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# The Importance of Nonnative English Teachers in Costa Rica

## La importancia de los profesores no nativos del inglés en Costa Rica

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### Abstract

In Costa Rican society, learning English has become a valuable tool to increase job opportunities, which has caused more hiring of teachers of this language. However, some institutions manifest preferences toward native teachers being perceived as the ideal tutor with a target model for language learning. Unfortunately, this causes nonnative English teachers (NNESTs) to suffer from discrimination when they are compared to native English teachers (NESTs). This paper aims to raise awareness in society to consider teachers' competences and qualities when choosing an English educator because teaching requires more than having a high level in the use of the language. In this literature review, it will be



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able to recognize the benefits of learning English from NNESTs. Additionally, the analysis of related research was used to exemplify some reasons to qualify NNESTs as educators with sufficient competencies to teach. The results from the literature review suggest that NNESTs are more aware of the students' needs and the importance of providing feedback. Being in the same position as most of their learners allows them to previously recognize the difficulties when learning English. Sharing students' cultural backgrounds permits NNESTs to teach and guide students regarding their functions as individuals in society

**Keywords:** Costa Rica, English teaching, needs, NESTs, NNESTs skills, strategies



### Resumen

En Costa Rica aprender inglés se ha vuelto importante para la mayoría de la sociedad, lo cual ha causado más contrataciones de profesores de este idioma. No obstante, algunas instituciones demuestran preferencia hacia los educadores nativos, ya que los consideran ideales para aprender inglés. Desafortunadamente, esto causa discriminación hacia los profesores no nativos, cuando son comparados con los nativos. Esta revisión bibliográfica permite crear conciencia al elegir un profesor de inglés, al tomar en cuenta sus competencias y habilidades, pues enseñar un idioma no solo implica dominar el lenguaje. Esta indagación le permitirá, a la población, reconocer los beneficios que tienen al aprender inglés con profesores no nativos. Además, el análisis de investigaciones relacionadas con el tema fue utilizado para ejemplificar razones para calificar a los profesores no nativos como educadores con competencias suficientes para enseñar. Los resultados de la revisión sugieren que los profesores no nativos son más conscientes de las necesidades que tienen los estudiantes y de la importancia de proveerles retroalimentación. El estar en la misma posición que la mayoría de sus alumnos, les permite reconocer las dificultades de aprender inglés. También, el compartir los antecedentes culturales con los estudiantes les permite transmitir conocimientos sobre sus funciones como individuos en la sociedad.

**Palabras clave:** Estrategias, habilidades, inglés, profesores no nativos.



## Introduction

People become interested in studying English as a foreign language because it helps them to increase their job opportunities mainly due to the influence that this language has on tourism development, international communication, and on the world of business transactions. [Aguilar-Sánchez \(2005\)](#) argued that “one of the trends setting into motion this academic and economic expansion is the influence of tourism and international investors in the country, which piqued great interest in the English language among Costa Ricans” (p. 164). Additionally, learning English is helpful not only for ways of expression but also for the open-minded development of individuals because English provides a broad concept of the world. [Zuparova et al. \(2020\)](#) confirmed that language helps society to make relationships and to understand how to relate in different social contexts depending on sociolinguistic situations. Due to the importance that learning English has regarding job opportunities and communication, in Costa Rica, learning English as a foreign language has been integrated since 1953. [Córdoba et al. \(2005\)](#) reported that in Costa Rica, the first experts in teaching English appeared when the University of Costa Rica (UCR) offered the opportunity in 1954 because, in the past, English lessons were originally taught by native speakers of English. However, this has left a huge gap between nonnative and native English speakers. Some inhabitants believe that, to acquire a high level of English, people need to be taught by native speakers because English is their mother tongue. In this regard, [Watson and Pojanapunya \(2008\)](#) stated that “native speakers are the best teachers of their own language” (p. 3). Although this is one of the biggest advantages that native speakers have, this is not the only feature needed to be an English educator. It is key for teachers to be prepared with pedagogical competences to facilitate the knowledge to the students considering their necessities.

Furthermore, the fact that nonnative speakers do not use English innately carries negative effects when trying to find a job. [Villalobos \(2011\)](#) stated that, in some private institutions, a certification to be a teacher is needed, but in others, being a native speaker of English is the only requirement. Unfortunately, this kind of institutional recruitment is one of the ways in which NNETs continue at a disadvantage because even if some of them have pedagogical training, institutions in some cases are still focusing only on linguistic competence. However, people

should be conscious that in Costa Rica, native English teachers are a minority. In fact, León (2021) stressed that in Costa Rica, the majority of English teachers are nonnative speakers of English which causes people to believe that NNETs are inferior to native English teachers. For these reasons, this literature review aims to support nonnative teachers' role by exemplifying existent literature on the topic under study.

### **Procedures for Searching for Information**

Considering the title of this literature review, the researchers focused the research of the information on three main subtitles which are Having a Higher Level of English, Discerning the Students' Needs when Teaching English, and Strategies Implemented in the Classroom. To collect the information, the researchers accessed some databases as Scholar Google, *UNA Búsqueda*, and ProQuest LLC. This literature review comprises 34 sources in which relevant information was identified. In addition, some keywords used to search for and collect the information were the following: nonnative English teacher, native English teachers, students' needs, teachers' skills, learning English, teachers in Costa Rica, and strategies used inside the classroom.

### **Having a Higher Level of English**

It is common for students of English to be overwhelmed by native speakers' accents. This causes most of them to prefer to be taught by NETs. Galloway (2013) stated that the majority of language students highly value native English and choose to follow a NES model. Furthermore, people show such interest in native speakers that sometimes they are attracted by courses announcing that the teacher is a native speaker. NESTs have been used to gain the attention of parents to enroll their children because; in the advertisements, they mention that NETs will be teaching in their schools or courses (Kurniawati & Rizki, 2018). Consequently, this type of advertisement causes people to believe that the ideal English teacher is one who knows the language in an innate manner. Indeed, Chun (2014) pointed out that "NESTs [are] judged to be more effective in the classroom in terms of their superior linguistic competence and their status as native speakers of the target language" (p. 574). Although native speakers use English innately, it does not mean that all of them are fully capable of teaching the language. In the same way, it is not suitable to classify people as not ready to teach



English just because they do not have English as their first language. Unfortunately, this issue of innateness has meant that NNETs are often not prioritized in the educational field. [Alseweed \(2012\)](#) affirmed that the expression “non-native” seems humiliating for some people and has insignificant importance in ETL (Effective Teaching and Learning). As a consequence of the previous ideas, nonnative teachers have been unfairly compared and, in some cases, discriminated against.

Nevertheless, it is important for Costa Rican society to realize that NNETs are model educators because they study the English language and prepared themselves professionally to teach it to other nonnative speakers. In this sense, it is [Bayyurt’s \(2006\)](#) claim that “non-native English language teachers represent the ideal language learner who accomplished learning English and became a professional to teach it to other nonnative speakers of English” (p. 236). In Costa Rica, those who have graduated from a public university are prepared with a high level of English because of the teaching programs that were designed for students to achieve a high level of linguistic proficiency. [Chaves-Fernández et al. \(2015\)](#) added that a public university in Costa Rica has one of the most high-quality levels of English curriculum with all the characteristics to ensure that students acquire the required linguistic and pedagogical levels according to the social demands of the country.

Moreover, considering their linguistic performance, nonnative teachers are qualified to speak English because teachers in Costa Rica are evaluated with the Test of English International Communication (TOEIC). [Alpizar \(2016\)](#) added that “the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) designed by The Educational Testing Service (ETS) is an English language proficiency test that measures the everyday listening and reading skills of people working in an international workplace environment” (p. 36). Fortunately, thanks to this test, teachers in Costa Rica measure their level of English on a regular basis because they have to take the test every two years, causing NNETs to be updating their linguistic level which is a requirement to work at the Ministry of Public Education (MEP in Spanish).

On the other hand, more than having a high level of English, educators should know how to facilitate the knowledge to the students. For this reason, teachers must have enough preparation to promote knowledge and explain to students why certain expressions are the way they are. Unfortunately, the fact that native teachers use the language

innately sometimes works against their ability to teach because they do not find a way to provide a suitable explanation. Florence Ma (2012) described that native speakers are aware of what is acceptable and what is not when teaching grammar, but they may not have the resources to explain the grammatical rules behind that. For this reason, the innate knowledge that NETs have makes them unconsciously teach their students certain grammatical expressions that were naturally learned without explaining the rules.

In contrast, nonnative speakers already went through the process of understanding how English works, allowing them to share this knowledge easily. Rao and Chen (2019) pointed out that “NNESTs can serve as role models for students by sharing their EFL learning experience, and that they are in a better position to anticipate learning difficulties and can benefit from the effective use of the mother tongue” (p. 3). Also, the fact that nonnative teachers were learners as well allows them to be an example for their students. Lasagabaster and Sierra (2005) concluded that because non-native teachers have gone through the same learning process as their students, that will help them to identify linguistic and nonlinguistic problems that can be too high to overcome for their learners and guide them in applying useful strategies to assist their learning process. This is one of the main advantages that nonnative English teachers have over some native English speakers.

### **Discerning the Students’ Needs when Teaching English**

It is crucial for teachers to take care of the relationship with their students to understand their needs and answer the questions they may have. Jiménez and Rose (2010) argued that educators should consider keeping good relationships with their learners to guide them with more successful instructions. In fact, nonnative English teachers are characterized by providing students with guiding techniques to improve the learning process. Thus, Mede *et al.* (2017) stated that “NESTs adopt a more flexible approach and attend to the perceived needs while NNESTs adopt a more guided approach and attend to real needs” (p. 412). In addition, Tosuncuoglu (2017) demonstrated that, when a NEST was teaching, students faced anxiety or felt scared; on the contrary, when a NNEST was teaching, students did not deal with those feelings. The previous insights demonstrate the necessity of knowing



the students' needs because it has an impact on the emotional stability of the students and their confidence while learning the language.

Another important student need is that teachers provide feedback that allows them to reflect on their learning process. [Moore and Kuol \(2005\)](#) concurred that “the positive effects of performance feedback have become one of the most widely accepted truisms in organizational psychology having long been seen as something that contributes a motivating potential to any work environment” (p. 57). Even if native speakers are recognized for their natural way to teach English, nonnative speakers are more aware of the students' needs and the importance of providing feedback. According to [Mede et al. \(2017\)](#), when NNESTs were teaching, it was observed a better frequency of teacher questions, student reactions, and teacher feedback, whereas NESTs lessons were more authentic and communicative. Even if natural communication is essential when speaking a language, answering questions and receiving feedback are key to the students' improvement in their learning process.

Likewise, because most of the nonnative Costa Rican English teachers have been raised in this country, it permits them to have innate knowledge about certain regions and their cultures, which allows them to communicate easily. In particular, [Inbar-Lourie and Donitsa-Schmidt \(2019\)](#) remarked that local teachers were perceived as more adequate because they obtained advantages over the native ones by better understanding the culture and language, facilitating learning and communication with students. Additionally, it is important for teachers not only to know the culture where the students come from but also to provide them with enough tools to participate in cultural issues that can benefit the country's development. In Costa Rica, NNESTs who work for MEP follow a curriculum that aims to boost students' knowledge regarding the functions of individuals in society. “Learners need an updated curriculum that reflects the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to communicate in a range of language use contexts and to succeed in the information age as 21st century learners” ([MEP, 2016](#), p. 12). This syllabus was designed to boost the students' progress as individuals who are participants of a developing century. Although nonnative teachers take advantage of their own context to guide the learning process, they are also concerned about the necessity of teaching about foreign cultures and the importance of having critical cultural awareness.

Regarding the cultural dimension, it is essential for teachers to provide students with enough critical cultural awareness, which according to [Atay et al. \(2009\)](#), is “the ability to critically evaluate the perspectives and practices in one’s own and other cultures” (p. 124). It is relevant for teachers to let students know that learning English as a foreign is not just about exchanging information but understanding other people’s cultures to avoid intercultural misunderstanding. Auspiciously, NNETs support students with intercultural competence because they already learned a foreign language and its culture. [Llurda \(2004\)](#) reflected on the idea that non-native speakers’ teachers went through the process of becoming bilingual and identifying themselves with diverse languages or cultures. Non-native teachers’ students will also be speakers of EIL (English as an International Language), causing them to live in a multilingual world that uses English for communication among many people from different cultures. Besides, NNETs in Costa Rica are characterized as teachers with enough competencies for leading this process of intercultural acquisition. Therefore, the contact they experienced with a foreign language and its culture will be similar to the experience that their students might find in the learning process. For these reasons, NNETs are conscious of considering the strategies that are most helpful in coping with learning English difficulties. [Kurniawati and Rizki \(2018\)](#) stated that, unlike NETs, the fact that NNETs previously learned English allows them to provide students with the best strategies to scope difficulties and learn the language easily. The experience acquired as a student of English, characterizes NNETs in Costa Rica as educators capable of teaching a foreign language establishing supportive relationships with their students by understanding their perspective and their difficulties while learning English.

It is understood that If teachers develop significant relationships with students, they can also motivate them to engage more in the learning process. [Soares \(2015\)](#) concluded that “by having a supportive relationship with teachers, students will be motivated, will feel protected and this sense of security and friendship will create an empathy which is important to get students interested and desirable to succeed” (p. 6). When learning a foreign language, motivation is key to enjoy and engage in the process, especially if students consider themselves not good at English. Fortunately, in Costa Rica, those English teachers that want to





work for the Ministry of Public Education are asked to follow certain tasks that were designed to encourage students to motivate themselves to improve their learning process. In fact, in 2020, in Costa Rica, it was stated that “the role of task-based language learning is to stimulate a natural desire in learners to improve their language competence by challenging them to complete meaningful tasks” (MEP, 2022, p. 23). Teachers in Costa Rica are responsible not only for the performance inside the classrooms but also for the strategies used to instill self-motivation and engagement as individuals’ part of a community.

### **Strategies Implemented in the Classroom**

Because learning styles vary from one student to the other, it is crucial for educators to consider the different ways of learning or processing the information in the learning process of the students. If teachers provide different strategies in the classroom, it might help most of the students to understand any topic in more than one way, which serves to provide more durable knowledge. According to [Gülhanım \(2018\)](#),

determining the learning styles of the students and providing education appropriate to these styles are important in terms of providing permanent learning as learning styles are considered to be an important step towards eliminating individual differences, especially in language teaching. (p. 185)

For these reasons, teachers should consider implementing many strategies in the classroom to eliminate individual differences because having a variety of strategies helps most of learners. Additionally, in an investigation carried out by [Mahboob \(2004\)](#), it was found that the variety of teaching styles used by nonnative teachers could be an explanation for the preference that students have towards them. Also, the fact that NNETs already experience some of the challenges of learning English as a foreign language helps them to comprehend those difficulties that learners find while learning English. Indeed, [Tosuncuoglu \(2017\)](#) argued that “the NNETs were identified as providing better learning strategies, they were better at understanding the difficulties their students faced and had a better factual knowledge about the English language” (p. 636). Furthermore, an interesting fact about NNETs found by [Youn-Hee \(2009\)](#) is that, unlike

the natives, they shared the same linguistic background as the students making it easier for them to recognize the students' pronunciation difficulties. Considering the similarities that NNETs have with their EFL students in terms of background, it can be interfered that these kinds of teachers highly understand the necessities of the population under teaching. Consequently, when referring to the students' pronunciation issues, nonnative English teachers have an advantage while teaching because of the experiences they gained from their second language acquisition process.

In addition, another strategy that is significant among English teachers is to provide students with enough examples about the topic under study to help the students to understand it clearly. [Kurniawati and Rizki \(2018\)](#) reflected on the idea that one disadvantage of NESTs can be the limitation of understanding the learners' native language when giving examples and comparisons while teaching. However, nonnative English teachers in Costa Rica have an advantage, and it is that they are able to use their first language when it is essential to help the students comprehend the topic. [Moore and Kuol \(2005\)](#) suggested that the usage of L1 in our classrooms will bring favorable effects for students; for instance, teachers can explain to their students in the L1 when they have trouble making them understand difficult guidelines or when their students need personal assistance. Therefore, this strategy is an advantage that NNETs have because as native speakers of Spanish, they can easily switch to the mother tongue helping students to scope the difficulty.

On the other hand, one of the most important strategies that English teachers should implement in their classrooms is addressing different skills. In this regard, teachers should provide students with enough tools to use the language in more than one skill. [Hinkel \(2006\)](#) added that "currently, in the teaching of the four skills, curriculum and instruction strive to achieve a balance between the linguistic and the schematic aspects of learner language development" (p. 111). However, it is common to perceive how some people still believe that knowing English is just being able to speak the language. This has led some people to look specifically for native English speakers because their pronunciation of the language is more accurate. [Lasagabaster and Sierra \(2002\)](#) argued that in the listening skill, a penchant for NSTs was more prominent than in the reading skill. Additionally, students also believe



that natives are the model for learning the skill of pronunciation and fluency. Even if the comprehension is not the best, native speakers are valued as a role model in terms of natural and authentic pronunciation (Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2014). Even though these abilities are key to speaking English, it is not the only way of communication. It is vital for learners to be exposed not only to speaking or listening but also to writing, reading, and grammar which are essential to transmit the information in a written form.

Nevertheless, nonnative English teachers are characterized by considering more than just one skill. Lasagabaster and Sierra (2002) concluded that in some areas of assessments, mainly in the production skills such as speaking, pronunciation, and writing, students seem more comfortable with NSTs. Still, integrating more than one skill while teaching is essential because, in that way, students can identify their strengths and weaknesses while learning English. Additionally, the implementation of various skills avoids students' discomfort because teachers can vary the tasks depending on the skill. In addition, even if grammar is categorized not as a skill but as a micro-skill, nonnative English teachers are concerned about teaching grammar and the formal features of the language. They do not teach grammar in isolation but as a key element to consider in most of the skills. In a study that aims to find out the beliefs NNETs have on grammar instruction, it was found that they prefer direct grammatical guidelines with repetition exercises because they believe that repeated practices help students in their fluency using grammatical structures. However, despite their interest in teaching explicit grammar, they still find no sense in teaching grammar in isolation from other skills (Önalán, 2018). Thus, students who learn English with NNETs are prepared to deeply recognize the rules and grammar usage of the prescriptive English language and apply it not as an isolated skill but a relevant element to consider when reading, writing, and speaking English.

In Costa Rica, teachers who work for MEP are asked to provide students with different strategies useful to develop the four skills not only inside of the classroom but also in real-life situations. To perform well in secondary education in this country, "L2 users must demonstrate that they have the skills needed to process information, reason from evidence, make decisions, solve problems, self-regulate, collaborate, and learn" (MEP, 2016, p. 12). Consequently, those teachers who

work for MEP must incorporate strategies in the classroom that reflect not only the four skills which are reading, listening, speaking, and writing but also the students' soft skills. Along with this, teachers in Costa Rica need to follow a curriculum that states certain stages of the lesson using different skills. In this education system, teachers are allowed to “combine oral or written comprehension goals with oral and written production ones, depending on the stage of the lesson so that an integrated skills approach is developed” (MEP, 2016, p. 33). For these reasons, nonnative English teachers are more acquainted with providing more strategies because they organized the lesson in several steps to help students enjoy their process of learning by trying to include the four skills.

### **Conclusion**

Unfortunately, throughout the history of English teaching, NNETs have always been compared to native speakers in terms of linguistic competence. This has led to NNETs' being considered as teachers without enough competences to teach English because of the belief that the best option for learning English is with teachers who use language innately. Notwithstanding, in this paper, it was possible to analyze the discrimination nonnative teachers experience when trying to be hired in private institutions in the country. Students highly value native English and prefer to follow a native-speaking model. These teachers have been minimized mainly because of their linguistic competence. However, throughout this literature review, those advantages that people might find while learning English with NNETs were highlighted. Among the features of learning English with NNETs in Costa Rica are the fact that most of them have a high level in the use of the language, recognize most of the student's needs, and integrate the appropriate strategies to teach English.

Nonnative English teachers in Costa Rica need to go through an extensive formative process to be successful on the TOEIC test to work for MEP certifying them as qualified teachers to teach English at a high level. Thereby, nonnative teachers in Costa Rica should feel proud because they received high-quality pedagogical training, especially those who studied at public universities. Moreover, nonnative English teachers are characterized by their ability to understand students' needs due to the fact that they have already undergone a second language



learning process. Furthermore, NNETs use a more guided approach to cater for real necessities. They also boost students' self-confidence during their English lessons. NNETs are also characterized because of the awareness they have of the importance of asking questions and providing feedback to increase motivation in the classroom environment. In the same way, most nonnative Costa Rican English teachers have been raised in this country allowing them to have innate knowledge about certain regions and their cultures facilitating the students' understanding by using English in their own context. Likewise, NNETS in Costa Rica who work in the MEP need to integrate useful strategies that promote self-motivation and student commitment.

Regarding pedagogical strategies, it was found that nonnative English teachers used a more varied teaching style integrating various strategies. When teaching pronunciation, NNETs identify most of the student's pronunciation issues because they already have a factual understanding of English use. Teachers in Costa Rica can make use of the L1 in the classroom when students no longer understand the instruction or specific explanation of a topic. In addition, those teachers who work for MEP are asked to use some stages designed to include different abilities such as writing, reading, listening, and speaking. Even if they care about teaching grammar repetitively, they find no sense in teaching grammar in isolation from other skills helping students to make use of the prescriptive grammar rules.

Additionally, the syllabus teachers use in Costa Rica requires them to organize and develop the class, varying the skill depending on the goal. For these reasons, it will be meaningful for nonnative teachers if they start being treated as teachers with enough competence to teach English. In conclusion, a possible way to avoid discrimination against nonnative English teacher and encourage a sense of equality in the English teaching field is that private institutions and society, in general, consider what is beyond a nonnative teacher's profile before judging their accent, fluency, nationality, or culture. Also, public and private institutions should assess the linguistic competence of the teachers, the pedagogical skills, and knowledge but especially their teaching styles to discover how these styles aim for students to increase critical thinking and multicultural awareness. Finally, if parents plan to register their children in any course or English class, they must consider if their children are going to be prepared just for being communicatively

competent or if they are also going to develop abilities that might help them to solve problems in real life.

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