

Position Statement Against Discrimination of Nonnative Speakers of English in the Field of TESOL

For decades there has been a long-standing fallacy in the field of English language teaching that native English speakers are the preferred teachers because they are perceived to speak “unaccented” English, understand and use idiomatic expressions fluently, and completely navigate the culture of at least one English-dominant society, and thus they will make better English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers than nonnative English speakers. As a result, nonnative English-speaking educators have found themselves often implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, discriminated against in hiring practices or in receiving working assignments in the field of teaching ESL or EFL.

However, as English language learners, nonnative English-speaking educators bring a uniquely valuable perspective to the ESL/EFL classroom, and so can closely identify with the cross-cultural and language learning experience that their students are experiencing. Research has shown that students do not have a clear preference for either native English-speaking educators or nonnative English-speaking educators, demonstrating that, in general, students do not buy into the “native speaker fallacy.”

In many cases the nonnative English-speaking educator may also be an immigrant to an English-language-dominant country, and thus had to master both a second language and a second culture. These personal experiences may be similar to those of their students, and thus the nonnative English-speaking educator can serve as a powerful role model for students.

The distinction between native and nonnative speakers of English presents an oversimplified, either/or classification system that does not actually describe the range of possibilities in a world where English has become a global language. More important, however, the use of the labels “native speaker” and “nonnative speaker” in hiring criteria is misleading, as this labeling minimizes the formal education, linguistic expertise, teaching experience, and professional preparation of teachers. All educators should be evaluated within the same criteria. Nonnative English-speaking educators should not be singled out because of their native language.

TESOL strongly opposes discrimination against nonnative English speakers in the field of English language teaching. Rather, English language proficiency, teaching experience, and professionalism should be assessed along on a continuum of professional preparation. All English language educators should be proficient in English regardless of their native languages, but English language proficiency should be viewed as only one criterion in evaluating a teacher’s professionalism. Teaching skills, teaching experience, and professional preparation should be given as much weight as language proficiency.

*Approved by the Board of Directors
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