



## **Reimagining English Competence: Pedagogy, Equity and the Need for Fair and Unbiased Hiring Practices**

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In an age where English is the *lingua franca* around the world, keeping up with a qualified workforce of English language teachers is essential. English language instruction is a rich, complex process. Teaching, across all subject matter, is not a trivial endeavor. It is a profession that calls for a whole host of competencies and skills. However, while well over three quarters of the world's English language teachers did not grow up speaking English as their first language, many English language teaching institutions, public and private, prefer to hire native speakers of English or consider native speakers to be superior. This poses challenges on many levels, including trying to convince these employers that there is no research indicating that English language learners learn English faster or better from a native speaker of English. In short, this is a myth, a perception: a deleterious notion that persists, undermines equity, weakens the teaching profession and that shortchanges students. This paper is based on the talks and discussions hosted by TESOL International Association's 2017 Summit on the Future of the TESOL Profession in Athens, Greece and will focus on 1) the importance of debunking this myth; 2) the need to identify and examine biases in hiring practices of English language teachers; and 3) steps needed to undo unfair and biased hiring practices to elevate the profession.

### **Native Speakers of English vs. Non-native Speakers—A Firsthand View**

This topic speaks to me directly and personally because my English proficiency is the product of mostly non-native English speaking teachers. I was born in Peru and spent my formative years between Lima and San Juan, Puerto Rico speaking Spanish as my first language. I came from a family who valued multilingualism so I attended bilingual English/Spanish schools from the age of five through secondary school. Most of my English teachers were non-native English speakers. They hailed from Peru, Puerto Rico, other Latin American countries, the Phillipines, and Russia. And I also had English teachers who were native speakers, including a Native Hawaiian teacher. At my schools, they were all regarded equally. Teachers at these schools were outstanding and hired based on their qualifications, expertise and knowledge base, not based on whether they looked or sounded a certain way. Professionals in the field know this.

Prior to preparing my talk for Athens, I reviewed many job advertisement postings from certain language teaching institutions abroad calling for “Native Speakers Only” or “Native Speakers from the U.S. and Canada.” These are deleterious and misguided hiring practices. What was also peculiar was that many of these specific advertisements hardly mentioned specific English teaching credentials or certification or extensive teaching experience. Employers should not deprive students of a highly qualified teacher when there are so many excellent, diverse, globally sophisticated teachers of English who are not native speakers, and who may have never even been to countries like the U.S., Canada, the U.K., etc. English, as the *lingua franca* that it has become, is no longer ‘owned’ by certain nations.

In my professional experience this wasn’t a particular challenge for public elementary/primary and secondary schools in the U.S.<sup>1</sup>, but it is dismaying and counterproductive that this belief is prevalent around the world. Many of these employers have idealized the native speaker of English as someone who is monolingual, monocultural, speaks one standard version of English, and is assumed to have competency in oral and literacy skills (Richardson, 2016). In turn, this social construct and “figment of linguists’ imagination” (Paikeday, 1985) has also become part of the narrative of how some employers misrepresent student demand—many employers claim the preference is due to their students/clients not wanting to learn English from non-native speakers. The existing literature actually demonstrates the opposite—that students themselves do not inherently have a bias against non-native English speaking teachers (Richardson, 2016)..

While there are several qualitative surveys and case studies on the topic, there are no randomized, experimental nor quasi experimental studies that are longitudinal that prove that native English speaking teachers get better English language acquisition results than non-native English speaking teachers.

One case study in particular conducted in Vietnam and Japan (Walkinshaw & Hoang Oanh, 2014) found no clear advantage in student learning when comparing certified native English speaking teachers to non-native English speaking teachers.

Christen (2008) accurately points out that “Although many language teaching institutions prefer native speakers as teachers, non-natives do have many advantages in language teaching, as well. Most importantly, non-NESTs have a better insight into the language learning process than native speakers have. That means, they have undergone the same learning process, the same problems and the same mistakes as their students experience and thus can also be the perfect language learner models for their students.”

In her 2016 International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) plenary, Richardson reviews the literature on non-native English speaking teachers and rightly

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<sup>1</sup> Regarding ESL teacher recruitment, most school districts around the United States have a shortage of ESL teachers so they are eager to hire candidates with the appropriate credentialing or certification in hand, native speaker or not. Furthermore, in light of the current calls for diversification of the teacher profession in the U.S., teachers who also speak the first language of English language learners they would be teaching are especially sought out by school districts.

even challenges the field to stop using the negating 'non' to identify teachers who learned English as a second or additional language. She passionately challenges the pervasive view that native English speaking teachers provide the best model, the best route to learning English, and that they are the ideal teacher. In her examination of several studies on student preference and perception, she found that a majority of students:

- Showed a positive attitude towards non-native English speaking teachers;
- Would want to learn from both non-native English speaking teachers and native English speaking teachers equally;
- Liked studying with non-native English speaking teachers;
- Did not encounter problems with non-native teachers because of their 'non-nativeness';
- Felt that non-native teachers taught as effectively as native teachers; and
- Are not necessarily as impressed by native speaker teachers as one might suppose

Other comments from the field in several online sources cited here and from our TESOL International Association summit discussions online and in person in Athens concur on the value and advantages of non-native English speaking teachers. Time and time again, participants expressed that non-native English speaking teachers:

- motivate their students by being role models showing them it is possible to achieve high proficiency in a second language;
- utilize the students' L1 for understanding and explaining the students' problems and conflicts between the target language (English) and the learners' L1;
- make use of the students' native language to explain complex structures, vocabularies, or concepts; and
- have deep knowledge of the students' cultural background, which helps to understand learning styles; and

### **The Importance of Pedagogy, Standards and Formal Preparation**

Have you ever witnessed a master teacher at work? There is craft, artistry and skill in their work. Becoming a teacher requires formal preparation, standards-based coursework, studies, certification and credentialing. When employers seeking teachers of English make "native fluency" their chief qualification, what this essentially says is "anyone can teach". This flies in the face of standards, formal preparation and the teaching profession itself. Teaching is not something that you just casually pick up. Students don't learn best through informal conversation or by just listening to someone speak. There is a process and science behind high-quality instruction.

And one must ultimately ask, what are the outcomes sought for students? True knowledge and learning of the language or more superficial outcomes focused solely on elocution? Experience

and preparation in teaching matter. Formal education to become a teacher matters. Student outcomes in the hands of a certified and credentialed teacher have been shown to be superior (CSP, 1997; Darling-Hammond 1997a, 1997b, 2000). The employers, policymakers, administrators and other decision makers who insist on the superiority of native speakers must learn to acknowledge and validate the certification and credentials of non-native English speaking teachers. Their ability to teach English has already been tested by the higher education institutions they attended. While certification and credentialing standards of English teachers are not universal or standard around the world, most degree-granting institutions of higher education have been vetted by a reputable accreditation body that has determined what a graduate of that institution should know and be able to do for each particular discipline. It should be noted that even though the field grapples with what defines competence in English (e.g., Should there just be one set of universal standards for all teacher preparation programs? Should competency for all teachers be based on one rubric and a test score? If so, which rubric and which test? What does it mean to be fluent? What about various levels of competency for various purposes? Should teachers have to become recertified every so often?), this should not be a distraction from the task at hand—to get many employers to regard native English speaking teachers and non-native English speaking teachers on equal footing.

### **The Role of Equity**

When native speakers are inherently preferred regardless of teaching qualifications, this is akin to embedding prejudice and bias, and is blatant job discrimination. This practice is a violation of a teacher's knowledge base, their professionalism, their *techne*, and ultimately, I believe, their civil and human rights.

We need to dig deep to unpack the shibboleth that only native speakers can convey the best teaching or that we don't have the highest standards if we employ teachers who don't speak English as their native language. So we have to ask—why is this bias so prevalent? I would argue that one way to unveil or even attempt to understand this systemic and institutionalized bias is through a socio-political and historical lens. National education agencies, officials, and individuals need to examine their own country's history of oppression and marginalization of populations considered 'inferior' due to race, ethnicity, social class, language, and numerous other factors on which exclusion is based. It is no secret that one of the pernicious consequences of colonialism around the world has been to label and codify the indigenous peoples and languages of the conquered nation as less able, less intelligent, and deficient in numerous ways while upholding an ideal standard of superiority based on the colonizer's characteristics, language, physical features, lifestyle, etc. (Turner Ponce, 1993). In time, this exclusive mentality and worldview permeate thinking, perception, and values in generation after generation. Charity Hudley & Mallinson (2011) explore how students still experience language bias: "today, as well as in the past, students who come to school speaking a nonstandard variety of English or another language are often marginalized and discriminated against." Confronting this bias will not be unlike the struggles for racial equity, gender equity, equal pay, and social justice.

In an equitable system qualifications count, formal preparation counts, experience counts, and value is placed on a highly qualified, diverse teacher workforce. Students have a right to learn from certified and credentialed teachers, and our teachers who are non-native speakers deserve the opportunity. And surely, there have been great strides throughout the world since most language learning institutions do uphold certification and credentialing as chief qualifiers for employment, but as long as a misguided few continue to devalue non-native English speaking teachers the field can not rest on its laurels.

### **Recommendations**

Even when most employers are not discriminatory, the transgressions of the few hurt the profession. It is critical that national and international bodies representing teachers, academics and other educators continue to highlight these inequitable deficiencies in the system and commit the organization and other stakeholders to call on employers, policymakers, government officials and others to put a stop to this where it happens. Our goal must be to create democratic, pluralistic classrooms in which students and teachers “who speak nonstandard varieties of English or other languages can experience recognition, equality and identity confirmation” (Gutmann, 2004). The following recommendations are some steps the field should consider:

- Educate teachers about these issues so that there is more widespread awareness amongst the profession;
- Advocate, writ large (organizationally) or individually for laws and policies (similar to those promoted by the United States’ Affirmative Action laws and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) that protect and encourage the hiring of non-native English speaking teachers. Keep in mind advocacy can take many forms—from an editorial article in a newspaper, to a social media campaign, to a one-on-one conversation with a decisionmaker, to full-fledged campaigns and concerted activist actions;
- Where there are such laws, remain vigilant that employers are in compliance and call for an official watchdog agency that ensures it;
- Address inequitable hiring practices in collective bargaining agreements and contracts wherever practitioners are represented by labor unions;
- Call for a uniform, universal set of standards that promote equity in hiring;
- Develop a worldwide publicity campaign that encourages employers and students to examine and challenge biases and that showcases non-native English speaking teachers of all backgrounds; and
- Conduct a systematic periodic worldwide hiring survey that gathers empirical data from public and private employers on hiring practices across the globe to track progress.

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