Position Statement on Terminology: An Asset-Based Approach

TESOL International Association (TESOL) advocates for the adoption of asset-based language within the English language teaching (ELT) profession and emphasizes the importance of proper representation in all contexts. The use of asset-based language shifts focus away from deficiencies, fosters inclusivity, and influences unbiased perceptions. Embracing positive terminology and promoting diversity in expression contributes to a more equitable and respectful society.

Identifiers and labels may provide categorization, efficiency, and pride in identification. However, the act of categorizing is inherently problematic and can have serious effects on various groups and specific individuals. Labels can lead to exclusion, stereotyping, and generalizations. It is essential that, when labels must be used, these terms are asset-based, promote human dignity and empowerment, and are accepted by those within the category.

For example, recent attention has been brought to the use of the term "NNEST" as a label for nonnative-English-speaking teachers in the ELT field. This term proves problematic for an asset-based approach, highlighting an inherent bias toward "native" English speakers, suggesting standards of language and use not aligned with real-world context, and promoting marginalization and discrimination (see TESOL's [Position Statement Against Discrimination of Nonnative Speakers of English in the Field of TESOL](#)). This acronym needs to be used with caution and only when its use provides an essential distinction to the discussion at hand, and when the groups being recognized are in favor of this identifier. In all other cases, the asset- based term "qualified English language teacher" should be employed, with *qualified* defined based on the context and content of objective and nondiscriminatory standards.

Adopting terminology for learners of English has also proven complex and problematic, often focusing on an individual's deficiencies and limitations, such as what the learner is lacking (i.e., English), rather than elevating the assets they possess and contribute to their environments.
Recently, the use of "multilingual learner" as a means to highlight the growing evidence of cognitive and social benefits associated with multilingualism has emerged. Because this term encompasses all multilingual learners, including those who may be learning languages other than English, TESOL uses the term "multilingual learner of English" (MLE) to capture both the assets of these learners and the contexts in which they learn.

There are many contexts and histories to the terms, labels, and acronyms currently used to identify those in the ELT world. These terms are often an institutional reality produced by legislation, research, and convenience. Occasionally, a term subsumes rather than elucidates the identities of our field, as well as the needs of MLEs and the diverse language learning contexts they occupy. These terms can amplify agency as well as diminish identity and opportunities.

Attempting to unify these terms with the hope of uniting the field could be viewed as unjust, especially to those who may lose representation with the loss of a label. By adopting asset-based

language attuned to context and the individuals and groups impacted, we all collectively contribute to and foster equitable and inclusive environments for learning, growth, and success, within our global ELT community.

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