

**Looking for Native Speakers of English:  
Discrimination in English Language Teaching Job Advertisements**

Ahmar Mahboob (Corresponding author) and Ruth Golden

University of Sydney

[ahmar.mahboob@sydney.edu.au](mailto:ahmar.mahboob@sydney.edu.au)

**Abstract**

This paper investigates if and how job advertisements for English language teachers discriminate against candidates with particular backgrounds. Based on an analysis of 77 advertisements (42 from East Asia and 35 from the Middle East), the paper identifies seven factors that are included as key requirements in these advertisements. A number of these factors, such as age, gender, nationality, nativeness and race, are “biographical” in nature and may be used to discriminate against particular populations of candidates. While discriminatory issues were observed in advertisements from both East Asia and from the Middle East, there were some differences between the two regions. The findings of this study suggest that the discriminatory practices that the field has been trying to eliminate are still visible and that more work needs to be carried out to make TESOL an equitable profession.

**Introduction**

Over the last 20 years, research interest on issues of non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) has grown tremendously. This research has looked at the perceptions of students towards NNESTs (e.g., Mahboob, 2004; Moussu, 2006; Nemtchinova, 2010), at issues of teaching (e.g., Cots & Diaz, 2005; Forman, 2010), at issues of training NNESTs (e.g., Barratt, 2010; Nemtchinova, Mahboob, Eslami, And Dogancay-Aktuna, 2010), and at issues of hiring and discrimination (e.g., Braine, 1999; Clark & Paran, 2007; Mahboob et. al., 2004; Selvi, 2010). This body of work documents that being a native speaker of English is not an essential factor in being an effective teacher. It advocates against discrimination against NNESTs and recommends that hiring decisions be based on candidates’ professional qualifications. In support of this research and professionalization of the field, TESOL International has published two statements regarding discriminatory hiring practices in the ELT profession. The first, in 1992, was the “Statement on non-native speakers of English and hiring practices”, and the second, in 2006, was the “Position statement against discrimination of non-native speakers of English in the field of TESOL”. Despite this work, research shows that many employers consider a candidate’s nativeness to be an important criterion in making employment decisions (Clark & Paran, 2007; Mahboob et al., 2004; Selvi, 2010). This paper builds on this body of research and investigates how job advertisements can discriminate against candidates with particular backgrounds.

Kubota & Lin (2010: p. 481) support this work by stating that “focussing on non-nativeness in employment discrimination is absolutely necessary when seeking social justice in this globalized era as more English language teachers are recruited in many communities around the world”. In spite of this call, there has been little research to date on such discriminatory practices in job advertisements. One study that does look

at this is Selvi (2010), who found that the job advertisements privileged people who were native speakers of English and, often, were citizens of certain countries. This paper extends this research agenda and examines what criteria employers advertise when hiring English language teachers, and how these practices differ across two regions (Middle East and East Asia). The findings of this study suggest that the discriminatory practices that the field has been trying to eliminate are still visible and that more work needs to be carried out to make TESOL an equitable profession.

### **Methodology**

To investigate what qualities ELT employers look for in potential job candidates, this study collected 103 job advertisements from the website *ESL Jobs World* ([www.esljobsworld.com](http://www.esljobsworld.com)). Of these, 53 were for jobs in the Middle East and 50 for jobs in East Asia. The job advertisements were taken from a single on-line source in order to reduce the possibility of duplicate advertisements and make comparisons between the two regions, without having to worry about whether the website policies might have impacted the nature of the job advertisements. In reviewing these 103 job advertisements, we found a number of duplicate job advertisements. We removed all duplicate advertisements from the corpus and were left with 77 advertisements: 42 from East Asia and 35 from the Middle East. The 77 advertisements were then analyzed for the selection criteria included in the body of the advertisements.

### **Results**

A content analysis of the 77 advertisements showed that they listed up to seven factors as key requirements for potential candidates. These factors included: age, educational qualifications, gender, nationality, nativeness, race, and teaching experience. These factors can be classified as either professional (educational qualifications and teaching experience) or biographical (age, gender, nationality, nativeness and race). Each ad varied in terms of the criteria it included. Below we will first present an overview of our findings (Table 1) and will then look at each of the factors in some detail. Table 1 provides a count of times (tokens) that each factor was included in the advertisements—across the two regions and in total.

**Table 1. Biographical and Professional Factors by Region**

Factors		Middle East	East Asia	Total
<i>Biographical</i>	Age	3	18	21
	Gender	3	1	4
	Nationality	18	20	38
	Nativeness	27	34	61
	Race	0	2	2
<i>Professional</i>	Education	31	22	53
	Experience	31	19	50

Table 1 above gives the frequency of each of the seven criteria mentioned in the advertisements. The Table shows the frequency count for each feature for the two regions as well as for the 77 advertisements together. These results show that “nativeness” was the single most frequent criterion mentioned in the advertisements across the two regions (61 tokens), followed by education (53 tokens), experience (50

tokens), nationality (38 tokens), age (21 tokens), gender (4 tokens), and finally race (2 tokens). Table 1 also shows some differences across the two regions. While nativeness (34 tokens) and nationality (20 tokens) were the two most frequently mentioned factors in the advertisements for East Asia, the advertisements for the Middle East listed the two professional factors, education and experience (31 tokens each), more frequently (note that nativeness was still a commonly included requirement). The table also shows that age as a requirement was mentioned more often in advertisements for East Asia (18 tokens) than for the Middle East (3 tokens). Gender was slightly more frequently mentioned in the advertisements for jobs in the Middle East (3 tokens) as compared to those for East Asia (1 token). And, finally, race was included only in 2 advertisements—both for jobs in East Asia.

Having provided an overview of the findings, we will now look at each of the factors in more detail below. In presenting the findings of the study, we will first look at the professional factors and then biographical factors.

### *Professional Factors*

There were two main types of professional factors included in the advertisements: educational qualifications and teaching experience.

#### *Educational Qualifications*

Of all 77 advertisements, 59 (77%) included education requirements. Forty-seven of these 59 advertisements required at least a bachelor's degree. In the Middle East, 74% of advertisements included minimum educational requirements (either a university degree or an ELT certification) while in East Asia the figure was 63%. There were differences between the advertisements collected from the two regions in terms of the types of educational qualifications required. Of the advertisements that required specific educational qualifications, 89% from the Middle East required university education; whereas, only 52% from East Asia mentioned this requirement. Thirteen per cent of advertisements in the Middle East required at least a master's degree, while there was no minimum requirement of a master's degree in the advertisements from East Asia. Of the advertisements from the Middle East, 32% required bachelor's degrees in English, Linguistics, Education or related fields. Two advertisements specifically stated that *Americans* must have English- or education-related degrees. None of the advertisements from East Asia specified the field of study for potential candidates.

There was a disparity in the ELT certificate requirements across the two regions as well. In all, 34% of the advertisements from the Middle East required some form of ELT certificate (e.g. TESOL, TEFL, CELTA), while only 24% of the advertisements from East Asia had such a requirement. The results indicate that the advertisers placed higher value on university degrees than on ELT qualifications in general across both regions.

Some advertisements showed further restrictions on the educational qualifications of the candidates. For example, one advertisement from the Middle East, which did not

specify any particular countries from which the candidates should come, stated that the candidates' qualifications should have been obtained in the UK, Ireland, Australia, NZ, USA, Canada or South Africa. Another stated that on-line, weekend, or correspondence TEFL courses would not be accepted.

#### **Teaching Experience**

There was further dissimilarity between the two regions when it came to required teaching experience of the candidates. For example, 89% of advertisements from the Middle East stated that teaching experience was either required or preferred; while, in East Asia, this figure was 45%. Furthermore, when teaching experience was mentioned as a criterion in the advertisements, 40% of the advertisements from East Asia did not specify the length of experience required; 47% required one-to-two years of experience; and only 14% required three or more years of experience. On the other hand, only 7% advertisements from the Middle East did not specify the length of experience; 47% required one-to-two years; and 46% required three or more years of experience.

#### ***Biographical Factors***

In contrast to the two professionally oriented criteria, there were five types of hiring criteria specified in the advertisements related to personal or biographical factors. Eight-eight percent of all the advertisements analyzed mentioned at least one—if not more—biographical factors. There was some difference between the two regions, but not a very large one: 93% of the advertisements from the Asian corpus and 83% of the advertisements from the Middle East included specific biographical requirements. These biographical factors include age, gender, nationality, nativeness, and race. None of the factors have any clear professional relevance and their inclusion as essential criteria for the jobs advertised raises the question: if biographical factors are used in determining an applicant's suitability for a role, could this result in discrimination?

#### **Age**

Of the advertisements from the Middle East, eleven (26%) included specific age requirements for the applicants. Of the remaining eighteen advertisements, the minimum required age was 20 and the maximum was 60. The average lowest acceptable age was 23 years, while the average highest acceptable age was 48 years. One advertisement simply stated that "older persons" were preferred.

In East Asia, only three advertisements included age requirements for the applicants. Of those remaining, two had "under 60" as the requirement, and the third had "30+".

#### **Gender**

Of the seventy-seven advertisements, four (5%) referred to gender, with one in East Asia requiring a female teacher and three in the Middle East requiring male teachers.

#### **Nationality**

Thirty-eight (49%) of the advertisements listed specific countries from which the applicants must come. Of these, 95% of the advertisements named the US, 89% named the UK, 84% named Canada, 66% named Australia, 55% named New Zealand, 37% named Ireland, and 24% named South Africa. While both regions showed preferences for candidates from North America and the UK, there were differences when it came to other countries. The advertisements from East Asia showed more of a preference for applicants from Australia and New Zealand, while those from the Middle East mentioned Ireland and South Africa more frequently. No advertisements from East Asia listed South Africa as a desired native speaker country. One advertisement from the Middle East mentioned that it was due to “visa blocks” that only US, UK and Canada passport holders would be considered. No advertisements from East Asia mentioned any such immigration policies. Two advertisements, both from the Middle East, named the required countries in the title: “ESL–Instructor—UK/ Irish Candidates” and “ESL–Instructors—UK / Irish /USA/Canadian Citizens”. One advertisement, which did not mention required countries from which the “native speaker” candidates should come, did however state that interviews would be held in the UK, Australia and New Zealand.

#### Nativeness

Nativeness was the most common biographical variable in the data set. Eight advertisements (10%) used the word “native” in the title for the job advertisement. Two other advertisements, both from the Middle East, did not use the word native, but instead specified the names of countries from which they required applicants in the title for the job advertisement.

Of the seventy-seven advertisements, only ten (13%) did NOT have any mention of “native speaker” or “nationality” requirement. This represented 9.5% of all advertisements from East Asia and 17% of those from the Middle East. In terms of “nativeness”, 79% of all advertisements specifically used the term native speaker. Two of these, both from East Asia, named possible exceptions to the rule. One allowed for “overseas Chinese from the UK, USA or Australia”. The second stated that “exceptions may sometimes be made in cases of non-native speakers who have no discernable accent”.

One advertisement from East Asia with no “native speaker” requirement did however state that one of the job’s duties would be to tell students about what life is like overseas. While this may not necessarily mean that the employer required only overseas applicants, it does seem to exclude local qualified English language teachers who may not have spent time abroad.

#### Race

Two advertisements, both from East Asia, referred to the race of the candidate. In the first, a position specified “white native speakers” stating that they must be from the USA, UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand or Ireland. The second listed “Caucasian” as a position requirement along with being a native speaker from the US or Canada. This advertisement also referred to nativeness in its title.

## **Discussion**

The results of this study show that there remains a distinction between NESTs and NNESTs, with a strong preference for NESTs as candidates for English teaching positions. It is also important to note that an absence of certain criteria in a job advertisement does not necessarily mean that they won't be used in the recruitment decision-making process. This study highlights an association between native English speakers and Inner Circle Englishes as no Outer Circle countries were specifically mentioned as possible places from which native speakers would be accepted.

Our research also shows a gap between the results from East Asia and those from the Middle East when it came to nativeness as an important hiring criterion. This may be partly due to the histories of each region. Many countries that comprise East Asia were subject to colonialism and therefore might place a higher perceived value on the English spoken and taught by Western teachers. Butler (2007) also suggests a reason why there may be more requirements for native speakers in East Asia. In her paper, she states that governments in East Asia have recently highlighted the importance of oral communication skills in the teaching of English at elementary school level, leading to an increased concern about the accents and pronunciation of local teachers having a negative impact on students. On the other hand, the first waves of migrants into the Middle East were workers from South and South East Asia and therefore it is possible that program directors in the Middle East would have a higher recognition of the abilities and qualifications of teachers from that region. However, given the nature of the present study, it is difficult to hypothesize about the possible reasons for the varying levels of discriminatory advertisements across the two regions. The motives and ideologies underlying the beliefs around nativeness would be worthy of further investigation in an attempt to understand and counter discrimination in the field.

It has been almost twenty years since the first research into issues surrounding non-native English teachers (Phillipson, 1992), and yet discriminatory practices continue to exist. Alongside the native speaker fallacy is an assumption that students prefer to be taught by native speakers. Studies such as Mahboob (2004), Moussu (2006), Moussu and Llurda (2008) amongst many others have consistently shown that both NESTs and NNESTs have (perceived) strengths and weaknesses when it comes to English language teaching. For example, research has shown that while NESTs are seen to have better vocabulary and pronunciation, students perceive NNESTs as having a better understanding of how English grammar works. NNESTs are also perceived to be better role models in the learning of English as they have already been through the process of learning English themselves: they are more familiar with the needs of learning the language. Similarly, Butler's 2007 study showed that accent had no impact on student performance, despite government concerns about local teachers. Unfortunately, as the results of the present study show, there is little evidence of impact of research on NNESTs in the advertisements analyzed in this paper. Given all the research and calls for NEST-NNEST collaboration (Matsuda &

Matsuda, 2001; Luo, 2010), one is still left with the question: why are native speakers still seen as the ideal model for teachers?

One factor that needs to be considered here is the definition of non-native speaker. Braine (1999: xiv) states that by its very definition a non-native speaker is classified against a native-speaker—but the classification of native speakers is not without debate. It would be of interest to know if those advertisements which required a native speaker but did not specify a country from which the teacher should come would be happy to offer the job to a Singaporean native speaker, for example. Moussu & Llurda (2008) believe that there are many people who cannot be classified as either. They question how, for example, an Indian person for whom English is a first language would be categorized. They suggest that such a person would be a native speaker of a “non-native variety”. This, however, maintains the distinction between native and non-native varieties of the language, and raises the question of how important the variety of English spoken by a teacher might or might not be.

As more people globally continue to learn and use English, and different varieties become accepted into the family of World Englishes, so-called native varieties may no longer be seen as standard forms of the language to which all speakers must aspire. In fact the growing research around, and acceptance of, English as an International Language (EIL) could mean that one day native speakers may join supposed non-native speakers in a shared language. Llurda (2004) believes that, as there are now more people who speak English as an L2 than those who speak it as an L1, the onus will be on the native speaker to adapt to the principles of EIL and the needs of EIL speakers, rather than teaching a native variety of the language. He states that as English is becoming a global language across many cultures, NNESTs should also value the multicultural contribution that they are able to bring to L2 and L3 learners. The impact that these discriminatory practices may have on the confidence, self-belief and motivation of NNESTs must be taken into account as the ELT profession needs to access their experience in learning English as a second language and the different cultural perspective they can provide to students (see also Mahboob, 2010).

A worrisome trend across the advertisements analyzed is a preference for native speakerness over teaching or educational qualifications. This impacts both the students who, as future English speakers, may be taught by individuals who are not qualified to do so, and teacher education and training institutions that train English language teachers. If these qualifications are not seen as relevant to getting a teaching position, then one may ask: what future is there for those taking these courses? And, by extension, of the institutions and programs that offer these courses?

The results of this study show that despite TESOL’s two position statements on discrimination in the industry as well as other advocacy initiatives, discrimination against NNESTs in hiring remains rampant. A further step could be to encourage all TESOL members not to accept any positions of employment where the advertisement is deemed discriminatory and possibly contact the employer telling them their reasons

in the hope that this will filter through over time. In his 2009 article, Selvi argues that there are three “A’s” required in order to move away from the preference for native speakers. They are awareness, advocacy and activism. This would require an awareness-raising campaign in publications by recognized individuals and institutions in the field. The results of the current study were in line with those found by Selvi in his 2010 paper and reconfirm his conviction that underlying norms and practices in the ELT profession need to be reconstructed to value professionalism over “native speakerism”.

Further study of interest could also look at whether or not special status is given to native speaker teachers of other international languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Spanish, etc. Moussu & Llorca (2008) highlight how little research has been done on this to date, suggesting that this may be due to the position of English as a global *lingua franca*.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study suggest that the concern about discriminatory practices in employment is justified. Eighty-eight percent of all advertisements looked at in this study had a discriminatory element to them. It would be of interest to draw a further implication from Mahboob et al.’s 2004 study and look at whether the discrimination in the job advertisements is manifesting itself in the actual employment of English language teachers in these regions. A future study might also consider analyzing the advertisements by employer type (for example, university or training center) and using this to further focus the analysis of the actual employment of NESTs versus NNESTs in these institutions.

While further study into this is needed, twenty years of research has shown that discrimination does exist. Therefore, it is now time to look forward and find ways to eradicate these practices. It may not be necessary to eliminate the distinction between native and non-native speakers altogether but rather utilize the strengths of both through further research in the area of collaborative teaching. The value and strengths of all English language teachers must be recognized based on their qualifications and experience and not on their mother tongue, race, or country of birth. Employment discrimination has been prohibited by law since as early as the 1960s in some countries. We must ask then why it is so prevalent in the ELT industry and why, despite awareness raising and discussion on the topic, it still continues.



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