

NNS and Invisible Barriers in ELT

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In a delightful article in *The New Yorker*, the Indian-born doctor Abraham Verghese recalls an incident which occurred soon after his arrival in the United States. Emboldened by his medical abilities and high scores in the required examinations, Verghese is confident of obtaining an internship at a “Plymouth Rock” hospital affiliated to a prestigious medical school. However, a more experienced compatriot warns him that these hospitals “have never taken a foreign medical graduate” and advises Verghese “not even to bother with that kind of place.” Instead, he is told to apply to more humble “Ellis Island” hospitals, those situated in inner-cities and rural areas, which American doctors avoid. “We are” Verghese’s compatriot continues, “like a transplanted organ--lifesaving and desperately needed, but rejected because we are foreign tissue. But, as they say in America, tough”

Although many foreign medical graduates eventually get internships, filling positions that Americans refuse to accept, NNS English teachers are less fortunate in finding employment. What chances do foreigners have in a market glutted with American teachers willing to accept even low-paying adjunct jobs with heavy workloads? Further, for many NNS English teachers, qualifications, ability, and experience are of little help in the job market.

Especially at the Masters degree level, where most ELT jobs are restricted to intensive English programs, few NNS have succeeded in breaking the unwritten rule “No NNS need apply.” Despite the TESOL organization’s explicit opposition to hiring practices that discriminate against NNS, most intensive program administrators—with some notable exceptions—do not hire NNS. In fact, some administrators have openly stated so at professional conferences and job interviews.

The most frequent excuse for this discrimination is that ESL students prefer to being taught by NS. In 1986, I was hired to teach part-time in an intensive English program. About two weeks after classes began, two students complained about my accent and requested transfers to classes taught by NS. Some ESL students naively subscribe to the native-speaker fallacy--that the ideal English teacher is a NS. This belief stems mainly from their frustration with incompetent, barely proficient English teachers in their own countries, and is especially evident in intensive English programs in which these newly arrived students enroll. When I later taught at a university English Department, ESL students flocked to my first year

and advanced writing classes, relishing the support of fellow ESL students and a NNS teacher, who they said would better understand their language problems.

Another frequently cited reason for not hiring NNS English teachers is the complex legal process that employers must go through in order to recruit foreigners. For instance, the Immigration and Naturalization Service requires proof that by hiring the foreigner (“alien,” in immigration jargon), the employer is not depriving an American citizen of employment. Despite this complicated and sometimes frustrating process, most intensive program administrators are also members of NAFSA, an organization which assists them with current immigration procedures. Further, most foreign employees are willing to bear the legal cost of the process, with an army of immigration lawyers competing for their business!

Perhaps the main reason is never explicitly stated but nevertheless apparent. A fairly recent phenomenon in Western academia is the increasing presence of foreigners, as teachers, researchers, and scholars, in almost every discipline, including ELT. Although this is only to be expected—there are at least four NNS to every native-speaker of English—it is naturally resented when scarce jobs are threatened. Many administrators and teachers appear to view ELT as the last domain of the NS, to be defended at any cost. This attitude is highly ironic, considering the professions’ strident championing of multiculturalism, diversity, and other sociopolitical causes, often on behalf of ESL students and immigrants. Although ESL students are praised and admired for the multiculturalism and diversity they bring into language classes, NNS English teachers, who can also contribute their rich multicultural, multilingual experiences, are often barred from the same classes. Paradoxically, NNS teachers are usually better treated by the often reviled administrators of English Departments, who care less for accent than for ability and experience.

A further irony is that NNS English teachers who return to their countries after qualifying in the West are not always able to find work. Some language program administrators, notably in Japan, Korea, and Hong Kong, prefer to hire unqualified NS instead of qualified locals. The classified pages of newspapers in these countries are strewn with advertisements for “native English speakers.” Exposed to such propaganda day after day, the minds of parents and students are brainwashed and the native-speaker fallacy is perpetuated. Indeed, we in ELT inhabit a weird landscape. A colleague in Hong Kong was once asked how she could teach English, since she is American. Another American friend, being interviewed for a private tutor position over the phone, was turned down because she did not have a “British” accent.

NNS speakers who have graduated from MA TESOL programs are in the bewildering and frustrating position of being denied what they have been trained to do. How can they

respond in these circumstances? First, they should accept that the playing field will not be level for NNS English teachers, that they will have to struggle twice as hard to achieve what often comes as a birthright to their NS counterparts: recognition of their teaching ability and respect for their scholarship. Often, teaching ability alone will not suffice for employment or career advancement. They must grow as professionals, taking active roles and assuming leadership in teacher organizations, initiating research (even on a small scale), sharing their ideas through publications, and learning to network with NNS colleagues.

Like I did, they will meet courageous administrators who will see beyond their accents and pronunciation, mentors who will promote their careers, and colleagues who will support their research and publication efforts. The ELT profession is segregated and the competition for jobs is fierce, but a glance at the scholarship in ELT shows how much NNS have achieved. Further afield, in current fiction, the technical mastery of V.S. Naipaul, the magical prose of Salman Rushdie, the subtle brilliance of Kazuo Ishiguro, and the million-dollar book contract of Arundhati Roy, are proof that mastery of the English language is within everyone's reach.