Saudi EFL Learners’ Perceptions about the Teaching of English by Native and Non-native English Teacher

Abdul Qadeer
Faculty of Languages and Translation, King Khalid University
Guraiger Campus, Abha, Saudi Arabia
&
Faculty of Languages and Linguistics
University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Abstract:
The issue of native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) has been controversial in debates by all the stakeholders. There is a variation in the imparting of knowledge and working style by these two different groups of teachers due to their educational and cultural backgrounds. The main aim of the study is to investigate the students’ positive or negative perceptions related to the learning of English by their NESTs & NNESTs at King Khalid University. Also, it does stand to answer the main question of this study that to whom do the learners in Saudi Arabia perceive as their ideal group of English language teachers among their NESTs & NNESTs at various levels? The study is significant specifically to investigate the Saudi EFL learners’ preferences about the teaching performance of their teachers regarding content knowledge, teaching methodology, interaction with learners as well as personal characteristics of native English speaking, non-native Arabic speaking English teachers and non-native Asian English teachers. The research method included the quantitative approach. The data was collected through a questionnaire from a sample of 136 participants at the department of English, KKU. The findings indicated that NESTs & NNESTs have a number of strengths and weaknesses. However, the findings recommended that the collaborative model of NESTs & NNESTs can be more successful for teaching of English as a foreign language in Saudi context.

Keywords: English as a foreign language (EFL), native English-speaking teachers (NESTs), non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), perceptions

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1. Introduction:

For the last few years a trend about hiring / recruitment of NESTs in academic institutes is getting popularity in Saudi Arabia. Many employers simply give more preference to NESTs. Eventually, a large number of NESTs are recruited than NNESTs to teach English at various universities in Saudi Arabia.

When NESTs & NESTs work together then a comparison with respect to their working behavior, subject competency, pedagogical strengths and weaknesses is brought in view by almost all the stakeholders.

On one hand, Native English speaking teachers’ (NESTs) teaching performance attracts attention of all the stakeholders since the time they start their teaching. On the other hand, the recruiting companies usually make selection of teachers just to fulfill the employers’ demand. It can be implied that a proper screening process for the selection of native English speaking teachers is not carried out in accordance with the requirements of the profession of English language teaching. It is also perceived that regardless of teachers’ professional teaching aptitude and qualifications their first language (L1), nationality and travelling document (Passport) are considered important for their selection as a language teacher.

A few examples can be referred, such as an American fellow was working as a male nurse in a hospital but his hiring company made him a language teacher. One fine Canadian fellow had been in different ventures such as soldiering and taxi driving but his recruiting company brought him as a language teacher. Likewise, many other fellow native English-speaking teachers studied and worked other than the English language teaching before joining the profession of teaching.

This study on comparison of native and nonnative teachers’ work performance is a strikingly interesting phenomenon, as many native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and Non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) are already teaching English language at various academic levels in Saudi Arabia. This study slightly deviates from other previous studies as it focuses on three different kinds of English language teachers.

In this study, specifically, “The teaching performance” of the following three groups of teachers will be brought in an analysis with respect to the Saudi students’ perceptions who are studying English.

i. Native English-speaking teachers (NESTs)
(Americans, British, Canadians, Australians, South Africans)

ii. Non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs / Arabs)
(Saudis, Sudanese, Syrians, Jordanians, Egyptians and Yemenis)

iii. Non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs / Non-Arabs)
(Indians, Pakistanis, Bengalis)
2. Literature Review:
   a. Research Studies on learners’ insight towards native and non-native instructors in Saudi Arabia:

   A number of significant studies in Saudi Arabian context have been made previously as many native and non-native English-speaking instructors are working/teaching at various academic institutes of public and private sectors.

   Alseweed (2012) carries out his study in Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. The participants of the study had been taught English by both NESTs & NESTs. The study sample consists of 169 male graduates who believe that NNESTs contribute effectively in terms of their role, first as language learners and then as language instructors. The learners’ opinion about their NESTs is positive than the NNESTs. The respondents give more importance to their NESTs over NNESTs and this is for the reason that majority of the learners tend to study abroad for their higher studies. The learners believe that their NNESTs provide them a serious learning environment though they have preference to NESTs. The respondents indicate that they evaluate both groups of teachers for their strengths.

   Alenazi (2012) a faculty member at King Saud University, Saudi Arabia, conducts a study on hiring EFL teachers. The study focuses on the major aspects of the recruiting process i.e. the selection criteria, effects of the applicants’ status as native and non-native for their employments. It reveals that the applicant’s status as NESTs & NESTs does definitely affect their employment probability. It ends up when the employers are asked to appraise the applicants’ qualification; the employers unconsciously disregard the native English-speaking applicants’ academic qualification, teaching experience and consider nationality and accent as their qualification indicators.

   Ahmed & Ahmed (2014) work on measuring non-Arab non-native English speaking instructors’ opinions in Saudi context and conclude that non Arabic speaking teachers are highly experienced and appropriately qualified teachers in the TESOL job market in Saudi Arabia. They find themselves professionally motivated and successful about their skill of English language teaching. Their inability to speak Arabic language does not pose any serious hindrance in their classroom practices as EFL teachers.

   Ahmed (2016) indicates in his study about the academic supervisors towards non-Arab non-native EFL instructors’ attitudes and according to the results, the supervisors believe that they had their strong and weak areas. He finds out that non-Arab non-native teachers use more effective teaching techniques compared to native counterparts and that being native or non-native is not an advantage or disadvantage, an effective teacher is someone who is qualified in TESOL/TEFL/ELT and has relevant experience.

   b. Studies on learners’ perceptions about native & non-native teachers in general context:

   Apart of the Saudi Arabian context, this issue of NESTs & NNESTs has already been brought in research in various academic institutes such as Spain (Lasagbaster & Sierra,2002),
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Hungry (Benke & Medgyes, 2005), Korea (Butler, 2007), Turkey (Ustuniuoglu, 2007), Hongkong (Lai Ping Florence Ma, 2012), Taiwan (Enchong Liaw, 2012), Turkey (Erhan Aslan, 2016), Turkey (Emrah Ekmekci, 2016) but specifically a brief survey of the past research work can be linked with the present study in the Saudi context.

Medgyes (1992), the pioneer in the field of teachers' nativeness and non-nativeness, opens the discussion in the 1990s by claiming that although native and non-native speakers teach differently, both can become equally effective language professionals.

(Reves & Medgyes 1994; Liaw 2012) report about an international survey on EFL or ESL teachers. In this study three areas of teaching are explored: i-Making practice English language, ii- Common teaching methodology, iii- Distinctive language teaching approach. It discovers that non-Arab non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) lack spoken competence including fluency and language accuracy. The study reveals that they face problems with effective use of English. It is found that they had a little familiarity of context. They learn and are taught a language which is totally different from their first language in isolation. On the contrary, NESTs teach language in comparatively better and creative way in more closely related context. Their teaching techniques are found more innovative and effective.

(Canagaragah 1999; Kachru 1996) discover another aspect regarding the difference between NESTs & NNESTs. These researchers reveal that NNESTs are increasing or exceeding over NESTs in the world. Around three quarters of English teaching workforce worldwide either as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) is from NNESTs.

Liu (1999) discovers a perceptual discrepancy between instructors and ESL students when judging the native speaking ability of the instructor. (Arva & Medgyes 2000; Liaw 2012) report native and non-native teachers’ performance in different categories i.e.: i. General disposition, ii. Approaches to teaching the language, iii. Use of English. NESTs with effective and superior command of English tend to set fewer tests and homework. They give preference to more deregulated activities, such as collaborative activities and more flexible approaches using various materials. On the contrary, their nonnative counterparts prefer more regulated activities such as translation exercises or drills. They use more controlled approaches requiring text book and homework. Native teachers are found partially devoted to teaching and partially sympathetic to students’ cognitive process of acquiring skill or knowledge, whereas NNESTs are stricter and have more realistic expectations of students’ learning. NESTs emphasize the elements such as oral fluency and colloquial register, whereas NNESTs focus on grammar rules, accuracy and formal register.

Lasagbaster and Sierra (2002) reveal that Spanish EFL learners have an inclination to learn pronunciation, listening, speaking and culture from NESTs. They prefer NNESTs, for learning the skills of grammar & learning strategies.

(Mehboob 2004; Liaw 2012) indicate in their studies that students appreciate and criticize their NNESTs for various reasons. NESTs are preferred for their oral language proficiency and knowledge of their social values but they are criticized for their weak grammatical concepts and students’ learning knowledge, whereas NNESTs are preferred by the students for their strong
grammar structured language and their empathy for students’ learning but these teachers are judged for the ineffective quality of their spoken language and lack of social awareness. Liaw (2012) investigates Taiwanese college students’ frame of minds about their NESTs & NNESTs. There are many studies made earlier for examining students’ attitudes toward NESTs but (Moussu, 2010; Pacek, 2005) explore the effects of NESTs in a background where qualifying language skillfulness is considered to be very significant for learners’ professional development in time to come.

Benkae & Medgyes (2005) contribute on the issue of NESTs & NNESTs performance in Hungarian background. They find that NESTs increasingly inclined on spoken language and cultural knowledge. NNESTs are more skillful and motivated for lessons and correction work in language classes.

Butler (2007) discovers that Korean students have different attitudes and preferences for their teachers’ pronunciation, fluency and confidence who speak English in American and Korean accents. However, they do not find any significant differences regarding teaching strategies.

In the Turkish EFL context, Ustunluoglu (2007) reports that NESTs and NNESTs are different in communication skills, teaching roles, and individual characteristics. It is perceived that non-native (Turkish) instructors are stricter than NESTs. They adapt the mode of imparting knowledge (teaching) more successfully and their lectures on English language are more knowledgeable than NESTs. On the contrary, it was found that NESTs are more talkative than NNESTs for various reasons such as “fun” during the teaching and the use of their physical postures, gestures and facial expressions to communicate non verbally with their students.

Aslan & Thompson (2016) indicates that NESTs and NNESTs are found opposite to each other in specific areas like approaches to skillful language teaching and classroom management. Aslan & Thompson (2016) explain further that students give importance to both NESTs and NNESTs in various areas of language learning process differently.

The learners do not perceive the superiority of one group of teacher over other. In conclusion, Aslan & Thompson (2016) states that learners’ language experience simply affects students’ perspectives regarding the language learning process but they also affect the construction of believes, when learners get experienced with NESTs and NNESTs. It is therefore, considered that learners may find changes in their perspectives towards the English language teachers or the context. Moreover, it is advocated in the study that program administrators who usually advocate the plus points of NESTs with the objectives of increasing students’ registration must also explain the positive points of NNESTs too. Other studies have also noticed the effects of English proficiency. (Chacon 2002; Shin 2001; Liaw 2012). It is found that teachers with higher levels of language proficiency use more interactive and communication oriented approaches in their class rooms.

(Liaw 2012) reveals that university students prefer NESTs for communication oriented skills and culture. However, this preference is not reflected by their parents and education administrators, especially when passing English proficiency test is involved. Conversely, NNESTs are believed to be better for their skill of test preparation because of their knowledge and experience of test preparation. Additionally, it is perceived that students’ selection for language
teachers is affected due to areas and reasons of language learning. It is a fact that both native and non native teachers contribute differently to the task of language learning.

(Liaw 2012) explores further that university students did not prefer their language teachers because of their status of being native English speaking teachers. Instead, they prefer teachers’ subject knowledge competency, language teaching experience, lesson planning and teaching techniques as the most important qualifications. This fact contradicts previous study of Arva & Medgyes (2000) and showed that students emphasize practical learning requirements and not only speaking ability, particularly when the passing language proficiency test is the main goal for many students. Therefore, for making teachers’ selection students ranked knowledge and experience more significant. However, preference is different for different tests. Finally, (Ekmekcil 2016) discovers that the findings of the assessment of EFL students’ oral proficiency by NESTs & NNESTs showed statistically no significant variance in the marks given by both groups of teachers. The results assigned by NESTs & NNESTs revealed similar rating behaviors. However, the only difference in behavior is in the appraisal of “pronunciation” intrinsic element of the scale. The study can be taken as a representative for the dependability of NNESTs’ assessing or ascertaining behavior in contrast with that of NESTs. The study finally concludes that each of the two types of teachers have their distinctive features with reference to the critical analysis of language skills and both the groups of teachers can be the counterpart to each other to many matters related to the appraisement of students’ language skills.

2.1. Objectives of the study:
This study aims to explore students’ positive or negative perceptions related to the learning of English by their NESTs & NNESTs at King Khalid University. The results of this study will help decision making authorities to recruit suitable and needful teaching staff in accordance with the certain requirements of Saudi students and their culture regardless of the native or non native backgrounds of teachers.

2.2. Limitations of the study:
There are some constraints related to the study due to some cultural restrictions. The scope of this detailed critical investigation focuses on the male native and non native faculty members who are working at the King Khalid University and likewise only male students’ perceptions will be brought in the process of analysis. Female faculty members and female students have been excluded from this study due to the prevailing social constraints.

3. Method

3.1 Research Questions:
The study will seek answers of the following questions.

Q1. What strengths and weaknesses do learners find for learning English from a native English-speaking teacher (NEST)?

Q2. What strengths and weaknesses do learners find for learning English from a non-native English-speaking teacher (NEST)?
3.2. The research tools:
The research instrument is questionnaire for the students of English department at King Khalid University.

3.3 Research sample:
A sample of 136 students was chosen and a questionnaire was distributed to get the participants feedback about different groups of their teachers such as native English speaking teachers (NESTs), non-native Asian English speaking teachers (NNESTs), non-native Arab English speaking teachers (NNESTs). It was decided that students of level 6 and 7 will be the intended contributors of this study. These students are at senior levels of their graduation studies in faculty of Languages and Translation at King Khalid University. The participants studied English as major in their graduation. The students have learned English from different groups of teachers like native English, non-native Arab and non-native Asian teachers.

3.4 Instruments
The quantitative approach was employed and the research instrument was constructed. The questionnaire will cover the important aspects such as (Part A) students’ personal preferences for their NESTs & NNESTs (1-5 items), (Part B) teachers’ pedagogical skills(6-10 items), (Part C) teachers’ class room management (11-17 items), (Part D) teachers’ subject / content competency related to reading, writing, grammar, listening and speaking skills (18-44 items) at various levels in their respective courses.

3.5 Data Collection
The data was collected from 136 students at the Faculty of Languages and Translation – (Graiger Campus) of King Khalid University, during the fourth week of the second semester of the academic year 2019. A questionnaire consisting of 44 items was distributed. However, 121 students returned the completed questionnaire.

3.6 Data Analysis
The data was examined carefully and methodically by using descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages. The graphs have been plotted to represent the findings of the study.

4. Results:
The results have been inferred from the responses of the questionnaire and which have been presented in the tables given below. The data has been classified under four categories

| Native | Non-native Asians | Non-native Arabs | Neutral | Left Blank |
|--------|-------------------|-----------------|---------|-----------|
| Fr     | Fr                | Fr              | Fr      | Fr        |

Table-1. Overall view of Saudi EFL learners' perceptions regarding the teaching of English by Native or Non-native English Teachers
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| Native | Non-native Arabs | Non-native Asians | Neutral | Left Blank |
|--------|------------------|-------------------|---------|-----------|
| Frequency | Frequency | Frequency | Frequency | Frequency |
| 56.80  | 41.76  | 3.50  | 2.06  | 54.20  | 39.85  | 17.60  | 12.94  | 4.60  | 3.38  |

**Figure 1.** view of Saudi EFL learners' perceptions regarding the teaching of English by Native or Non-native English Teachers

**Table-2. Part A: Students’ Personal Preferences about English Teachers**

**Figure 2.** Students’ Personal Preferences about English Teachers
Table 3. Part B: Students’ Perceptions about English Language Teachers’ Personal Characteristics

|            | Native | Non-native Asians | Non-native Arabs | Neutral | Left Blank |
|------------|--------|-------------------|------------------|---------|------------|
| Frequency  | 45.20  | 33.24             | 11.60            | 8.53    | 37.80      |
|            |        |                   |                  | 27.70   | 30.60      |
|            |        |                   |                  |         | 22.50      |
|            |        |                   |                  |         | 10.80      |
|            |        |                   |                  |         | 7.94       |

Figure 3. Students’ Perceptions about English Language Teachers' Personal Characteristics

Table 4. Part C: Students’ Perceptions about Student - Teacher Interaction

|            | Native | Non-native Asians | Non-native Arabs | Neutral | Left Blank |
|------------|--------|-------------------|------------------|---------|------------|
| Frequency  | 38.00  | 27.94             | 11.00            | 8.09    | 40.40      |
|            |        |                   |                  |         | 29.71      |
|            |        |                   |                  |         | 31.40      |
|            |        |                   |                  |         | 23.09      |
|            |        |                   |                  |         | 15.20      |
|            |        |                   |                  |         | 11.18      |
Figure 4. Students’ Perceptions about Student - Teacher Interaction

Table-5 Part D: Students’ Perceptions about English Language Teachers’ Competency on the Listening Skill.

|                | Native | Non-native Asians | Non-native Arabs | Neutral | Left Blank |
|----------------|--------|-------------------|------------------|---------|------------|
| Frequency      | 29.80  | 21.91             | 12.80            | 40.60   | 35.29      |
| Frequency      | 21.91  | 9.41              | 40.60            | 29.85   | 4.80       |
| Frequency      | 12.80  | 4.80              | 35.29            |         |            |
| Frequency      | 9.41   |                   |                  |         | 3.53       |
| Frequency      |        |                   |                  |         |            |
| Frequency      | 29.85  |                   |                  |         |            |
| Frequency      | 4.80   |                   |                  |         |            |
| Frequency      | 11.18  |                   |                  |         |            |
| Frequency      | 3.53   |                   |                  |         |            |
Figure 5. : Students’ Perceptions about English Language Teachers’ Competency on the Listening Skill.

Table-6 Part E: Students’ Perceptions about English Language Teachers’ Competency on the Reading Skill.

|                | Native | Non-native Asians | Non-native Arabs | Neutral | Left Blank |
|----------------|--------|-------------------|-----------------|---------|------------|
| Frequency      | 40.40  | 29.71             | 8.60            | 6.32    | 42.00      |

Figure 6. Students’ Perceptions about English Language Teachers’ Competency on the Reading Skill.

Table-7 Part D: Students’ Perceptions about English Language Teachers’ Competency on the Writing Skill.

|                | Native | Non-native Asians | Non-native Arabs | Neutral | Left Blank |
|----------------|--------|-------------------|-----------------|---------|------------|
| Frequency      | 33.50  | 24.63             | 12.25           | 9.01    | 34.00      |

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Figure 7. Students’ Perceptions about English Language Teachers’ Competency on the Writing Skill.

Table-8 Part D: Students’ Perceptions about English Language Teachers’ Competency on the Grammar Skill

| Native | Non-native Asians | Non-native Arabs | Neutral | Left Blank |
|--------|-------------------|------------------|---------|------------|
| Fr. equency | Fr. equency | Fr. equency | Fr. equency | Fr. equency |
| 23.00 | 16.91 | 4.80 | 3.53 | 50.80 | 37.35 | 42.20 | 31.03 | 15.20 | 11.18 |

Table continued...

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Figure 8. Students’ Perceptions about English Language Teachers’ Competency on the Grammar Skill

Table 9. Part E: Students’ Perceptions about English Language Teachers’ Competency on the Teaching Methodology

|                  | Native | Non-native Asians | Non-native Arabs | Neutral | Left Blank |
|------------------|--------|-------------------|-----------------|---------|------------|
| Frequency        | 30.86  | 22.69             | 9.71            | 7.14    | 35.29      |
| Frequency        | 35.29  | 7.14              | 25.95           | 46.86   | 34.45      |
| Frequency        | 46.86  | 34.45             | 13.29           | 9.77    | 7.14       |
| Frequency        | 13.29  | 9.77              | 7.14            | 34.45   | 46.86      |
| Frequency        | 9.77   | 7.14              | 34.45           | 46.86   | 13.29      |
| Frequency        | 7.14   | 34.45             | 46.86           | 13.29   | 9.77       |
| Frequency        | 46.86  | 13.29             | 9.77            | 7.14    | 34.45      |
| Frequency        | 34.45  | 9.77              | 7.14            | 35.29   | 22.69      |
| Frequency        | 9.77   | 7.14              | 35.29           | 22.69   | 34.45      |

Figure 9. Students’ Perceptions about English Language Teachers’ Competency on the Teaching Methodology

5. Discussion:

The study focused on to determine Saudi EFL learners’ perceptions about their different groups of teachers such as native, non-native (Arab & Asian) English speaking teachers. The outcomes of the study revealed that 41.76% of learners considered NESTs as their preferred teachers on the basis of the teachers’ personal characteristics. The learners seemed in the favor of Philopson’s (1992) argument about the perceived supremacy of NESTs which he later termed as native speaking Fallacy. It links the belief that, the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker.

The second theory in the realm of teaching English to the speakers of other languages (TESOL) is that NNESTs can be more successful in the teaching of English because they themselves had been accomplished language learners, here the study outcomes seem closer to this theory by inferring the results that NESTs consisting upon Arab and Asian teachers have been comparatively more successful for making effective student-teacher interaction. The learners liked NNESTs (Arabs and Asians) due to their positive, friendly and pragmatic behavior. The outcome
related to teachers’ professional competency in the use of teaching methodology, the learners were found comparatively more satisfied and appreciative than NESTs.

With respect to teachers’ content knowledge including grammar, reading, writing, and listening the learners indicated that NNESTs (Arab & Asian) were comparatively well equipped, efficient and competent than NESTs. Keeping in view the major findings of the study, the learners supported NESTs for their personal characteristics and this can probably be due to the generally established belief that NESTs are better English teachers. However, the learners’ categorical feedback about their native and NESTs & NNESTs revealed their preferences for NNESTs. The learners’ this feedback might emphasize that NNESTs had been successful language learners.

Ahmad (2016) concluded in his study by referring several other researchers like Medgyes (1992), Canagarajah (1990), Cook (1999), Llurda (2004) who stated in their studies that NNESTs were comparatively better in motivating, using teaching methodology and establishing student-teacher relationship because they are accomplished language learners. However, NNESTs lack in effective native like communicative language skills and this deficiency of NNESTs takes them behind over NESTs. The findings come closer to the Cook’s (1999) study which states that a limited use of learners’ first language can be useful particularly at junior level English language teaching.

The findings of this study have close relevance with the education system in Saudi Arabia whereas the students at school levels have very little communicative exposure to the English language as the state run schools mainly have non-native Arab speaking English teachers.

6. Conclusion:

Students’ perceptions regarding the teachers’ work progress is always very much valued in the realm of education. Students can be considered as the judges of their teachers. The study has tended to analyze students’ perceptions about their NESTs & NNESTs which ultimately can help recruiters to make their preferences about native, non-native Arab and non-native Asian teachers on the basis of the facts revealed by this study.

The findings indicated that there are several kinds of differences and similarities among NESTs, NESTs(Arab) and NESTs(Asian) teachers. Besides, it is also evident that NESTs & NNESTs have a number of merits and demerits among the focused groups of teachers. The overall findings discovered that majority of the students showed the first preference to their non-native Arab teachers, whereas native teachers were rated as second according to their inclination. Non-native Asian teachers were taken into the last category. However, the collective ratio of Non-native Arabs and Non-native Asian teachers exceeds over NESTs instead of their western nationality and accent. Non-native Arab and non-native Asian teachers are considered more successful according to the Saudi EFL students’ perceptions for the teaching of Reading, Grammar and Writing skills. On the contrary, NESTs were considered more proficient and skillful for teaching listening and speaking skills.
Consequently, the collaborative model of native and non-native teachers can be more successful for teaching of English as a foreign or second language in Saudi context. It can be inferred that native, non-native Arab and non-native Asian teachers can complement to each other because the weaknesses of a certain group can be covered/compensated by the strengths of the other group of teachers to bring effectively harmonized teaching benefits.

About the Author:
Abdul Qadeer has been working as a Lecturer in English at King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia since 2003. He did his M.A in English literature from University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan and M.Ed. from the University of Karachi, Pakistan. Currently, he is working on his Ph.D. at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0323-7807

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