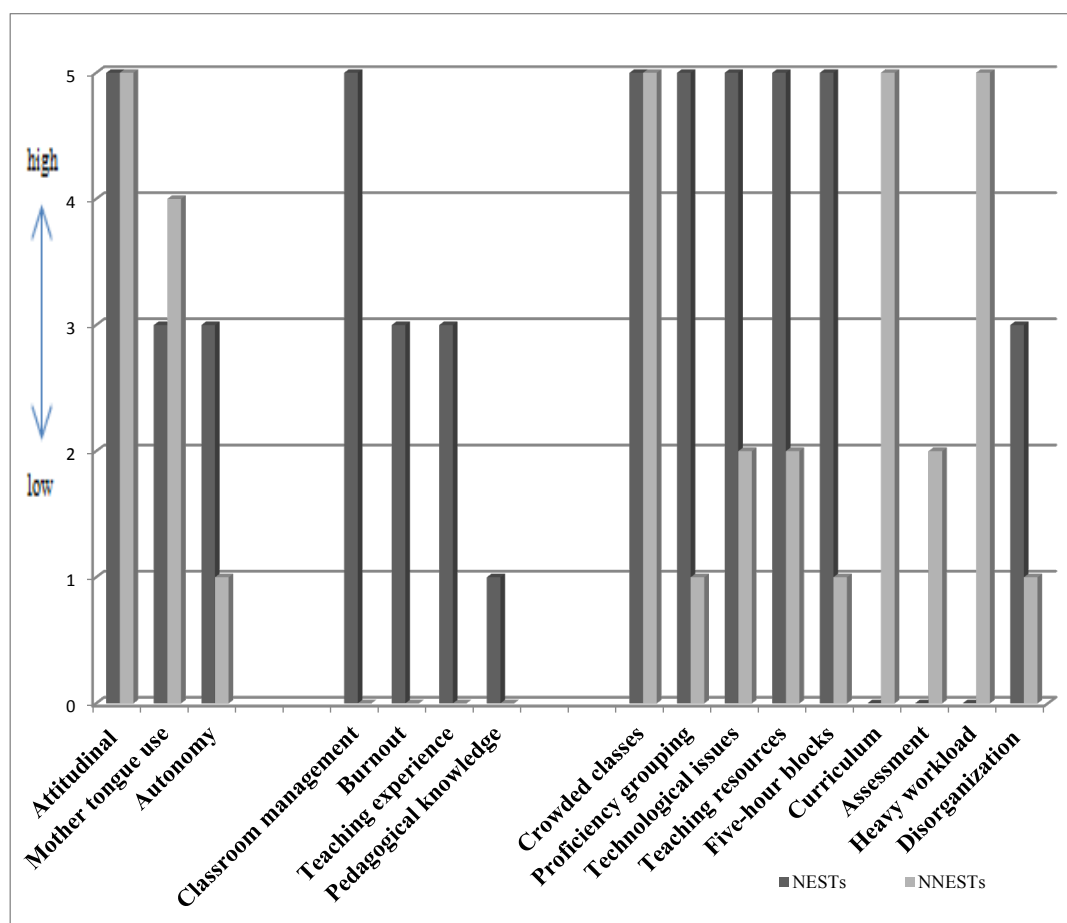
The interview data obtained from the NESTs were transcribed verbatim. Then, these transcriptions were juxtaposed with the NNESTs' written accounts. These two sets of data were analyzed together through deductive thematic analysis, a theory-driven approach. Deductive thematic analysis is led by the researcher's specific thematic interest and aimed at analyzing a specific area of the data (Halland, 2007) rather than drawing a large portrait of the data overall (Braun & Clarke, 2006). "A deductive approach to thematic analysis utilizes some form of template, usually derived from the relevant literature, in order to code the data and derive themes from it" (Willig, 2013, p. 185). Since the data collection template for this study (TCELT) already specified three main categories (student-related, teacher-related, institutional challenges) and their subchallenges extracted from the literature, what was left to do was to go through the data to find the prominent instances and their detailed accounts related with the categories. The data set was read against the condensed literature embedded in the TCELT and the researcher's own professional and personal knowledge as an ELT researcher-practitioner, making the process a deductive one. Following the classification, organization and analysis of the data in accordance with the categories, to ensure *trustworthiness* (Guba & Lincoln, 1981), the initial report was member checked with two teachers from each NEST/NNEST group, which resulted in their confirmation of the researcher's interpretation of the data.

### **Findings**

The findings are reported below in accordance with the predetermined challenge areas available in the TCELT. The analyses revealed that these problem areas are often intertwined and interdependent by nature, maintaining an interactive relation between/among themselves. Figure 1 demonstrates the level of three challenge categories as perceived and attended by the NESTs and NNESTs based on their numeral agreement on the challenges, frequency of their accounts and their preferred emphasis on the challenges specified in the TCELT. Regarding the three challenge categories available in the TCELT, the NESTs and NNESTs held different as well as similar notions. In addition, they explained the

causes, potential sources and consequences of these challenges, and suggested several solutions to cope with them.

Figure 1: Level of student-related, teacher-related and institutional challenges respectively, as perceived by the NESTs and NNESTs



### ***Student-related challenges***

#### ***• Attitudinal problems***

In the reporting of this part, some of the subchallenges under student-related challenges were merged as attitudinal problems. To begin with, the NESTs widely passed remarks on the propositions that their learners did not show enough interest and motivation toward English lessons. They gave the following accounts of why their learners are not eager to engage in the lessons and tend to show disruptive behaviour. In the first place, one NEST remarked that his learners were

uninterested in English simply because they are uninterested in all things that are not in Turkish. Another NEST attributed lack of learner interest in English to the coursebooks used, thinking that they include irrelevant components and activities for learners. It was furthered by another NEST that mere resort to coursebooks during the instruction becomes boring for both the teacher and students, a barrier to keeping the students motivated for having an interactive or exciting lesson. Hence, she suggested the use of several engaging activities such as competitive games to jazz up the lessons. In the eyes of the NESTs, however, the biggest barrier to the students' motivation and active engagement derives from five-hour long classes in a row (with ten-minute breaks, though) in the present teaching context. Without any exceptions, all the NESTs believe that such a schedule is too exhaustive and unmotivating, and therefore, it is unfair and unrealistic to expect the students to actively participate in a five-hour long mandatory class. As two of the NESTs noted: *"While they[students] are getting credit for five hours on paper, they are actually only learning for about half that time"* (Byron) because *"staying focused five hours in a row cannot be possible. Moreover, if it is a five-hour block with a native speaker, this can get really frustrating for them"* (Gloria). What is more, a negative consequence of such a course schedule in terms of learner misbehavior, as Sheila mentioned, is that *"the students become easily bored and start to be taken up with their smartphones"*. To these ends, the NESTs suggest that the class hours per day need to be reduced so that both the teachers and students could be more energetic and enthusiastic for the lessons.

The NESTs took the motivation problem further, holding it liable for several other student-related problems including school absenteeism, lack of involvement in tasks, and unwillingness to speak. Moreover, one of the NESTs makes a cross-cultural comparison of school attendance and student misbehaviour as follows:

*In the classroom, students are much more willing to vocalize how bored they are or how much they want to break. I am not used to that in America... In Turkey, when students miss so many classes, this does not lead to any serious results. However, in my country, you miss three classes and you are done... (Gloria).*

In addition, the NESTs gave some other reasons for the students' lack of active involvement in classroom activities that include their shyness to speak with the teacher and in front of other students, some teachers' being too critical of the students' accents leading them to lose confidence and therefore to reject to participate.

Just like their native counterparts, the NNESTs also highlighted their students' negative attitudes toward English lessons, including lack of interest and motivation, unwillingness to get involved in classroom activities, and engagement with irrelevant occupations. The NNESTs, however, rested on relatively different grounds and motives in comparison to the NESTs to account for the students' attitudinal problems. The NNESTs, first and foremost, distinguished between the students in compulsory and voluntary classes. Uninformed of each other's written accounts, the NNESTs pointed out in agreement that the students in compulsory classes are obviously more motivated, and therefore more interested than those in voluntary classes for fear that the former group would have to repeat the preparatory class if they failed at the end of the year. In addition, two of the NNESTs lamented that the students' previous experiences of learning English, especially if governed by grammar-based instruction, has the potential to negatively influence their epistemological beliefs and future L2 learning practices. In this respect, Ayten made the following remark:

*Some students bring learning barriers into the classroom from their previous learning experiences. So, they believe English is difficult to learn. According to them, for years they have been learning the same grammar subjects and although this is the situation, they aren't able to speak fluently; thus, learning English is a waste of time.*

Another NNEST states that their students' earlier habits and experiences of grammar-based instruction also lead them to show lower degrees of participation for communicatively-oriented activities. To account for their students' lack of active involvement and unwillingness to participate in tasks and activities, the NNESTs specified some other factors which include self-perceived low proficiency, lack of self-confidence, speaking anxiety, and such personality traits as shyness. In the face of these shortcomings, one of the NNESTs mentioned that she

is trying hard to convince her students that mistakes may occur, in an effort to remove psychological barriers to her students' active involvement.

Another point that the NNESTs laid strong emphasis on was their students' engagement with off-topic activities. The students were repeatedly reported to read non-English novels and play with their smartphones during the lessons. For Suna, this was because the students were coming to school just for fun. For Nükhet, the students engaging in irrelevant activities were especially those who cannot keep up with other students in the class since they cannot understand what is going on. Therefore, she claims, these students do not put much effort in learning English, and then they opt to waste time over irrelevant activities.

- ***Mother Tongue Use***

In addition to the attitudinal problems detailed above, the NESTs commented on the proposed challenge *"my students use their L1 very often during the lessons"*. One of the NESTs stated that this situation was very frustrating for him especially at the beginning of the term. He noted that this was because he absolutely had no grasp and foundation of the Turkish language, thereby leading only to interruptions and disruptions during the lessons. However, the NESTs did not necessarily consider the students' L1 use a problem. They also mentioned its benefits, viewing the use of native language as a tool through which students can improve their own and peers' English. Byron had the following to say: *"Now I allow students some time to speak Turkish to explain the topic for their peers. I recognized that students' use of their first language for some reasons is important"*. Further support to this point was lent by Sheila in a different interview session:

*They[students] couldn't just ask the question in Turkish and they had to find other ways of understanding what we are saying. When some students understand the topic, they can explain it to the others who don't understand. I find that is more helpful when you allow them sometimes to use their native language to learn a foreign language instead of completely shutting it down.*

As these notions make clear, the NESTs do not hold a completely exclusionist view of students' L1 use, but instead, they attribute some benefits to the occasional use of native language. Regarding the reasons why their students use L1 in the class, one of the NESTs linked it to their past habits of learning English and to the education system. She emphasized that their students have learnt English through speaking Turkish thus far, and that it was the first time they were learning English through English without having the teacher explain in Turkish. As a native English-speaking teacher learning Turkish at the same time, Sheila explained the systemic problem with an example: *"We are taking Turkish class right now and our Turkish teachers don't let us use any English. Sometimes it is really difficult to understand since we can't ask any questions in English"*. On the one hand, Sheila admits, this situation helps her empathize with her students. On the other hand, it portrays the sharp pedagogical contrast she has experienced concurrently as an L2 teacher and student within the frontiers of the Turkish education system.

While the NESTs held a two-sided view toward their students' L1 use, the NNESTs were often in a position that disapproves of the students' L1 use in the class. These teachers complained that even if they teach and talk in English, most of the time their students prefer to speak and ask questions in Turkish. One of the NNESTs, Suna, attributed the students' frequent mother tongue use to their unwillingness to speak English. In the excerpt below, she reported having employed an innovative material that helped her delicately arrange the shifts between L1 and L2 use depending on the activity.

*In my first year of teaching, my students were always using L1 in the class. In order to put an end to this problem, I prepared a sign as a traffic light and told my students that red meant L1 wasn't allowed, yellow meant they could use very limited L1 and mostly English, green meant L1 was allowed. According to the activity type, I changed the color. This was very useful since I realised that at the end of the year most of the students could speak English very fluently.*



- **Lack of Autonomy**

The NESTs also underscored their students' failure to take charge of their own learning. While one of the NESTs complained that his learners have not been taught before how to effectively study a language and study rigorously on their own, another NEST made the following comparison between her home culture and the host culture in terms of autonomous learner behavior:

*Comparing to American culture, students are a little bit more dependent on teachers [here]. For example, some students still keep asking me the same questions which I have already answered. Sometimes everything they need is written in their worksheets but they still ask the same questions. American students are more different in this respect. They try to be more independent and figure out if it is correct or not, but here students don't start an assignment until they are one hundred percent clear, which is a little bit different" (Gloria).*

On the other hand, the NNESTs did not dwell much on their students' lack of autonomous skills. Only one NNEST, Cigdem, marked this problem: *"Some of them try to work in pairs even in writing and speaking activities. They don't have enough vocabulary or can't activate their schemata".*

### **Teacher-related Challenges**

Among the teacher-related challenges suggested in the TCELT, the NNESTs did not specify any of them. Nor did they mention a challenge of this type in the other challenge-provoking parts of the TCELT. The data for this part, therefore, comes exclusively from the NESTs' reflections as the novice and guest teachers to the research context.

- **Classroom Management**

The proposition *"I have difficulty managing the class"* was overemphasized by the NESTs, rising as the most speculated teacher-related challenge they have stated facing. These teachers mentioned that they have dealt with several discipline problems and disruptive

tendencies during the instruction. Getting to the root of the problem, one of the NESTs stated that his young age affects the classroom dynamics, and thus, his students sometimes see him as a peer. In addition, these teachers admitted that their position as a new teacher who does not speak the native language of the students often leads their students not to take them seriously. In reaction to discipline problems, the NESTs mentioned having implemented a number of coping strategies, but to no avail, which included reprimanding, yelling, seating rearrangements, extra homework assignments, kicking the students out of class, asking them to leave the class for one hour, taking away attendance credit. The NESTs' elaborations on these problems were often concluded by *but nothing has really worked* despair. As an example, from a cross-cultural perspective, Byron made the following utterance:

*After reprimanding them for talking, they usually continue talking right in front of me, within seconds of sincerely apologizing... The biggest problem with my students is that they don't register scolding or discipline. Whereas in the US, openly reprimanding a student for being disrespectful might make that student ashamed, it is very common [here] to condemn or punish a student for talking, and he will simply respond telling me that I look handsome today, and look at me expectantly as if that comment is supposed to get him out of trouble.*

- ***Teacher Burnout, lack of teaching experience and pedagogical knowledge***

Apart from the difficulties in managing the class, some of the NESTs marked that they also suffer from burnout, in addition to lack of professional experience and pedagogical knowledge. One of the NESTs viewed lack of teaching practice as a matter concerning the very beginning of the school year which he came through after one semester of classroom experience. With regard to burnout, interestingly, despite the fact that they are at the very beginning of their teaching career, three of the NESTs lamented that they suffer from this problem. It seems to be the case that this situation is a fresh result of the present contextual conditions rather than their general mood. This is because

their comments point to the present factors outside of their control rather than negative long-continued teaching experiences. To exemplify, one of the NESTs spoke as follows:

*Because most of my students show disinterest in learning English, it is easy for that disinterest to transfer to my teaching. Additionally, having to teach five-hour class sessions is quite exhausting and it is an unfair expectation for the students to have to focus on a mandatory subject for that many hours. This semester, I will try to incorporate more non-book related activities in my classrooms. (Matt)*

### ***Institutional challenges***

- ***Big class size and lack of proficiency grouping***

In the present research context, the most agreed institutional challenge by the NESTs and NNESTs was the fact that the classes they have taught are too crowded to conduct an effective language teaching. As the host teachers, the NNESTs described an ideal English class as consisting of 14-16 students, which should be 20 at most. However, in reality, as they noted, they have 25 to 35 students in their classes. First and foremost, the NNESTs viewed big class size as a barrier to performing communicative activities, tasks, games and any kind of effort to promote productive skills. They stressed the need to lower the number of students in each class so that the teachers can allocate enough time for each student to allow for more speaking practice and language use. Secondly, they mentioned that big class size is also a problem for guiding, controlling and managing classes effectively. Furthermore, as one of the NNESTs stated, class size problem prevents both teachers and students from having a nice physical atmosphere and learning environment. As for the NESTs, they also widely considered big class size a real challenge for effective teaching, especially when it is coupled with the students with drastically different proficiency levels in the same class. As Matt uttered:

*With 25 students of different English proficiency levels, I spend a lot of time focusing on the students with lower proficiencies, which is unfair for my more interested and*

*advanced students... I have students that still struggle to say their name and where they are from, but also I have students who can fluently discuss politics with me in the same class. This is probably the most frustrating aspect of my job. I am unable to create a lesson plan that properly addresses the fundamental needs of my low-proficiency students which also addresses the advanced material to keep my high-proficiency students motivated to learn English.*

In the eyes of the NESTs, lack of proficiency grouping system was a dominant challenge facing them in the class. The NESTs gave many other Fulbright institutions as an example where proficiency grouping is applied based on the conception that it has proved to be more beneficial for language teaching. The NESTs' wide concern for the lack of such a system in the present program is shared only by one of the NNESTs who gave the following example: “- We put them into the same basket and expect them to show the same success” (Ayten).

### ***Issues regarding technological support and teaching resources***

All the NESTs agreed upon the proposition that *technological equipment is inadequate in the classes*. Matt explained the lack of technical assistance as follows: “- I was never once shown how to operate the projector equipment in my classes. Other Fulbright institutions have computers and projectors already installed in their classrooms. Perhaps, this can be done here”. Yet, this does not seem to point to the lack of technological equipment necessarily, but rather, it could be about technical problems with the available equipment in the classrooms. As Sheila noted:

*Some of the projectors don't work properly. This is problematic because there are additional materials that I would like to show the students but I cannot because the equipment does not work. Just taking inventory and having maintenance fix these issues would make a big difference.*

However, the NESTs did not only complain about lack of technical support. They also underlined the need for computer-generated teaching resources, revealing at the same time the need for more teaching resources aside from the coursebook. As Byron voiced: *"They[students] are only provided with textbooks and the English language TV shows that are popular in Turkey. Some type of interactive English language games, even if it is just a vocabulary game, on a computer would be highly effective"*. This idea was furthered by two other NESTs who mentioned that the coursebooks they are using are inadequate and irrelevant to their students' experiences and interests, and that their students have no other additional learning resources besides the coursebook and classroom instruction. Therefore, one of them suggested some integration of technology and speaking clubs to make learning English more fun and interactive. Regarding the NNESTs, two of them marked the related proposition, commenting that their students are not provided with language laboratories, interactive and technological resources which also include authentic videos to exemplify real life communication.

### ***Five-hour Blocks***

Also mentioned under student- and teacher-related challenges, five-hour English classes in a row every day shows up as an institutional factor that negatively influences both the students and teachers. All the NESTs, unexceptionally, underscored this as a case that leads to serious problems regarding motivation, focusing, energy and enthusiasm on the part of both the teachers and their students. As Sheila puts it:

*The preparation program has five hours a day. I understand that that is mandated by law. You have to do 25 hours in a week, but I believe after a few hours it turns out to be counterproductive. The students get tired. During the last two hours they aren't learning anything. This is just a waste of their time and our time. As teachers, sometimes we forget how it feels being a student. I think rather than five hours, if we had two hours with completely paying attention, they would remember those two hours better than five hours. The*

*more hours you teach students, the more they learn is not the case. Quality is over the quantity.*

Contrary to the NESTs, the NNESTs did not seem to problematize five-hour long course sessions. Only one NNEST talked over this point, saying that the problem was having five hours with the same teacher which could be boring for the students. Therefore, she suggested that it could be 3+2 or 3 hours per day, with two different teachers every day to relieve the monotony of instruction.

### ***Problems regarding curriculum and assessment procedures***

It was only the NNESTs who addressed these subchallenges. All the NNESTs, individually, underlined the case that the English preparatory curriculum and the course schedule fall short in covering productive skills such as writing and speaking enough. Two of the NNESTs specifically stressed that in the curriculum, emphasis is put more on grammar than communicative aspects. This was furthered by another NNEST who mentioned that five class hours of speaking a week is not sufficient for necessary language practice. This being the case, they claim, *“the students can neither write nor speak in English”* (Suna) and *“- when they begin to have education in their own departments, they can’t use the language they learnt effectively”* (Ayten). In addition, two other NNESTs emphasized the negative effects of the overloaded curriculum on the students and teachers. While one of them argued that the students get bored easily when the overloaded curriculum is coupled with the use of the same coursebook, the other stated that strong emphasis and dependence on textbook-based curriculum prevents teachers from engaging students in extra communicative activities. As a solution, another NNEST suggested that the curriculum should be revised and renewed according to the needs of the students, earlier experiences of the teachers, and today’s expectations.

Regarding testing and assessment issues, two of the NNESTs expressed their concerns. Çiğdem, for instance, emphasized the dark side of momentary speaking assessment as follows:

*Students should not be evaluated within five minutes. The evaluation of speaking skills should be valued more than only one chance. I think it is a process. Some of*

*them don't understand or misunderstand the topic or really ill or excited and can't talk.*

Nukhet mentioned this point by calling attention to the discrepancy between teaching and testing:

*The books look communicatively-oriented but some testing criteria aren't in line with the communicative approach. For testing, for example, there may be more opportunities for students to see their performance in speaking skills or to have more practice with the speaking and communicative skills.*

- **Heavy workload**

The NESTs did not deliberate on this issue at all due to the fact that their contract specified the maximum number of course hours they were expected to instruct, which was not too much to conduct for them. But rather, this challenge was seen to be specific to the NNESTs. All the NNESTs viewed heavy workload as a factor influencing them negatively in a number of ways. As a case in point, one NNEST lamented that they have to teach at least 25 hours a week, which she describes as a tiring schedule and real burden serving as a barrier to showing good teaching performance toward the end of the week. Two other NNESTs complained that overworking this way leads them not to allow enough time for the preparation of the lessons and course materials. As a remedy, they recommended increasing the number of teachers in the program so that this would comfort them with fewer course hours, paving the way for a more flexible and therefore a more manageable and fruitful teaching environment.

***Lack of organization, communication and collaboration within the institution***

As different from the abovementioned institutional challenges, the participant teachers' insights toward the collaboration and communication within the program emerged when they were asked to contribute challenges other than those proposed in the TCELT. The NESTs called attention to disorganization and poor communication

within the institution and among the teachers and administrators. As Kathleen stated:

*One challenge that I worry about, disorganization within the department, university and miscommunication between the teachers. That is not necessarily a problem with the students, but it has an effect on the learning environment. Confusion about dates, time, things like that.*

Another NEST also mentioned the confusion regarding scheduling, examination and teacher expectations, adding that during the first few months, he did not feel like a valued guest of the department and it took him months to meet his co-teaching partners, which was not a very welcoming feeling for him. With a view to promoting collaboration and communication within the program, he suggested that monthly meetings should be organized to allow for any questions to be asked and to foster a stronger team environment in the department. The issue of miscommunication within the program was lent further support by Sheila, who provided a comparative account of the administrative structures in her home country and Turkey in the following utterance: *“In Turkey, there is more hierarchy in the system. This was one of the most difficult things to get used to. We cannot directly speak to whoever is in charge of making these decisions. As for the NNESTs, regarding the elicited problems in this section, only Nükheth voiced an opinion, which was about the lack of harmony among the teaching staff: “Your partners are not always in good harmony with you in terms of their look at teaching, learning and assessment. This problem may stem from the differences in educational backgrounds and mostly from personal insights”.*

## **Discussion**

This study investigated the challenges confronting the NESTs and NNESTs teaching in the English language preparatory program of a state university in Turkey. The participant teachers' oral and written accounts provided rich data with respect to different types of challenge they suffered from, the potential sources and consequences of those specified, and their coping strategies with those challenges, if any.



Starting from the student-related challenges, both the NESTs and NNESTs laid the strongest emphasis on their students' attitudinal problems. These problems include the students' lack of motivation and involvement in tasks, disinterest in learning, unwillingness to speak and some disruptive behavior. The NESTs attributed the students' negative attitudes to their failure to grasp the value of English, indifference to non-Turkish content, mere resort to and the irrelevance of the coursebooks in use, five-hour long class sessions per day and some personality traits. The NNESTs, on the other hand, distinguished between compulsory and voluntary English classes, arguing that the students of compulsory classes are considerably more dedicated, which is motivated by their concern for repeating the class in case of a year-end failure. In addition, the NNESTs highlighted the students' previous English learning experiences dominated by grammar-based instruction to account for their negative attitudes, as well as lack of self-confidence, self-perceived low proficiency, and some personality traits. In contrast to the participant teachers' identification of their students as negative attitude holders and the limited number of parallel results obtained from the student ratings (Çetinkaya, 2009; Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi, & Alzwari, 2012), a vast number of research findings from different EFL contexts including Turkey document learners' positive attitudes toward learning English (Üzüm, 2007; Yu, 2010; Zareian, Zangoei & Taghvaei, 2014; Tanni, 2015; Eshghinejad, 2016; Karataş, Alçı, Bademcioğlu & Ergin, 2016). Similar studies also inferred that although EFL learners recognize the importance of English (a case contradictory to the present NESTs' remarks about their students) thanks to its status as the dominant global language (Tsuda, 2003; Üzüm, 2007; Nysten, 2009), they do not tend to enact high level orientation toward learning (Tsuda, 2003; Karahan, 2007), as also perceived by the teachers in this study. This paradox can be linked, to a significant extent, to formal instruction-oriented issues. Burgos and Pérez's (2015) and Ahmed's (2015) findings help to support this claim, by reporting the contradiction that the students who have held positive attitudes toward the English language do not like learning it as a formal subject at school, and they consider the ways of classroom instruction to be a source of unpleasant feeling. Formal instruction-oriented issues can also apply for the present investigation in the sense that the NESTs and

NNESTs viewed five-hour long daily class sessions and grammar-based instruction, respectively, as important causes of their students' negative attitudes toward English lessons. To provide a remedy for the impasse which involves informed and committed students who at the same time frown upon formal instruction, as recommended by the participants of this study, attention can frequently be shifted to some technological and out-of-class tools such as computer-generated interactive games, authentic videos, speaking clubs, and so forth. With regard to the substantial difference between the dedication level of compulsory and voluntary English students as perceived by their non-native teachers, this is linked by the same teachers to the former groups' anxiety of grade retention. Tsuda's (2003) findings also affirm this stance, with the conclusion that as a way of *instrumental orientation* (Gardner & Lambert, 1959), examination is the strongest motivator for EFL learners.

Another student-related challenge addressed by the teachers was the use of L1 by the students. To be sure, this should be considered more of an issue of concern to monolingual than multilingual contexts. Inevitably, as a monolingual EFL which is home to students with the same L1, the context of the present study is the setting for plenty of student use of L1, and has therefore been subject to the teachers' elaborations on the issue. The NNESTs were in a firm position against their students' L1 use, whereas the NESTs did not only conceive of students' L1 use as an unfavorable attitude, but they also viewed it as a pedagogical tool through which they can collaboratively learn. While most language teaching methods adopted in their prescriptions for practice the covert traditional standpoint that L1 use should be disapproved, discouraged and even be banned, some scholars like Cook (2001) hold the view that "it can be deliberately and systematically used in the classroom" (p. 418). No doubt, in some cases, the use of L1 has the potential to bring important benefits for both teachers and learners. On the part of teachers, their use of L1 during the instruction as a pedagogical tool can be a conducive way of explaining complicated grammar rules in addition to conveying word and sentence meanings, which would otherwise require the teacher to act as a contortionist to explain the language item when a simple translation would save time and effort (Cole, 1998). By using L1, "they [students] may explain the

task to each other, negotiate roles they are going to take, or check their understanding or production of language against their peers” (Cook, 2001, p. 418). In this study, the NESTs’ stated consent for their students’ use of L1 can serve some of these purposes. Their consent might have also been triggered by their trajectories as the learners of Turkish as a second language in Turkey, a *Turkish only* process, which helped them better empathize with their students.

The teachers also articulated lack of learner autonomy as another student-related problem. As a concomitant of learner-centered approaches in the past few decades, first coined and defined by Holec (1981), autonomy involves learners’ holding responsibility to make decisions with regard to all aspects of their learning. In this study, the NESTs seemed to problematize the students’ lack of autonomy more than the NNESTs although in general the teachers did not put considerable emphasis on the issue. By viewing the development of autonomy as a desirable educational aim (Nematipour, 2012) which can at least be partly acquired through educational experience (Candy, 1991), it was mentioned by one of the teachers that the students were not taught previously how to study effectively on their own. By the same token, they were reported to seek help from peers even in individual productive work. With their exposure to both the home and host culture, it was specifically intriguing to have an understanding of the students’ autonomous skills through the lenses of the NESTs. In this respect, from a cross-cultural perspective, one of the NESTs commented that her students in the present context were more dependent on their teachers as opposed to the culture of autonomy in the United States. This idea parallels the recognition in the literature that “the perception and practice of autonomous learning change according to specific cultural and educational contexts” (Yıldırım, 2008, p. 65). Though, this recognition should be accompanied by the caveat that stereotypic notions and ethnocentric generalizations of autonomy should be avoided given the idiosyncratic nature of autonomy (Littlewood, 1999).

This study further shed light on the challenges relative to the teachers themselves as the subject of the challenges. It was only the NESTs who mentioned having suffered from the problems under the category of teacher-related challenges. The NESTs identified classroom

management as the principal challenge in this category. They each stated having experienced discipline problems and disruptive learner behavior in the classroom. As the causes of such problems, the NESTs enunciated their young age, novice teacher status, and not sharing the students' L1. Their stated efforts to manage the students were often to no avail. A connection can be made with some of these stated factors and Gan's (2013) research findings, which revealed the ELT student teachers' failure to manage their classes. Both include young and beginning practitioners who have either not received any teacher education or not been adequately prepared by teacher education courses for dealing with classroom management. In the present study, the NESTs' problems with managing the classes may also be related with their lack of knowledge of *culturally responsive classroom management* (CRCM), a concept delineated by Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke and Curran (2004). They suggested teachers' knowledge of their students' cultural backgrounds, and understanding of the broader social, economic, and political context as two of the five essential components of CRCM, and indicated the former as a prerequisite for developing skills for cross-cultural interaction. In this vein, Sheets and Gay (1996) postulated that "teachers need to understand the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, how they sanction behavior and celebrate accomplishments, and their rules of decorum, deference, and etiquette ...and the value orientations, standards for achievements, social taboos, relational patterns, communication styles, motivational systems, and learning styles of different ethnic groups" (p. 92). They furthered that these should be employed effectively in managing students' behaviour. From this point forth, Byron's (one of the NESTs) complaint about his students—that they don't resent being condemned, punished and scolded as opposed to the case in his country—could result from his lack of knowledge of the Turkish students' communication styles, behavioral and relational patterns, and inadequate exposure to the local context. Supportive of this inference may be the NNESTs' (as opposed to the NESTs) making no mention of such a problem linked to classroom management in view of the fact that they share the same cultural background as their students. The NESTs also expressed concerns regarding their limited teaching experience, which can moderately or significantly impact on classroom

management skills. As illustrated by Wright's (2005) own practice which values professional experience in this sense, accumulated knowledge of teaching may enable practitioners to manage classes in an automated, instinctive and intuitive manner.

With reference to the institutional challenges facing the participant teachers, the NESTs and NNESTs arrived at a large consensus on the reality that the class sizes were too big to create an effective teaching environment. As a result of big class sizes, "the teachers become coercive in delivering the lessons, give less time for individual problems, and care less about individual learning strategies of the learners. So, even if the teacher is well spoken in theoretical and practical aspects of language teaching, s/he fails to apply it in the classroom" (Ahmed, 2015, p. 14). Along similar lines, the NNESTs collocated the negative reflections of big class size which include difficulties in guiding, controlling and managing classes, fewer opportunities to perform communicative tasks and speaking practice, and unfavorable physical learning environment. Binding as the above are for the NESTs equally, they did not consider big class size independent of the problem caused by the classes which embody students with drastically different proficiency levels. The NESTs intensely complained about lack of proficiency grouping system, saying that this problem precludes balancing between low- and high-proficiency students in the same class in terms of time allocation, difficulty level of instruction (often disadvantaging high achievers), selection of materials and lesson planning. The available literature reveals the strengths and weaknesses of proficiency grouping, which can also be labelled as homogeneous grouping in contradistinction to heterogeneous grouping of students. On the one hand, as reported by the teachers in (Ertuğ, 2012), homogeneous grouping benefits especially high-proficiency students by allowing for the quick flow of the activities, thereby providing more practice opportunities. They further articulated that in homogeneous grouping, the curriculum can be arranged according to the needs of low-proficiency students. On the other hand, such a grouping system could label students as 'good' or 'bad' (Ertuğ, 2012), and have negative influences on the self-concept and achievement of low-proficiency students (Macintyre & Ireson, 2002), in addition to sparking differences in the quality of teaching received by

those in high and low-proficiency groups (Dreeben & Barr, 1988; Tizard et al., 1988; Harlen, 1997; as cited in Macintyre & Ireson, 2002). Besides, homogeneous grouping might deprive students with different proficiency levels of the chances of learning from more knowledgeable peers within Vygotskian perspective (Sabharwal, 2009), and of having access to successful peer role modeling Ertuğ (2012) as propounded by Bandura (1971). Furthermore, homogeneous grouping may rule out the diversity which could promote productive conversations in the classroom, in addition to the shortcoming that the teachers in low-proficiency groups allocate more time for managing the student behaviour than for teaching (Sabharwal, 2009). Overall, as opposed to homogeneous grouping, heterogeneous grouping can benefit low-proficiency students but it can at the same time debilitate the achievement of high-proficiency students (Loveless, 1998). With these perspectives in mind, the NESTs could be in the right track on their own behalf in their desire for the application of homogeneous grouping system in the present context if we consider that this system is viewed as a solution to the problems created by heterogeneous grouping (Ben-Ari, 1997). However, the potential weaknesses of homogeneous grouping are equally critical and worth considering.

Curricular issues were also featured, as a case subject only to the NNESTs' strong consideration. These teachers did not find the curriculum in effect adequate in covering productive skills, resulting in the students' failure to use English effectively in their future English-medium courses. Their problem statements were accompanied by the words of concern which include overloaded curriculum, textbook-based curriculum, and emphasis on grammar. While these concerns might result from the contextual factors which influence how teachers interpret and implement curricula (Orafi & Borg, 2009), it may also be the case that the textbook-based curriculum might be failing to cater to learners' communicative needs, which directly correlate course materials (Savignon, 2002). If not as much as the curriculum in question, the NNESTs also touched upon the problems with assessment procedures as a component of the curriculum. These NNESTs mainly problematized the one-shot speaking assessment, which gives the students only a few-minute opportunity to prove their oral proficiency. In their demands for a change toward speaking assessment spread over

time, the NNESTs seem to favor the applications of dynamic assessment, which is process-oriented as opposed to product-oriented static assessment (Cotrus & Stanciu, 2014). The NNESTs' desire for the employment of such a type of assessment can further be grounded on *collaborative engagement* (CE) as one of the components of dynamic speaking assessment, in which "during periods of instruction, the mediator engages collaboratively with learners, providing them with the intervention needed to overcome problem areas, and then learners are once again assessed as to the extent to which the CE was successful and the necessary cognitive were tools internalized" (Hill & Sabet, 2009, p. 539).

## **Conclusion**

Adopting a case study design, in its specific context, this study revealed different kinds of challenges facing a cohort of NESTs and NNESTs teaching EFL, in addition to the perceived causes and consequences of these challenges, and how the participant teachers cope with them. The challenges reported in this study were only limited to the teachers' perceived problems in the related program, drawing a contextual portrait in its own right. Otherwise, naturally, problems of English language teachers in general are not limited to those reflected in the present study. Therefore, on the one hand, it would be problematic to draw broad generalizations from the current study. On the other hand, the findings obtained may pave the way for a cumulative understanding of the challenges facing English language teachers in a global sense and for the generation of a common agenda for solutions, when combined with other research findings in the relevant literature.

This study did not only shed light on the challenges experienced by the NESTs and NNESTs in the present program, but also approached these challenges from a cross-cultural standpoint. Student-related and institutional parameters accounted for the NNESTs' problems, whereas on the part of the NESTs, teacher-related and cross-cultural influences reinforced these parameters. For example, problems regarding learner autonomy and classroom management as reflected in the NESTs' accounts, could be associated with their peculiar educational experiences and cultural backgrounds. In order to explain

some of the challenges faced by the NESTs (e.g. dealing with student misbehavior), a theoretical link was established with cross-cultural adaptation theory, which mandates host communication competence—the ability to communicate in tune with the norms and practices of the host culture (Kim, 2010)—as central to adaptation to the host environment.

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