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(Re)constructed Narratives of Three Expatriate English Language Teachers' Challenges in Turkiye's K12 Contexts

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences of three expatriate English language teachers working in private K12 schools in Istanbul, Turkiye. Using a narrative inquiry approach, it examines how professional and cultural dynamics shape their teaching practices, identity formation, and well-being. Participants, who were diverse in national, racial, and linguistic background, were initially drawn to Turkiye by personal motivations and a desire for cultural exchange rather than financial gain. While Istanbul offered cultural richness and social diversity, all three teachers encountered workplace tensions, particularly exclusion and lack of support from local colleagues. These challenges, along with linguistic and institutional barriers, hindered their professional integration and motivation to a considerable extent. The study also highlights subtle but persistent forms of discrimination, often rooted in exclusionary behaviors and native-speaker biases. Although participants experienced varying degrees of social acceptance, their professional struggles remained central. Findings emphasize the need for schools to foster inclusive environments through structured onboarding, cultural sensitivity, and collaborative staff relationships. By bringing attention to the nuanced challenges expatriate English language teachers face, this research contributes to a more holistic understanding of teacher mobility, intercultural competence, and the evolving global English language teaching landscape.

Keywords: ELT in Türkiye; expatriate English language teachers; local English language teachers; Native English-Speaking Teachers (NESTs); Non-Native English-Speaking Teachers (NNESTs)

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Introduction

The rapid advancement of technology and globalization has reinforced the role of English as the global lingua franca of entertainment, diplomacy, trade, telecommunications, and scientific communication. As Jung and Choe (2024) note, the rising need for global communication in English leads to a parallel surge in the demand for English teachers. This worldwide demand fuels the growth of the English language teaching (ELT) market. With this demand comes consumer preferences, especially for "native" or foreign English speakers over local, non-native teachers. As Chen and Cheng (2010) observe, such preferences entice more English teachers to work abroad, particularly in countries with high learner demand. Many pursue international teaching for cultural exposure, travel, and adventure (Frederiksen, 2014; Kissau et al., 2019), a lifestyle often idealized in international job advertisements (Mackenzie, 2021). However, teaching abroad is not without trade-offs. Golis (2025) warns of emotional and professional sacrifices, while Kumazawa (2013) highlights that English teachers often face a jarring disconnect between expectations and the realities of their work. This expectation-reality gap significantly results in professional demotivation (McMurray, 2023).

Similar to the recent trends worldwide, Turkiye has been experiencing an increase in the number of expatriate language teachers (Jalilzadeh et al., 2024). Against this backdrop, I explore the lived experiences of three expatriate English teachers working in private K12 schools in Istanbul, Turkiye. The aim is to critically examine how the realities of teaching abroad, particularly in the Turkish context, shape their professional identities and everyday challenges. By shedding light into their stories, I seek to illuminate the nuanced complexities and tensions they face while living and teaching in a foreign educational and sociocultural landscape. The following research questions guide this study:

1. How do expatriate English language teachers narrate their lived experiences regarding their personal and professional life in Istanbul, Turkiye?
2. To what extent do these teachers believe that they are discriminated against in the ELT contexts of Istanbul?
3. Have these teachers experienced any tensions while working in private K12 schools in İstanbul?

Background Literature

The global education market is rapidly evolving to meet the changing needs of learners and the associated stakeholders. The global market for English language learning was worth $27.43 billion in 2023, is estimated to be USD 54.8 billion in 2025, and will continue expanding in the near future with a 9.95% rise reaching $61.02 billion in 2031 (Adroit Market Research, 2024). This growth has led to an increased demand for English teachers, prompting K–12 schools around the world to hire expatriate English language teachers from both English-speaking and non-English-speaking countries.

Expatriate English Language Teachers and the Challenges They Face

While moving abroad is often a personal choice, it inevitably pushes individuals beyond their comfort zones, presenting a range of social, economic, and professional challenges (Keleş & Yazan, 2022). Research shows that expatriate language teachers commonly encounter these difficulties when working in non-English-speaking settings (e.g., Kasimi & Hangişi, 2021; Prazeres, 2017;

Simpson, 2008; Tran, 2018). A key issue is their unfamiliarity with local languages and cultures, which often results in frustration, isolation, and workplace stress (Prazeres, 2017).

Expatriate English language teachers may struggle to understand students' cultural backgrounds, native languages, religious beliefs, communication norms, and lifestyles (Alshakhi & Le Ha, 2020; Altaai & Gokgoz-Kurt, 2023; Hettiarachchi, 2013). This gap may hinder expatriate language teachers' ability to connect with students and build meaningful relationships, which over time may affect their motivation to teach, hamper their teaching performance (Hettiarachchi, 2013), reducing the overall quality of instruction at their school. Additionally, various studies highlight these challenges in different national contexts. For instance, Chen and Cheng's (2010) case study of three Black expatriate NESTs from South Africa and working in Taiwan revealed students' negative reactions to their "non-American" English accents and a lack of support from local staff regarding classroom management. Similarly, Frederiksen's (2014) research on four expatriate NNESTs from Philippines found that, although they earned better salaries and had working conditions compared to local NNESTs, cultural unfamiliarity and language barriers significantly undermined the expatriate NNESTs' motivation to keep working as expatriate teachers. That is, as they encountered communication problems with the locals regarding their intercultural communicative competencies, their willingness to stay and work diminished over time.

In her autoethnographic study, Tran (2018) narrated her English language teaching experiences as an expatriate NNEST in the US, where classroom dynamics differed sharply from those in Vietnam. For her, the American students were more vocal and willing to challenge authority, contrasting with the deferential attitudes of Vietnamese learners. For Tran, such contrasts in classroom culture contributed to a profound sense of culture shock. Additional disruptive behaviors cited by Bresnahan and Cai (2000) included vulgar language, lateness, classroom inattentiveness, and inappropriate conduct, which are all behaviors unfamiliar or unacceptable in many teachers' home cultures.

Expatriate English Language Teachers in Turkiye and the Challenges They Encounter

In Turkiye, English has been associated with modernization and westernization in the past few decades (Keleş, 2023; Keleş et al., 2024a, 2024b; Keleş & Yazan, 2021; Ordem, 2022; Sarıgül, 2018), particularly in urban private schools where demand for English proficiency is high (Doğançay-Aktuna, 2010). Therefore, until recently, the hiring of expatriate English language teachers especially those perceived as "native" speakers grew rapidly in cities like Istanbul. Until recently, K-12 schools recruited NESTs "to attract attention from students and parents and increase their enrollment rates" (Çelik, 2006, p. 372; Selvi, 2021, 2025). School administrators and parents commonly held the belief that expatriate NESTs were better-suited and more effective teachers for language learners in Turkiye, foregrounding them over local NNESTs . Even though the local NNESTs held a university degree in English language Teaching and had better language teaching experience and skills, expatriate NESTs had a higher chance of recruitment (Tatar, 2011) since they spoke English fluently with either a British or American accent and since they looked more "western" than local NNESTs (Sarıgül, 2018).

However, while Turkiye has expanded efforts to attract expatriate teachers by offering competitive packages and greater cultural inclusivity (Jalilzadeh et al., 2024), many challenges persist. Tümtürk and Deniz (2025) found that expatriate NESTs often leave due to political concerns, cultural differences, economic instability, and security-related anxieties. Given the scarcity of expatriate NESTs, Turkish K–12 institutions increasingly recruit expatriate NNESTs, requiring students to interact with them in English (Altaai & Gokgoz-Kurt, 2023). The EFL market in Turkiye has thus become more diverse, multicultural, and inclusive, supported by government incentives such as competitive salaries and recognition of religious holidays (Jalilzadeh et al., 2024).

However, expatriate English language teachers in Turkiye still face significant challenges, including language barriers and cultural adjustment. A first and foremost challenge for these teachers in Turkiye is the language gap. Frederiksen (2014) stresses that not knowing the local/official language can limit a teacher's effectiveness in classroom management and rapport building. Yurtbaşı's (2016) study on expatriate language teachers mispronouncing students' names revealed that such errors can negatively affect student morale and classroom relationships.

Institutional and interpersonal challenges are also prominent. Han and Mahzoun (2017) conducted one of the earliest studies on demotivating factors for expatriate language teachers in Turkiye. In these authors' study, two expatriate NESTs (one from the US and one from the UK) reported a lack of respect from students, poor communication with administrators, and weak collegial support. More recently, Kasimi and Hangişi (2021) studied four expatriate language teachers from the US, Nigeria, and Iran working in Sivas, Turkiye. They identified several sources of demotivation including student misbehavior (e.g., shouting, walking around), unrealistic parental expectations, insufficient collaboration among staff, overcrowded classrooms, excessive workloads, inadequate salaries, and lack of recognition from administrators.

Despite Turkiye's multicultural and inclusive aspirations, these studies suggest that systemic shortcomings continue to affect expatriate English language teachers' well-being and performance. Teachers are often unprepared for the hierarchical nature of Turkish educational institutions, where pleasing parents and maintaining the school's image can take precedence over pedagogical autonomy. This dynamic may particularly surprise the language teachers accustomed to different standards of professionalism and teacher authority.

Methodology

This study utilized narrative inquiry as situated and operationalized by

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) for whom it is both a methodology and a conceptual framework. Conceptually, narrative inquiry aligns with the interpretive naturalistic approach to qualitative data (Kutsyuruba & Stasel, 2023). Therefore, the study focused on making sense of the participants' own interpretation of their lived experiences. This approach is a common practice in narrative inquiry, which "attempts to understand the meaning teachers and learners make of their lived (as well as imagined) experiences" (Barkhuizen, 2022, p. 3).

Throughout, the manuscript centers on and around the parallelism in the participants' lived experiences. Drawing on Barkhuizen et al.'s (2024) conceptualization of narrative analysis, the study aimed to transform non-narrative data into personal stories. Specifically, it is based on data from three journal entries written by three expatriate language teachers as well as three consecutive interviews conducted with them about their lived experiences before and while working at K12 schools in Istanbul, Turkiye.

Participants were purposefully selected since in this strategy "particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately to provide information that is particularly relevant to your questions and goals, and that can't be gotten as well from other choices" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 99). Against this backdrop, the participants (Adam, Mary, and César; pseudonyms) are all expatriate English teachers coming from different backgrounds working at private K12 schools in Istanbul (see Table 1). Their diverse backgrounds provided enriched data and offered me a profound and comparative lens.

Table 1
The Participants' Personal Information

	Adam	Mary	César
Gender	M	F	M
Age	29	28	32
Citizenship	South Africa	Canada	Brazil
Racial Identity	White	Arab	Black
L1s	English	English, French	Portuguese
Education	No college degree	BA with double major in Linguistics and Psychology	Pursuing a BA in Foreign Languages
ELT experience before Türkiye	Thailand – 2 years	Canada – 1 year China – 1 year Morocco – 1 year	Brazil – 6 years
ELT experience in Türkiye	2.5 months	1.5 years	6 years
Teaching certificate	TEFL	TESOL	TEFL
Levels taught	Elementary graders; Middle schoolers	Kindergarteners	Middle Schoolers; Adults

As seen in Table 1, they all come from varied national and racial backgrounds with differing prior teaching experience before moving to Istanbul, Turkiye.

Data Collection Tools and Procedure

The participants were approached verbally before the study was initiated to ensure that they consented to participate. All participants went through the same data collection procedure, which took place in three consecutive rounds. For each round, the participants were given a prompt to write a journal entry (JE). Once they completed their JE, they were interviewed face-to-face as explained in detail in Table 2 below. Each interview was conducted in two steps. Step one included a broad question such as: "Can you please tell me what you remember about your pre-departure," "Please describe the challenges you went through before coming to Turkiye," and so on. In the second step, the questions referred to the JEs as the participants were asked questions like: "You said that […]. Please elaborate on that?" or "You mentioned […] in your journal entry. Do you remember anything else about that?" Doing so, the participants were motivated to provide more details and more depth to their studies. Once the participants were interviewed in three rounds, a final interview followed to make clarifications or ask for more details about previous interview topics.

Table 2
Data Collection Procedure

Data Source	Challenges/ Tensions	Media	Length		
			Adam	Mary	César
Journal entry 1	Pre-arrival in İstanbul	Email	785 w	3006 w	247 w
Interview 1	Pre-arrival in İstanbul	Audio	47.45 m	49.30 m	54.17 m
Journal entry 2	First months in İstanbul	Email	460 w	652 w	914 w
Interview 2	First months in İstanbul	Audio	54.31 m	51.20 m	56.59 m
Journal entry 3	Current experiences in İstanbul	Email	502 w	275 w	570 w
Interview 3	Current experiences in İstanbul	Audio	45.29 m	40.45 m	53.11 m
Follow-up interviews	All three periods	Audio	21.05 m	27.34 m	22.53 m

Note. w: words; m: minutes

As Table 2 demonstrates, data were collected in a chronological order meaning that the three rounds of data collections focused on three consecutive periods of time (pre-arrival, first arrival, and current life in Istanbul). The participants first wrote a journal entry reflecting on their thoughts/beliefs/emotions regarding their lived experiences of each time period. Then, open coding was used to analyze their journal entry's content, which made up for the foundation of the following semi-structured narrative interview questions. According to Barkhuizen et al. (2024), semi-structured narrative interview questions are generally open-ended which encourage participants to talk about their lived experiences through anecdotes, which are later used by the researchers to develop stories. Once the journal entries and interviews were completed, a follow-up interview was conducted to discuss and clarify any contradiction, ambiguity, and/or memories. During and after the interviews, field notes were taken to pin down the critical moments in the participants' lives as these moments would "show rather than tell" the participants' narratives. (Ellis, 1997, p. 2). Using these field notes helped with data triangulation as they provided another dimension into data analysis which increased the trustworthiness of the study (Maxwell, 2013).

All the interviews were audio recorded. Then these recordings were transcribed and copied into Word format with the help of an online transcription program (www.temi.com). At first, these transcriptions were coded phrase-by-phrase to grasp the content in a profound way. Then, the transcriptions were re-read three times over a period of two weeks to comprehend and recall the lived experiences of the participants in detail. After each round of reading the transcriptions, each participants' lived experiences were (re)viewed and (re)created in the form of short story. These scripts were the foundation of the narrative inquiry. After several drafts, three stories were streamlined and presented in the following by adding quotations where necessary.

Findings

Adam's Story

Adam, a 29-year-old white male from coastal South Africa, arrived in Istanbul two months before he participated in this study. He had already secured a teaching job as an expatriate NEST at a private K12 school. Holding a TEFL certificate but no college degree, Adam had previously taught in Bangkok, Thailand, for two years. His move to Turkiye was partly personal as his partner had found a job in Istanbul; and partly professional, prompted by a last-minute vacancy at a private school due to COVID-19 travel restrictions.

Adam's Lived Experience as an Expatriate NEST in Istanbul. Living in Kadıköy, a multicultural district, Adam was initially drawn to Istanbul's reputation as a cosmopolitan city. However, his first impressions were mixed. Despite expecting a globally oriented population, he was surprised by the language barrier. Even at the airport, he struggled to communicate in English, finding staff "grumpy and unhelpful." His assumption that English would be widely spoken clashed with the linguistic reality on the ground.

Still, Adam felt more at ease in Istanbul compared to Thailand. In Bangkok, his physical looks with blond hair and blue eyes made him stand out and often objectified. Thai women frequently took photos of him without consent, which he found intrusive. In contrast, Istanbul allowed him a degree of anonymity. "Here, I blend in more. I feel a little bit invisible," he shared. Though he occasionally drew curiosity, he was not exoticized to the same extent.

Over time, Adam began to appreciate Turkish culture's warmth. Locals were curious about his background and welcoming toward foreigners. Unlike Thailand, where his "foreign"ness often reinforced social distance, in Istanbul he experienced a more open social atmosphere. While he struggled "with the loud, seemingly aggressive communication style of the people around [him], especially at work," he came to understand it as cultural rather than hostile.

Tensions in Private K12 School Contexts. Adam's teaching experience in Istanbul revealed a set of unique professional challenges. Compared to his previous job in Bangkok, his current school had higher expectations and a more structured environment. He was surprised by the professionalism of his Turkish colleagues and the thorough onboarding process. Despite his limited time to prepare for the school year, staff were supportive, helping him transition smoothly. However, not all challenges were institutional. One major issue was student behavior. Adam found Turkish students more assertive and less disciplined than Thai students. In his view, students from wealthy families sometimes displayed a sense of entitlement: "You'd ask them to sit down, and they'd say, 'No, I'll get up if I want.'" While he did not attribute this directly to Turkish culture, he believed affluence played a significant role in shaping students' attitudes.

Classroom management emerged as a persistent difficulty. According to Adam, international teachers in his school struggled more than locals in handling student behavior. The cultural mismatch in teaching style and authority may explain this. His Turkish colleagues, many of whom had stricter approaches informed by their own upbringing, were often more successful than him in managing student dynamics.

Outside the classroom, Adam also had to adjust to working with Turkish colleagues who often interrupted each other and communicated in loud, overlapping ways. While initially jarring, he came to recognize this as a norm in workplace discourse. Nonetheless, it contributed to his overall impression of the Turkish work environment as intense and at times chaotic.

Perceptions of Discrimination in English as a Foreign Language Contexts. Adam's experience with discrimination was more prominent in Bangkok than in Istanbul as an expatriate NEST in both contexts. In Thailand, he was hired quickly due to his white, Western appearance, which fit the "ideal" image of a native-speaking English teacher. Yet, paradoxically, this visibility also led to exclusion and racism. Local Thai teachers would segregate foreign staff, assigning them separate lounges, and even prohibiting them from using the same bathrooms doe to "racist hygiene stereotypes." In such situations, Adam felt deeply othered, both socially and professionally.

In contrast, Adam described less overt discrimination in Istanbul. He initially felt warmly received by his Turkish colleagues, who helped him adjust and treated him as an equal member of the team. However, over time, he noticed subtle signs of resentment. Turkish teachers, he observed, seemed slightly envious of the prestige and higher salaries awarded to foreign teachers. Their envy was more visible as the students and parents tended to value Adam and other expatriate NESTs' opinions more highly. "I was the 'cool,' fluent, and talkative guy, who came from afar," he said while his "co-workers were not as interesting and 'cool' like [him]."

He also acknowledged this preferential treatment was not necessarily justified by teaching superiority. "There's no real difference in how we teach," he said, "and sometimes I ask [my co-workers] for help to explain a grammar rule to my students." He speculated that his international background and the school's branding needs contributed to his elevated status.

Despite not feeling discriminated against directly, Adam sensed class and status tensions between local and expatriate staff. These tensions remained unspoken but contributed to a subtle divide in workplace dynamics. The friendliness he initially encountered began to feel performative at times. Culturally, Adam was also disturbed by what he perceived as sexism in Turkish society. He found male-female dynamics hierarchical and was unsettled by older female teachers who acted with undue entitlement during meetings such as talking longer than their male counterparts and interrupting colleagues more frequently than male colleagues did. These observations did not stem from local NNESTs but shaped his broader experience of working in a K12 school. They added complexity to his understanding of the social fabric and dynamics of his workplace along with his role within it.

Overall, Adam's journey as an expatriate English teacher in Istanbul revealed a multifaceted picture. On the surface, his experiences seemed positive owing to the welcoming colleagues, professional support, and relative anonymity in public. Yet underneath, subtle challenges persisted. Navigating linguistic barriers, classroom discipline, and the layered politics of status between local and foreign staff required emotional labor and cultural adaptation. Compared to his previous teaching role in Bangkok, Adam's time in Istanbul marked a shift from overt racial exclusion to quieter social stratification. While he did not feel openly discriminated against in Turkiye, the cultural nuances of prestige, entitlement, and envy still shaped his experience in meaningful ways.

His narrative underscored the importance of examining ELT contexts not just in terms of pedagogy or language use but also through the lens of power, identity, and cultural negotiation. As he continued to settle in, Adam remained cautiously optimistic about his future in Istanbul, but he was fully aware that integration was a process, not a given.

Mary's Story

A 28-year-old Canadian Arab woman who moved to Istanbul a year and a half before participating in this study, Mary was teaching English at a private kindergarten. With a BA in Linguistics and Psychology, along with TESOL and PYP certifications, she had previously taught in Canada, China, and Morocco. Her multicultural upbringing in Canada, combined with insecurities about her

ambiguous ethnic appearance, made her acutely aware of how identity impacted her lived experiences abroad.

Lived Experience as an Expatriate NEST in Istanbul. Mary moved to Istanbul during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, largely for personal reasons as she wanted to be with her then Turkish partner. Although she had fond memories of Turkish hospitality from earlier visits in the pre-COVID times, her most recent experience was quite different. Upon arrival, she found locals far less welcoming. She attributed this to increasing anti-foreigner sentiment amid economic strain and rising numbers of refugees. In her words: "The Turkish hospitality-charm that once was, no longer existed. People seemed weary... working to barely make ends meet."

Culturally, Mary felt out of sync with both locals and foreign colleagues. The other expatriate teachers she worked with were mostly integrated into Turkish families and less open to forming new friendships. Her quiet demeanor and Western background did not align with the more expressive, emotionally driven culture she encountered. She described feeling isolated until another colleague reached out after noticing her struggle on the personnel service bus.

Despite these difficulties, Mary found aspects of life in Istanbul deeply enjoyable. She loved the local cuisine, the affordability of living, and the travel opportunities: "You've got so many things tempting you; the food, sight-seeing, neighboring cities… It's easy to vacation anywhere here." Still, these lifestyle perks were not enough to offset deeper challenges. She felt uncertain about her long-term future in Turkiye, noting that her desire to stay hinged on whether she could learn Turkish. Without that, she felt socially and professionally limited.

Tensions in Private K12 School Contexts. Mary's teaching role in Istanbul came with both material rewards and professional limitations. She appreciated her school's high salary and the close proximity between her home and workplace. However, her interactions with colleagues and administrators were hampered by the language barrier. Although her school staff made gestures of inclusion, communication difficulties prevented deeper relationships from forming. Mary recalled the head of the department saying that everything would be easier if she spoke Turkish. This comment, while perhaps well-intentioned, made her feel excluded rather than encouraged: "It looked like my admins and colleagues wanted to include me… but they made it clear that I should learn Turkish."

She also sensed that her quiet personality was unsettling to her colleagues, who were used to louder, more assertive interaction styles. Her colleagues described her as "unfamiliar and uncomfortable," further reinforcing her outsider status. Mary noted that while her school was generally professional, she lacked the kind of interpersonal support that might help her thrive. Her only significant support came from her former coordinator, who provided encouragement and guidance. In contrast, she found her fellow foreign teachers to be unexpectedly distant. This stood out for Mary, who had previously worked in more tight-knit expatriate communities in Morocco and China.

Student-parent dynamics at school also mirrored some of her past experiences. Like in Morocco, she found parents to be somewhat uptight and struggling between traditional values and a desire to appear Western. However, she noted that Turkish children were more disciplined, and she credited parents' genuine efforts to improve their children's upbringing: "They really did try hard to make a better generation of kids." Still, due to COVID-19 restrictions, Mary's communication with parents was limited, and most interactions remained impersonal and online.

Perceptions of Discrimination in ELT Contexts. Mary's experience with discrimination was nuanced. Unlike her time in Morocco, where western women were often harassed in public and NESTs were disrespected at work, discrimination in Istanbul was more structural and subtle. She

did not report overt racism or harassment but rather exclusion born of cultural difference and language gaps. She felt that Turkish society was resistant to cultural mixing, particularly in personal relationships. Based on her social experiences and even online interactions, she sensed that locals preferred to connect with other Turks, citing cultural incompatibility with foreigners: "My landlord's wife once told me that a Turk could not live with a foreigner… Turkish culture is too difficult to handle."

Her perception was that while foreign teachers were professionally accepted, they remained socially peripheral unless they assimilated particularly through marriage or deep language learning. This created a glass ceiling of inclusion: one could live and work in Turkiye but not fully belong.

Mary's past experiences abroad had shaped her awareness of how "whiteness" and "foreignness" operated in ELT. In China, her white-passing appearance was an asset that secured her jobs and admiration. She recalled being ushered into events where Chinese families were excited to see a Westerner. She even noted how Russian teachers were favored for their looks "despite their heavily loaded Russian accents." In contrast, her experience in Morocco as an Arab-looking woman challenged her on the opposite end of the spectrum, exposing her to sexual harassment and institutional neglect. Compared to these extremes, Istanbul fell somewhere in between. Her ambiguous appearance did not confer privilege, but it did not bring active discrimination either. Instead, she encountered passive exclusion which was manifested through cultural misalignment, communication barriers, and emotional distance.

On the whole, Mary's experience as an expatriate NEST in Istanbul illustrates how gender, appearance, personality, and language proficiency interacted to shape foreign teachers' integration into the local context. While materially stable and professionally manageable, her life in Turkiye was emotionally and socially complex. She encountered silence where she expected warmth, and distance where she hoped for connection. Her story challenged the assumption that "cosmopolitan" cities like Istanbul automatically offered inclusivity and acceptance of diversity. Instead, she found that integration was conditional and it often hinged on assimilation into Turkish culture and language. For Mary, this left a lingering question about whether Istanbul could ever feel like home. While she appreciated the beauty, cuisine, and convenience of the city, she remained unsure about her future there. Unless she could cross the linguistic and cultural divide, she viewed her time in Turkiye as temporary.

César's Story

When I crafted his story, César was 32-year-old – a Black Brazilian English teacher who had been living and working in Istanbul for six years. With prior experience teaching adults in Brazil and holding a TEFL certificate, César arrived in Turkiye through a work-abroad program when European placements were unavailable. Though Istanbul was not his first choice, it quickly became a meaningful chapter in his life.

Lived Experience as an Expatriate NNEST in Istanbul. César's first impressions of Istanbul were overwhelmingly positive. He admired the city's size, diversity, and cosmopolitan nature, especially compared to his hometown in Brazil. "Istanbul is huge, culturally diverse… you find everything you want here. It's very international." Unlike the other participants, César felt warmly received from the beginning. He did not perceive any racial discrimination and believed that his identity as a Black Brazilian actually added to his appeal. Locals would mistake him for a Latino and treated him with curiosity rather than hostility. Early on, he had connected with the local Brazilian community, which offered emotional and logistical support, helping him feel grounded.

One of the more eye-opening cultural encounters for César was seeing head-scarved women for the first time. Coming from a predominantly non-Muslim country, this was foreign to him. His initial confusion evolved into understanding after conversations with friends helped him contextualize the practice: "It broadened my mind and perspective. I learned to respect different ways of living." This willingness to learn and adjust is a defining feature of César's expatriate experience in Istanbul. Over time, as an expatriate NNEST, he built strong bonds with other expatriate teachers, many of whom he now calls his "chosen family." "We support each other, and that makes life easier. Some of them are from Brazil, and others from countries like Syria, Australia, and Russia." His social integration into the international community has significantly shaped his overall satisfaction in the city, though the professional sphere presented more complex challenges.

Tensions in Private K12 School Contexts. Although César appreciated Istanbul as a place to live, his experience working in private K12 schools has been mixed and depended on the institutional shortcomings and cultural mismatches. Coming from an adult education background, he found the K12 system demanding, bureaucratic, and parent-focused in ways that initially confused him: "You always have to please the parents. But I'm a teacher, not a babysitter." César was caught off guard by the lack of structured guidance. He was expected to understand school policies, grading systems, and classroom management without orientation or training. His perception was that schools operated more like businesses, prioritizing client satisfaction (i.e., parental approval) over educational integrity. He also encountered issues with internal staff dynamics. While one local NNEST colleague tried to support him, his senior team leader, who was also a local NNEST, refused to offer materials or mentorship, eventually complaining about César's lack of preparedness to the department head, who was an expatriate NEST. He attributed this resistance to resentment over salary differences between local and foreign staff, which was also an issue echoed in Adam and Mary's narratives.

Classroom management presented another struggle. He described students, particularly those from privileged backgrounds, as "spoiled and difficult to discipline. [And, he] was expected to deal with it." This hands-off attitude placed the burden solely on him, without the backing of a strong behavioral policy or administrative support. Moreover, César noticed that the communication style of local NNESTs was "often loud, emotional, and assertive," creating an uncomfortable working environment for him. He described it as a "toxic" atmosphere, with constant complaints and little team cohesion. This aspect of school culture gradually eroded his job satisfaction.

Perceptions of Discrimination in ELT Contexts. César's view of discrimination was somewhat distinct from the other participants. As a Black expatriate NNEST, he was concerned about how he might be received in Turkiye. However, he emphasized that he had never faced racism. Instead, he found curiosity and friendliness from locals, and his Latino looks added a kind of social capital rather than hindrance. Nevertheless, he acknowledged subtler forms of professional inequality. As an expatriate NNEST, he felt structurally unsupported and at times deliberately left out by the local NNESTs. The lack of collaboration, combined with last-minute administrative demands and vague expectations, made it clear to him that expatriate teachers were often left to find their own way in the dark.

He also identified a divide between expatriate teachers and local NNESTs, which was fueled in part by unequal pay and differing teaching philosophies. Local NNESTs' resistance or indifference, in his view, was not personal but stemmed from institutional practices that failed to promote equity or team cohesion. His experience underscored a more systemic issue: while outright discrimination was not part of his narrative, a lack of institutional support and cultural adaptation mechanisms still left expatriate teachers vulnerable, especially those without insider knowledge or language skills.

Though socially integrated and emotionally grounded in his international community, César grew weary of the work environment. He explained that the COVID-19 pandemic and worsening economic conditions in Turkiye made life more difficult. On top of that, he lost three family members back home in Brazil during the pandemic but had to keep working in Istanbul: "It was really hard because I couldn't go back… I had to calm down and keep working. I couldn't do much."

When asked if he would stay in Istanbul long-term, César was uncertain. While he appreciated the friendships and personal growth the city offered, the professional dissatisfaction was taking a toll: "You spend a big chunk of your life at work… and it's not exactly a paradise." He made it clear that unless his working conditions improved, he would consider leaving. Despite his deep bonds with his chosen family in Istanbul, the stress of teaching in private K12 schools, where expatriate teachers are often under-supported and undervalued, was pushing him to reconsider his life choices.

To sum up, César's narrative reflected a complex yet overall resilient expatriate NNEST's experience in Istanbul. While he did not encounter explicit racial discrimination, contrary to what he feared, his story highlighted the significance of social inclusion and professional marginalization in shaping expatriate teachers' lives. His integration into the city's diverse international community was a key protective factor, providing him with emotional support and a sense of belonging. Unlike Mary, he felt welcomed by locals and embraced his identity as a "cool Latino," rather than feeling mistaken for, objectified by, or excluded for it.

However, in the professional domain, César faced systemic challenges common to expatriate language teachers in Istanbul's private K12 sector. These included a lack of onboarding, unrealistic expectations, poor collaboration from local colleagues, and emotionally taxing school dynamics. The cultural mismatch in communication styles and pedagogical expectations exacerbated his sense of alienation at work. Much like Adam and Mary, he noted tension with local NNESTs, especially around salary disparities and institutional hierarchy.

While his personal experience in Istanbul was largely positive and shaped by meaningful cross-cultural friendships, César's dissatisfaction with the working environment was visible. His reflections underscored the emotional and psychological burden of working in what he described as a "toxic" system and point to the urgent need for better institutional support for expatriate teachers.

Discussion

This study explored the lived experiences of three expatriate English language teachers in Istanbul, Turkiye. All participants were drawn to teaching abroad by their desire to travel and experience different cultures, aligning with Frederiksen's (2014) finding that international mobility and cultural exchange are common motivations among expatriate language teachers. While high salaries are often considered an incentive, none of the participants identified income as their primary motivation for teaching in Turkiye. As César noted, "I didn't come for the money because then I wouldn't have come like to Turkiye."

Istanbul's multicultural, cosmopolitan nature was a key factor in their overall positive impressions. Participants appreciated the city's diversity and the general friendliness of its people. This study focused on Istanbul specifically for its unique urban character, which presented different living and working conditions from other regions in Turkiye. Han and Mahzoun (2017) observed that expatriate English language teachers in Eastern Turkiye struggled with isolation and lack of social

life, which were also the common challenges that were notably absent in Adam, Mary, and César's narratives.

However, despite the city's welcoming atmosphere, all participants experienced significant workplace challenges, particularly from the local NNESTs. A recurring theme was the lack of support, collaboration, and inclusiveness within their institutions. Participants reported feelings of being othered or excluded, especially when the local NNESTs spoke in Turkish around them, ignored their expatriate co-workers' input, or failed to assist them with teaching materials or information about the school's system. These findings reflect similar conclusions from Aydın (2012), Erkaya (2012), and Putri (2020), who also emphasized institutional neglect and interpersonal exclusion as key demotivating factors for expatriate language teachers.

The participants' experiences suggest that while the Turkish education system is eager to attract expatriate language teachers especially in urban private schools, it does little to support their adaptation once hired. They often receive no guidance on school practices or curriculum and are expected to understand local norms with minimal induction. As Putri (2020) and Getty (2011) argue, assuming that "teaching is teaching" regardless of cultural or institutional context results in unprepared teachers and poor integration.

Notably, most prior research on expatriate English language teachers in Turkiye (e.g., Aydın, 2012; Han & Mahzoun, 2017; Küçükali, 2017) focuses exclusively on school-based challenges, leaving the personal and cultural dimensions of expatriate life underexplored. This study, however, reveals that the challenges these teachers face are not confined to their professional lives. Outside the workplace, participants described difficulties adapting to conservative societal norms. While this was more pronounced in Mary's accounts as the only female participant, such findings indicate the importance of addressing not only workplace dynamics but also broader social integration issues in research on English language teachers.

In terms of discrimination, participants experienced subtle but impactful forms. While the broader discourse in ELT often centers on native-speakerism, this study points to a more nuanced reality. Discrimination was not always about nativeness, but about exclusionary behaviors such as linguistic gatekeeping, workplace isolation, and lack of collegial support. These forms of social exclusion function as microaggressions and should be acknowledged as discrimination in their own right.

Ultimately, the most critical finding of this study is the centrality of workplace dynamics in shaping expatriate language teachers' well-being. Despite their enjoyment of life in Istanbul, the participants identified their working conditions (particularly the local NNESTS' treatment to them) as the most significant source of difficulty. Acknowledging that earning more money than the local NNESTs increases envy, the expatriate ELTs emphasized a desire for more inclusive environments where the local NNESTs try to involve them, communicate in a shared language, and offer support during their adjustment period.

Conclusion

Adam, Mary, and César's narratives as three expatriate language teachers are situated in the local contexts of Istanbul. Although Istanbul hosts a population of people from everywhere in Turkiye, it does not mean that it is a representative of Turkiye's demographics. Istanbul has its unique contextualities including its urbanized, cosmopolitan, transcultural, and multiethnic makeup. Adam, Mary, and César's narratives are influenced by this makeup and cannot be generalized to fully grasp other expatriate language teachers' lived experiences. However, as Barkhuizen et al. (2024) note, narrative analysis provides comprehensive, profound, and contextual examples that help

understand a phenomenon under scrutiny. That said, they went through similar tensions and challenges other expatriate language teachers experienced in much smaller settings in Eastern Turkey as described in Han and Mahzoun's (2017) study. Nevertheless, Adam, Mary, and César's narratives contribute to the field of language teaching by virtue of the fact that their lived experiences may shed light to what kind of tensions and challenges expatriate language teachers may undergo elsewhere in the world.

Their narratives show that expatriate language teachers in Istanbul navigate a city that is simultaneously welcoming and challenging. While their social experiences are generally positive, their professional lives are often marred by exclusion, insufficient support, and organizational blind spots. If K-12 schools hope to continue attracting and retaining quality expatriate ELTs in Istanbul and elsewhere, greater attention must be paid to supporting their transition not just in terms of finance and logistics, but in fostering inclusive, collaborative, and respectful workplace cultures. Small signs and acts of inclusion, empathy, and collaboration could make a huge difference for the expatriates. When possible, offering systematic orientation and professional development would ease transitions and increase job satisfaction, teacher retention, workplace peace, and the quality of language education. Addressing these needs may not only improve teacher satisfaction but also enhance the overall quality of English language education in Turkiye.

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