

Native English Speakers in Madrid's Classrooms: Difficulties Reported by Assistants

Hablantes nativos de inglés en las aulas de Madrid: Dificultades señaladas por auxiliares

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DOI: 10.17398/1988-8430.31.47

Fecha de recepción: 18/02/2019

Fecha de aceptación: 11/07/2019

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Litzler, M. F. (2020). Native English Speakers in Madrid's Classrooms: Difficulties Reported by Assistants. *Tejuelo* 31, 47-76.

Doi: <https://doi.org/10.17398/1988-8430.31.47>

Resumen: This article examines difficulties encountered by 40 native English-speaking language assistants working in classrooms in the Madrid region, as reported in their teaching portfolios, a requirement of the Master's degree programs they completed during the same period. The 187 comments obtained were analyzed by sorting them according to theme; the findings confirm those of prior studies while bringing to light challenges not mentioned to date in research. Some aspects discussed by the native English speakers were differences in classroom methodology and discipline, the need for increased communication with local teachers, the policy to use only English at the schools, an inability to help students with special needs effectively, and responsibilities that go beyond those of a language assistant.

Palabras clave: Bilingual Education; Teacher Aides; English (Foreign Language); Native Speakers.

Abstract: Este artículo trata las dificultades encontradas por 40 auxiliares de conversación hablantes nativos de inglés que trabajaban en centros de enseñanza en la Comunidad de Madrid, según ellos informaron en sus portafolios durante los programas de Máster que realizaron en el mismo periodo. Los 187 comentarios obtenidos se analizaron para clasificarlos en grupos temáticos; los resultados confirman ideas de estudios previos, a la vez que remarcan retos no mencionados hasta la fecha. Algunos aspectos señalados fueron diferencias en las metodologías y la disciplina en el aula, la necesidad de una mayor comunicación con los profesores de los centros, la política de emplear sólo el inglés en las escuelas, una falta de capacidad para ayudar a los alumnos con necesidades especiales de forma eficaz, y responsabilidades que sobrepasan el papel del auxiliar.

Keywords: Educación Bilingüe; Auxiliares Docentes; Inglés (Lengua Extranjera); Hablantes Nativos.

I ntroduction

Numerous countries around the world employ native English speakers to teach or assist in their schools. The Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET) has been in operation since 1987, while the English Program in Korea (EPIK) was set up in 1995, and the Native-speaking English Teacher Scheme (NSET) began in Hong Kong in 1998. As a result of European Union initiatives to promote plurilingualism among citizens described, for example, by the Council of Europe's *Recommendation R (98) 6*, the different regions of Spain have also been hiring native speakers to work alongside local teachers. The Madrid region itself has several programs. One of these is an association of charter schools that receive public funding, which is supported through collaboration with several universities and was involved in this study. Programs such as these are based on the notion that native speakers, with their superior language competence (Medgyes, 1992), can provide a model of native-speaker pronunciation and increased opportunities for conversation and they can serve as representatives of the L2 culture (Méndez García & Pavón Vázquez, 2012; Tajino & Tajino, 2000). At the same time, they cater to a

tendency of students to prefer having a native-speaker teacher (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2002), and can serve to boost student learning as long as they are motivated at their positions within their schools (Meerman, 2003).

Many articles have been written on different schemes that involve the use of native speakers of English, and especially on those in East Asia. Some of the programs have encountered difficulties in incorporating them in the foreign classroom effectively as reviewed by Herbert and Wu (2009), but little has been published on the subject specifically from the point of view of the native speakers themselves. Nevertheless, their insights can be valuable for finding ways to improve their adjustment to and effectiveness in this type of programs. The present study involves 40 native English speakers who participated in a combined Master's degree program and teaching practicum in charter schools belonging to the association of private institutions mentioned above. It examines the statements made in their teaching portfolios, a requirement of the postgraduate degree program, to determine trends regarding challenges that they encountered in their school placement in the foreign setting. The comments were written freely in response to broad questions provided to the participants at the beginning of the academic year and, hence, can be considered unbiased by researcher influence.

1. Theoretical Framework

Studies focusing on the presence of native speakers and non-native speakers of English in classrooms around the world have led to a wide body of research beyond Widdowson's (1994) notion of ownership of English and Kachru's (1992) three circles of English. Some work addresses the question of native speakers and non-native speakers in the foreign language classroom (for example, Canagarajah, 1999; Benke & Medgyes, 2005; Medgyes, 1994), including the advantages of each or ways to take advantage of the strengths of each (Dormer, 2010; Luo, 2010; Medgyes, 1992; Tajino & Tajino, 2000). Other contributions deal with different programs, such as JET and EPIK, and their successfulness or lack thereof (Alderson, Pizorn,

Zemva & Beaver, 2001; Carless, 2006; Garton, 2013; Herbert and Wu, 2009; Jeon, 2009; Seargeant, 2011). Students' and teachers' attitudes towards the two groups in the classroom (Benke & Medgyes, 2005; Coşkun, 2013; Jenkins, 2007; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005; Wang, 2013) and workplace conflict and hiring practices (Houghton & Rivers, 2013) are also the subject of publications. Finally, the actual language characteristics of the two groups of speakers in the classroom are yet another area of research (Cots & Díaz, 2005; Dafouz & Hibler, 2013; Park, 2014; Rámila Díaz, 2009). In Spain, the presence of native speakers of English in the country's bilingual educational systems is now showing up in a small body of research focusing specifically on the figure of the "conversation assistant" or "language assistant." In particular, a few theses have been written or are now in progress. Like the present paper, these studies have the aim of finding ways of making the native speaker program more effective and satisfactory for everyone involved, including teachers, language assistants and students.

A number of common issues have been reported in terms of programs employing native speakers of English alongside non-native English-speaking teachers in primary and secondary schools in different countries. Carless (2006), Copland, Davis, Garton & Mann (2016), Herbert & Wu (2009) and Houghton & Rivers (2013) provide thorough discussions of difficulties reported in the literature regarding the programs in Hong Kong, Korea and Japan. For instance, the native speakers have often been viewed as not having enough training to teach and they are unable to discipline their classes. At the same time, the roles of the native speakers have been seen as unclear or in need of further development. Cultural differences including differing ideas on methodology because the local schools tend to place a heavy emphasis on exam preparation are also reported. The inability of the native speakers of English to use the host country language can add to the potential for cultural clashes, yet this lack of communicative ability reinforces their appeal as representatives of the target language and culture (Breckenridge & Erling, 2011; Seargeant, 2009). Finally, busy teaching schedules on the part of the local teachers have hindered chances for coordination with native speakers (Copland *et al.*, 2016).

The relatively recent body of research on language assistants in Spain echoes many of these difficulties, albeit with small groups of participants involved in studies to date. As is the case of many other programs both in and outside the country, the programs in the Madrid region normally require candidates to have completed some or all of their coursework towards a university degree, but they do not need to have a degree in Education (British Council, 2019; Colegios Bilingües Cooperativos, n.d.; Consejería de Educación, 2019; Ministerio de Educación, n.d.). The main function of the native speakers is to reinforce students' oral skills; they are not to manage groups, deal with discipline on their own, or be responsible for testing or curriculum design (Dirección General de Innovación, 2018a,b). Nevertheless, despite meeting the application requirements and sometimes surpassing them (Dafouz & Hibler, 2013), the native speakers have been viewed as needing more training (Buckingham, 2016; Gerena & Ramírez Verdugo, 2014; Hibler, 2010; Méndez García & Pavón Vázquez, 2012; Sánchez Torres, 2014; Scobling, 2011). There have also been calls for more information to guide teachers and assistants in collaborating and in understanding their roles and responsibilities (Buckingham, 2016; Méndez García & Pavón Vázquez, 2012; Tobin & Abello-Contesse, 2013). In fact, Hibler (2010) indicates that some language assistants had the impression they were going to be ambassadors of their countries' culture, while the classroom teachers were asked to team teach with them, although the regional school board does not consider the native speakers to be actual teachers. As a result of these experiences, an online training course for language assistants in the Madrid region was started by the Directorate General of Innovation, Scholarships and Teaching Aids. In addition, material on different ways of collaborating with a language assistant is now becoming available online (for example, Sauciuc & Vescan, n.d.).

Communication is another area that has been highlighted in studies carried out in Spain. The assistants in Hibler's (2010) study indicated that they wanted more information from the classroom teacher and, in fact, the aspect they liked least about their jobs was "working in an unplanned manner" (41). In similar studies, Scobling (2011) and Buckingham (2016) stress the need for communication as a form of

support for young native speakers who are adjusting to jobs and life in a new country. Difficulties related to discipline have also been reported. This can become an issue when native speakers are asked to work with small groups of students in a separate location (Hibler, 2010). Behavior management struggles may also be related to required class attendance, the relaxed atmosphere that native speakers promote when working in small groups, or the insistence that students speak using only the target language when they may not yet be prepared linguistically to do so (Ortega Cebberos, 2000).

Because few studies focus specifically on the point of view of native English-speaking conversation assistants and because the numbers of participants in the research conducted in Spain are generally limited, additional research on this area is of benefit. The present study examines the difficulties assistants report when working alongside local teachers in a foreign setting. It seeks to answer to the following questions:

1. What difficulties do native English-speaking language assistants report in working with local teachers?
2. Which of the problems are reported the most often among the schools?

2. Participants and Method

In order to examine the challenges that native English speakers encounter when working with local teachers in Madrid, this study worked with forty students enrolled in Master's degree programs in Bilingual and Multicultural Education and in International Education in the Instituto Franklin's Teach & Learn in Spain program during the 2014-2015 academic year. Both degree programs involved a nine-month teaching practicum as a language assistant at one of the cooperating schools, where they taught between 18 and 24 hours per week. The participants (henceforth, assistants) were mainly in their twenties and came mostly from the United States but a few from other countries also took part. Eight of them were men and 32 were women. An examination of their resumes, included in their teaching portfolios

for the Master's degrees, revealed that the members of the group as a whole were interested in foreign languages, particularly Spanish, and they had some experience in the classroom but did not necessarily have formal preparation to work as teachers.

Twenty-one different charter schools were indirectly involved in this study. The schools are located in different areas throughout the region of Madrid and, therefore, operate in various socio-economic backgrounds. Although the semi-private nature of the schools and the special nature of their association's bilingual project surely had an effect on the participants' perceptions, the varied contexts in which the schools are located assured a certain degree of representativeness of the schools. This means that the difficulties encountered by this group of native English speakers can quite probably be extrapolated to those of language assistants working in different schools in the other bilingual programs in Madrid.

As part of the requirements for the Master's degrees, the assistants were asked to complete a teaching portfolio, the main objective of which was for them to reflect on their teaching practicum experience in relation to their academic studies. In this sense, it was an opportunity for them to personalize the experience in writing, to review the contents of their courses considering their interests and experience, and to provide evidence of their teaching practice. The data for this research were taken from two required sections entitled "Most common problems and solutions" and "Suggestions." In the former, the participants were instructed to describe difficulties that they encountered and the solutions that they found to improve their situation at their teaching practicum, while the latter was a place for them to voice their ideas about how the classroom and/or Master's degree programs might be modified in the future. They were given no further instructions than those listed in the Appendix in order not to bias them in the content of their responses.

After the students submitted their final portfolios, the entries for the two sections were typed into a table in Word and then analyzed inductively to determine common themes based on their wording.

Hence, the categories emerged from the data. This analysis involved a combination of “key word analysis,” as described in Nunan and Bailey (2009), and a digital version of “the card sort technique” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which involves deciding whether each comment is addressing a similar or different theme to the others. In some cases, the entries were divided into several comments based on linguistic cues if more than one concern was addressed. The findings provide insight into challenges that may exist in the school system and their relative frequency so they can be taken into account by the schools and teachers.

3. Results

A total of 187 comments were obtained from the 40 portfolios. Each participant made between 1 and 12 comments, with a mean of 4.6 and a median of 5 per person. Table 1 lists the topics discussed in order of frequency that the participants mentioned them.

Table 1

Categories of problems mentioned by the assistants in their portfolios

Topic	Number of comments	Number of schools	Number of assistants
Teaching methodology	48	15	24
Discipline and classroom management	34	17	24
Communication	32	16	22
English	27	13	19
Materials	16	9	14
Assistants' role	14	10	11
Training in teaching English as a foreign language	7	5	6
Miscellaneous problems	9	6	7

Source: Original content purposely designed by author

Each school received between 1 and 16 comments. However, some schools employed only one assistant, while in other cases, up to seven of them were working at the same school. Hence, the number of native speakers affected the number of comments obtained by that particular school.

3.1. Teaching methodology

Concerns about the teaching methodology were the most numerous among the data. This category covers comments about how the subject matter was taught or about how the schools organized groups for teaching and it has been divided into four different subgroups. The fact that 24 language assistants at 15 of the 21 schools discussed these issues indicates that the situation was not isolated to a small number of schools or group of native English speakers, but instead that it was more widespread within the program and is worthy of note. The largest number of comments in this category, twenty, give the impression that the classroom teachers followed what the assistants considered to be a “traditional” methodology:

Unfortunately, most learning is done out of books, an aspect that I see as endemic to the Spanish education system as a whole... Every topic, regardless of how theoretical, should have some hands-on element incorporated (IE 10)¹.

They [teachers] do not guide discovery or open creative pathways towards self-directed learning (BI 9).

A second group of comments assigned to the category of teaching methodology relates to the assistants’ opinions that the schools had assigned them a large number of groups. Eleven people from different schools mentioned this matter. A number of the cooperating schools tend to distribute the practicum teaching hours into slots of as little as one hour per week per group so that the maximum number of students attending the school can have contact with a native speaker of English. The result is that the assistant can have up to fifteen or more groups but there is no further contact with them until the following week, a situation that has also been reported in South Korea (Egginton 1997, in Herbert & Wu, 2009; Jeon, 2009) and in Japan (Breckenridge & Erling, 2011). According to six of the eleven the comments, this distribution hindered the language assistant from getting to know the

¹The different participants in the study are identified with the abbreviations BI and IE for the Masters’ degrees in Bilingual Education and International Education respectively and their unique number.

students in the classrooms, creating a bond with them or encouraging them to learn as individuals. At the same time, the participants stated that they were unable to have continuity from one lesson to the next, and, therefore, could not see progress among their students. Another result of this organization of the groups, according to five of these participants, was that they had to prepare for too many classes and felt “spread too thin” (IE 6). The comment below is representative:

I teach 32 classes a week spanning across 8 different levels (26 in pre-school, 2 in primary, 3 in middle school and 1 in high school)... It is nearly impossible to remember every student’s name, which can be frustrating (BI 20).

A third aspect related to teaching methods that appears in the portfolio comments concerns students with special needs or immigrants in the mainstream classroom. The native English speakers were interested in helping these pupils but felt unable to do so because they did not receive guidance from the schools and/or teachers. Teachers in the Madrid region have actually indicated that additional help to assist students with special learning difficulties would be beneficial (Fernández & Halbach, 2010). In some cases, however, the native speakers in the present study were shocked at the classroom teachers’ attitudes because they interpreted them as being racist. Seven of the comments, all from different schools, related to special needs, and are exemplified below:

Children with learning difficulties do not have a study plan and the teacher with the class does not usually have the knowledge or training to work with the child and try to incorporate them into the classroom. In English class they often seem very confused and quite regularly disrupt the class because they feel bored or frustrated (BI 12).

They [teachers] will often mention that all Chinese kids are especially smart and advanced, so they are not concerned with teaching them when they are struggling, because they will “quickly catch on, like all Asians do” (BI 23).

The remaining comments assigned to the category of teaching methodology include a variety of different concerns. For example, two

of the native English speakers questioned the effectiveness of the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) methodology, one at the theoretical level and the other at the practical level in terms of how his school was implementing it. Another three assistants mentioned concerns about testing, an issue that appears in other places in this study below. In one case, the native speaker indicated that the oral exam criteria were “subjective” and that “no one seems to know exactly what is being evaluated” (BI 8), while in the other two cases, the assistants commented on the importance placed on preparation for Cambridge and Trinity exams in class time starting in January.

3.2. Discipline and classroom management

The next major category observed in the results, Discipline and Classroom Management, relates to student disruptions in class and the classroom teachers’ reactions to this behavior, as well as the day-to-day running of the classes. Again, a large number of native speakers (24) and schools (17) means that this area is worth examining in detail, as it most likely represents a situation that extends beyond this bilingual program. Nevertheless, it should be noted that one school received seven comments in this category. Twenty-seven comments, the majority, mentioned children’s talking, getting out of their chairs or other behaviors during class, and/or teachers’ reactions. The native English speakers were surprised at the level of “noise” heard in the classes and indicated that there is less talking in classrooms in their home countries. At the same time, they were shocked to observe that many teachers resorted to “yelling” to call their groups to order, normally in Spanish, a practice that disrupted the flow of activities in the classroom. Some illustrative examples of comments follow:

It is nearly impossible to expect students to be able to engage in meaning-making when the classroom culture is chaos. Unfortunately, in many of the classrooms I have participated in at my practicum, the content and good intentions of the teachers are overshadowed by a lack of behavior management strategies. There are very few classrooms with clear expectations for behavior incentives, and consequences (BI 1).

For most U.S. teachers, if one kid talks out of turn, it is enough for us to take action (BI 10).

One of the comments indicated that the native speaker would have liked more assistance from the regular teachers in disciplining the classes: “Even though I was told that there would always be another teacher for discipline in my classes, there is sometimes not...” (IE 2). Five of the comments related to student misbehavior in special extra-curricular classes set up to help students reinforce their language level. The reason for disruptions suggested in two cases was the fact that students did not receive a grade for the classes, a situation also reported in South Korea (Jeon, 2009): “Since there is no grade given for the extracurricular classes, there is little motivation to participate or do better” (BI 24).

The remaining seven comments related to classroom management. They covered a variety of issues, such as working towards motivating the students and teaching them to raise their hands. Mention was also made of assuring that everything was “fair and equal between students” (BI 17), and assisting students to become more responsible in coming prepared to class, submitting homework, and putting away materials at the end of class time. Another comment indicated that there was a high level of competitiveness amongst the students.

3.3. Communication

The subject of communication was the third most frequent issue observed among the data. The fact that 16 of the 21 participating schools were represented by 32 comments from 22 teachers again reveals a situation that most likely extends to more schools and bilingual programs. Overall, the data in this category indicated that the assistants wanted more information from classroom teachers as well as the administration. This perceived lack of communication began as early as day one, as one language assistant indicated that she was not expected on the first day of school and another two people mentioned not having a schedule when they started. The most frequently reported type of communication problem (12 comments) was difficulties in

coordinating with various classroom teachers. If an assistant works with 5 or more teachers, each of whom has a different timetable, meeting with them on a regular basis is extremely difficult. Complicating this matter is the fact that some teachers find integrating assistants into classes time consuming (Gerena & Ramírez Vergudo, 2014) and the finding that teachers themselves indicate that they have little time for meetings (Fernández & Halbach, 2010). Yet, the native speakers would have liked an idea of the overall curriculum plan and the week-to-week work to be covered so that they could prepare for their classes. While it was not mentioned in the portfolio comments, some of these assistants may have expected from the start to participate in the planning of lessons, as was the case among the participants in Buckingham (2018). Another common issue (8 comments) was that teachers and/or schools did not inform the native English speakers in advance of class cancellations or modifications to timetables. The following are representative comments of this category:

Early on in the teaching practicum I found that setting up a time to meet with my teachers to plan lessons was a bit complicated. It was difficult to know what was expected of me in class when I was unaware of the lesson or topic of the day (BI 13).

A typical class goes like this: I walk into class and the teacher tells me where she left off and how much she wants me to get through for that class period (IE 5).

Nonetheless, the native English speakers viewed the lack of communication as a product of disorganization, as opposed to ill intentions. Reported misunderstandings were rare. Two, nonetheless, were found, as observed below:

When there is a need to communicate about a problem, it is very indirect. For example, in my English class with three-year students, I had been instructing without any apparent problems and the main teacher would always greet me warmly and work with me as I requested. The other Auxiliaries [sic] had the same experience. But later, the older Auxiliary [sic] told us that these teachers wanted us to move the students around more. We all wondered why these teachers did not tell us directly because, if they had, we would have

been happy to change it. This is a problem because I want to help the teachers and not hinder them (IE 5).

Since I am in this class only once a week, it was hard to maintain contact between the two of us and I was never updated on the lesson plans or activities the students were doing in class. Because of this reason, the teacher took the lead and did all the lessons while I simply watched her. After the lessons were finished, I would help the children with their classwork and assignments but I was never able to lead any exercises... She thought I was uncomfortable with the material in the book and I thought she did not want me teaching the class (BI 4).

These two cases reflect differing styles of communication and are worthy of note. Nevertheless, the assistants and classroom teachers were able to adapt to each other's communication styles and expectations later in the school year according to additional comments in the portfolios.

3.4. English

The final major category observed among the data relates to different aspects of English, including the English-only policy language assistants are required to follow in the bilingual program, the levels of English encountered in the classroom, and the perceived lack of confidence on the part of children in using the language. The overall number of comments (27), schools (13) and assistants (19) represented here was slightly lower than the first three categories discussed but they are still worthy of note as they represented about half the participants. Thirteen of these comments discussed the policy of using only English in the classroom. Five of these concerned the classroom teachers' speaking Spanish in class and another five indicated that the students did not understand instruction in English or had difficulties in the foreign language classroom setting. Three of these comments about the teachers' speaking Spanish related specifically to discipline but have been counted here as opposed to in section 3.2 because they explicitly mentioned the issue of the English language policy, and the other two indicated that the teachers used Spanish for instruction. Some examples are as follows:

The lack of English used in ‘normal’ English classes taught by Spanish English teachers results in increased problems for native English speaking teachers where classes are expected to be conducted 100% in English.... They [students] are often confused in class (BI 24).

When a teacher conducts the class in their first language, they [students] lose all incentive to attempt communication in English (IE 10).

The remaining three comments about the language policy concerned the assistants themselves and their having difficulties using English all day in class (for example, indicating that it was exhausting), and the specification that some staff did not know English.

Another nine comments in the overall category of English referred to the assistants’ impressions of class levels. Six of the entries pointed out differences in levels within the same classroom, while the other three revealed that the native speakers thought the overall class levels were low. It should be highlighted here, however, that the six comments corresponded to two schools only, and in the case of the other three comments, the participants had no prior experience as English teachers, so they may have expected a higher level from the start.

The final five entries related to English stated that the students in the classes did not have confidence when speaking English. As a result, they needed some time to “acclimate to being taught in English” (IE 12). The students also seemed to feel “intense pressure... from their peers when speaking English in front of other students” (BI 17).

3.5 Other categories

The remaining categories were the subject of far fewer comments than the four categories in the above sections. For example, seven of the sixteen comments regarding materials related to the fact that a recently founded school had few books and other materials. There were also three complaints about the photocopying procedures at

different schools and five indications of ICT problems such as faulty internet connections or unreliable computers.

The role of the language assistant is the most interesting of these minor categories as it is fundamental if the native speakers are to be used productively, yet it only yielded 14 of the 187 comments. At the same time, the subject of roles has come up in a number of prior publications. For example, Hibler (2010) indicates that the participants in her study were unsure about their responsibilities and Buckingham (2018) found that the initial expectations and later experiences of the assistants answering her questionnaire did not match, while Gerena & Ramírez Verdugo (2014) found that the assistants' responsibilities varied from school to school. Seven of the comments in the present study, all from different schools, related to the assistants' feeling that their role was unclear or that the different classroom teachers had varying ideas regarding their role in the classroom. Two of these comments indicated that the native speakers had expected and wanted to be able to observe more classes than they were able to do. In addition, at times the schools violated the guidelines of the Madrid regional educational authorities (Dirección General de Innovación, 2018a, b), which prohibit the language assistants from having full responsibility for classes. The next example is revealing in this regard:

When I first entered the classroom as an Auxiliary [sic], none of the teachers understood what to do with me. Some allowed me to sit and observe, while others handed me the book and expected me to create a lesson on the spot. And still in other cases, I was given a classroom full of students and told I was their main teacher for the year (IE 5).

Another challenge that appeared in two comments on the role of the assistant was the expectation that the native English speaker should evaluate the students and that they should have sole responsibility for preparing them for official exams, tasks which the assistants felt unprepared to do and which they should not be assigned (Dirección General de Innovación, 2018a, b). The participants in Buckingham (2018) did not expect to have this responsibility either, yet the majority actually performed similar duties.

Two more comments indicated that the native speaker would have liked more responsibility. However, one of these was made by a participant who had been trained as a classroom teacher and had more than five years' experience and can, therefore, not be taken as representative of language assistants' feelings. The remaining comments regarding the role related to the non-native speakers' expectations, for example, the teacher's presumption that the assistant should know how to pronounce scientific words on demand.

The next category, training, normally brought out feelings of insecurity, as seen here:

The auxiliaries [sic] are required to teach both Cambridge preparation and Conversation classes, but unlike in Primary, we teach them without a lead teacher... We are not trained in Cambridge preparation as auxiliaries [sic] and often times we feel hopeless and confused (BI 4).

The seven comments regarding training reflected the native speakers' needing more background in test preparation (3 comments) and their not feeling like teachers yet (2 comments). Another person mentioned difficulties related to not knowing differences between British and American English and the last comment reported that the EFL coordinator of the school had difficulties providing the assistants "adequate training" (BI 2).

The nine comments in the final category were grouped as "miscellaneous" as they related to situations affecting only one native speaker in each case. For example, one assistant mentioned having to substitute for the other native speakers because they took time off without providing any reason for doing so. In another case, an assistant had been asked to work on a business project for the classes for five months with the result that the students missed other class content.

4. Discussion

This study brings to light three issues in classrooms that make use of native speakers as language assistants to which little attention has been paid in published research. The first of these is related to the English language. It is interesting to note that the data collected here revealed that both local teachers and students, as well as some of the language assistants, had difficulties in following the English only policy in force at the schools. It may be of interest to allow some flexibility in the policy, for example, when language assistants want to take charge of disciplining their classes during an activity they are leading so as not to lose face with the students when the classroom teacher does so, or when they notice student fatigue. In fact, Méndez García and Pavón Vázquez (2012) have already documented cases when the main classroom teachers and native English assistants use the students' mother tongue for a variety of purposes including clarification of difficult content. This is an example of what Macaro (2005) refers to as the “message-oriented functions” of codeswitching, “a useful communication strategy” because it saves time (69). Copland *et al.* (2016) also recommend considering judicial use of the students' native language.

A second issue raised in this study concerns testing. This situation was reported by ten assistants from eight schools across the different categories observed in the data, so it is not an isolated case. Even though the native speakers of English were surprised at the exam emphasis and the washback effect it had on classes, this was not the most significant problem here. Instead, it is of more concern that some schools appeared to have violated the Madrid regional policies in assigning assistants the responsibilities of preparing rubrics for internal exams or evaluating students, the latter of which was also found in Buckingham (2018). In addition, the assistants had not been trained to perform these duties and did not feel confident to do so. A new online course offered by the Madrid regional school board does include samples of external exams and resources as part of its syllabus, which is a step towards providing the assistants with help regarding external exam preparation, but measures need to be taken to ensure that the native speakers are not used primarily for the this purpose (Dirección

General de Innovación, 2018a, b). The fact that a large percentage of the 81 assistants surveyed in Buckingham (2018) felt that one of their contributions to their schools was exam preparation reveals that this is, in fact, a common practice.

The third new finding in this study is related to students with special educational needs including recently arrived speakers of other languages. Seven comments representing different schools revealed that the native speakers of English felt that they did not receive guidance on how to assist these members of the classroom and/or that they had interpreted local teacher comments as racist. This issue may be linked to the assistants' expectations based on their experience in their home countries. In the United States separate classrooms and additional support for students with special needs or those learning English upon arrival in the country can be provided by schools, and foreign language classes can be taught using the students' first language. Further research is needed to examine in more depth the assistants' view of teacher comments as being racist so that measures for improved understanding and practices can be undertaken.

The remaining findings in this study support those reported for other programs employing native English speakers. In particular, differences in expectations regarding teaching methodologies and discipline in the classroom have been noted both here and in studies around the world. This situation could stem from differences in the orientation of education and schools in the English-speaking countries compared to other countries, as the participants in the Master's degree program have tended to prefer experience-based learning and a more practical focus, as opposed to learning based on memorization of facts and use of a textbook. Because this issue has been reported in other countries, and not just in this study, it can safely be asserted that this difficulty has not arisen from the native speakers' learning about these methodologies in their M.A. courses, though it could be an additional factor. Nevertheless, a way must be found to tap into the native English speakers' educational experiences while respecting and upholding the local educational tradition. Increased dialogue and flexibility between the parties involved at all levels is a first step.

In terms of discipline, the native English speakers' lack of ability to use the local language has been suggested as a cause for this problem in some cases (Ahn, Park & Ono, 1998, and Boyle, 1997, both in Herbert & Wu, 2009). However, the comments collected from the teaching portfolios here suggest that the problem may be related to cultural differences, students' not receiving a grade for some of the classes taught by the native speaker of English, or the policy of using only English in the classroom despite knowledge of the host country language of Spanish. This could also be a question of lack of teaching experience as the assistants were generally not trained and practiced teachers and, hence, may have lacked confidence. Assistants need to be forewarned of differences in classroom behavior to assist them in their adjustment.

Another frequent problem observed in this study, communication, also echoes findings in the other studies from Spain described above, suggesting that this is a local issue that must be addressed in this country. The language assistants in this research indicated that they wanted more guidance more often from the local teachers. They claimed that the classroom teachers did not have time to coordinate with them, so they had to improvise and, as in Hibler's (2010) study, felt uncomfortable having to do so. At the same time, some of them did not receive warning in the event of changes in timetables. These findings coincide with the OECD's TALIS report (2009), which ranks teachers in Spain lowest among all the participating countries in terms of professional level collaboration. Nevertheless, increased effort is being made to coordinate with assistants, even if it is at an informal level (Lova Mellado, Bolarín Martínez & Porto Currás, 2013), especially since communication and planning are vital for successful partnerships between native and non-native teaching pairs (Copland *et al.*, 2016). While the situation appears to be a cultural difference, some of it may also relate to the assistants' having limited teaching experience. Given these two factors, assistants should be provided early on with a clear indication of what (not) to expect in their schools, an idea of what local teachers and schools expect of them (for example, independence and initiative), and

practical, feasible ways of being an asset to the classroom. In addition, schools need to find a channel to communicate early on basic information such as changes in schedules. The language assistant program guide for schools (Dirección General de Innovación, 2018a) is a step in this direction as it provides suggestions for schools and teachers on what and how to communicate effectively with assistants.

A challenge reported less frequently in this study, the role of the language assistant, seems to be a larger issue in Asia, and in the other studies from Spain discussed in Buckingham (2018), as opposed to the program examined here. Nevertheless, the fact that the native speaker's role has come up in a variety of studies suggests that it should not be taken lightly despite the present findings.

Conclusion

This study brings to light some difficulties encountered by native English-speaking classroom assistants that have not been reported in earlier research but are likely to exist beyond the participants here given a certain degree of representativeness of the schools involved, as explained in section 2 above. Two of these findings, challenges related to the English only policy in the schools and a lack of guidance for helping students with special needs, probably reflect cultural differences and expectations. Another finding of this study is that some schools appear to be assigning their language assistants duties such as evaluation of students that have been listed as not being the responsibility of the assistants in the handbook for the program. For this reason, a review of schools' use of these native speakers is in order. Finally, this study echoes the findings of earlier work both in Spain and elsewhere that reveals that the assistants found it difficult to adjust in this order of reported frequency to the "traditional" teaching methodology with a heavy focus on exams, the discipline practices in the classroom, and a lack of communication.

It would be of interest to confirm whether cultural differences and expectations, as well as limited teaching experience and training,

are at the root of these difficulties. Further research using more objective, in-depth methods can lead to the development of measures beyond an online training course and a guidebook for schools in order to assist the native speakers in adjusting to working in classrooms in Spain and to help them to feel more comfortable in their roles so that they can perform optimally in their work. Their points of view, in particular on teaching methodology and discipline, contrast sharply with the practices of many of the classroom teachers in this study, so a way to take advantage of the positive aspects of the different forms of education must be found.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr. Ana Halbach and the reviewers for their comments on an earlier version of this paper and the Instituto Franklin of Universidad de Alcalá for the possibility to undertake this research.

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Appendix

Extract from the instructions on completing the Teaching Portfolio. The sections relevant to this study are in italics.

The portfolio should be approximately 50 pages (45-55 pages). It should specifically include the sections listed below and each one should start on a new page. The numbers indicate a suggested number of pages to be written about each subject.

- Title page: title, your name, the course name: “Memoria,” professor name, the name of the Master’s degree, and the date of submission. 1 page
- Table of contents. 1 page
- A description of the current teaching practicum: name of the school, address, detailed description of the classes taught and responsibilities, an explanation of the materials developed and any participation in school projects, etc. 2-3 pages
- A description of what the current teaching practicum experience means to you. Why did you want to do the teaching practicum? What other things are you getting from the experience? 2 pages
- An evaluation of the school and cooperating teachers. Include the teacher observation forms from the beginning of the school year (cut and paste or scan them, as opposed to retyping them). Then reflect on how your opinion has changed since submitting the forms in the fall. 2-3 pages plus 2-3 forms.
- *The most common problems encountered at the school and strategies for dealing with them. This is a place where you can show how you are proactive in handling difficult situations. Mention the problem and the circumstances surrounding it, and then indicate what you did to improve the situation. 2-3 pages*
- *Suggestions and comments. Here you can describe the situations that are out of your control but that you think should be considered. 1-2 pages.*
- Reflections on your experience in the Master's Degree courses. Explain your overall impression of the program and the courses here. 1-2 pages.
- Personal reflections on the course contents. There should be three separate sections on areas of interest to the student teacher. 4-5 pages each.
- The future (optional). Where do you want to go from here in the teaching profession? What steps, if any, have you taken in this direction? 1-2 pages.
- Documentation. 15-20 pages.