



Issues in Hiring Nonnative English-Speaking Professionals to Teach English as a Second Language

■ This article discusses issues that influence the job search of non-native English speaking (NNES) teachers in the U.S. Recent publications (Medgyes, 1994; Tang, 1997; Thomas, 1999) have shown that NNES teachers encounter discriminatory practices in employment because neither employers nor applicants grasp all the issues involved. Using the resolution from the organization Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) on NNES teachers and hiring practices (“A TESOL Statement,” 1992) as a basis, this article will present a set of guidelines for administrators and NNES applicants to improve employment opportunities. The authors, themselves community college administrators, discuss factors that account for the attitudes of administrators, English as a second language (ESL) learners, and NNES job applicants.

With the use of English as a lingua franca worldwide, the explosive growth of the Internet, the increased use of English as a medium of instruction, and the resulting increased interest in learning English—we now have greater questioning of the definition of the term “native speaker” of English. Much like Chinese and Arabic speakers, English speakers around the world share a common writing system but are increasingly separated by a wide linguistic gulf in areas such as accent, speech patterns, slang, and cultural content. Just think of the native Englishes spoken in the U.K., U.S., Ireland, Australia, and South Africa. Would you not consider those who speak English as their first language from each of these countries to be native speakers of English? Yet speakers in each geographic area have a distinctive accent and their own set of slang and colorful expressions. How is the English of one of these native speakers different from that spoken by an English speaker from Bombay or Myanmar?

If English itself can be said to consist of many Englishes, why do some ESL programs hesitate to hire NNES teachers? As set out in the TESOL resolution on NNES teachers ("A TESOL Statement," 1992), administrators should carefully consider uniform perspectives on hiring to make sure they include sound programmatic and instructional expectations that address equal opportunity. The issues that account for the ambivalent attitude toward the hiring of NNES professionals in the U.S. are definable and can be discussed on a professional level. In this article, we address issues related to attitudes concerning fluency-accuracy and cultural authority as well as issues that surface when considering institutional hiring expectations. At the same time, we seek to offer constructive solutions for program administrators.

We understand that ESL and English as a foreign language (EFL) are taught in many venues and that there are no hard and fast rules to answer the questions that are posed in this article. That said, we wish to share our own answers to the questions. These answers reflect a collective experience of 39 years in the fields of ESL and EFL in teaching and in program administration. One of us, Kathleen Flynn (KF), is a native speaker of American English and was born in New York City. She became interested in the topic of "nativeness" after discovering that she needed to modify her New York dialect to find employment in different parts of the U.S. Kathleen has a Ph.D. in Applied Linguistics from the University of Southern California and for nine years was the Division Chairperson of Credit ESL at Glendale Community College in Glendale, California. She now divides her time between teaching ESL and chairing the College's Accreditation Self-Study. She is the CATESOL Community College Level Chair. The other author, Goedele Gulikers (GG), was born in Belgium. Her home language is Dutch and her second language is French. Goedele studied English as a third language in middle and high school. She obtained an MA in Slavic Philology from the University of Ghent, Belgium, where she started her career as a foreign language teacher. She later earned a Master of Education degree in TESOL from Rhode Island College in Providence, Rhode Island. Currently, Goedele is the associate professor of ESL at Prince George's Community College in Largo, Maryland. Until last year she worked as the Curriculum Coordinator for the ESL Program at Anne Arundel Community College, Maryland. This ESL Program offers courses at the adult education and intensive English program (IEP) levels in the county of Anne Arundel. Goedele supervised a staff of two instructional specialists and 36 part-time faculty.

This article is presented as a series of answers to six questions that we believe are critical to the issue of NNES hiring practices. We hope that the readers will find the questions thought provoking. We do not expect readers to agree with our answers on all of the points that we raise or the opinions that we offer. However, our goal is for the issues presented to be used as a basis for debate in an MA TESOL program or in an in-service workshop. Exploring these questions may open up an issue that requires more frank discussion and guidelines for decision making in both ESL and EFL programs.

Question 1: What are the expectations of program administrators in the U.S. when they hire NNES professionals? What qualifications do NNES need to have to be hired? What kind of professional training or experience or both do administrators expect when they hire NNES professionals? What criteria do program administrators employ for hiring NNES professionals?

GG: Program administrators expect NNES job candidates to have a high level of English skills—both spoken and written. If NNES professionals have an accent, it should not interfere with understanding. That is, their speech should be intelligible to both native and nonnative speakers of English. In many ESL programs, instructors are expected to teach both written and oral skills. NNES teachers who can only teach writing because their accent is very strong will probably not be hired to teach speaking or pronunciation classes. This limitation can be an impediment in the hiring process. While NNES professionals may be offered part-time assignments teaching writing, it would be harder for them to obtain full-time teaching positions in which they would be expected to teach all four skill areas.

KF: What is fluency? It is made up of several facets. A fluent speaker may have a discernible accent, but one that does not interfere with comprehension. Cultural fluency includes a knowledge of body language, pause length, and idiomatic expressions. Fluency, for the most part, comes after a period of residency in the country. Graduate students who learned English outside of the U.S. may need to evaluate what they have learned in light of current usage in the area they now reside. This is true as well for native speakers who move to a different area of the same country.

NNES professionals should also understand American culture. This includes a good understanding of the norms of student behavior in U.S. classrooms. For example, students in American classrooms, regardless of where they were born, do not stand when the teacher enters the room. Young male students may wish to leave their baseball caps on during class, and students may arrive in class chewing gum. Knowing how to react to student behaviors is an important part of becoming prepared for the job (Flynn, 1999).

Most program administrators expect all ESL job candidates to have an MA degree in TESOL, TEFL, or Applied Linguistics. Teaching experience in the U.S., even if only in a teaching practicum, is a plus. This type of experience can also be a local source of references for potential employers.

GG: When I was hiring teachers for my program, I first looked at people who had received an MA TESOL degree or EFL training. Experience in the kinds of programs that are offered at Anne Arundel Community College was a definite plus. If NNES teachers had significant experience in countries other than the U.S., I would look at the kind of programs in which they had taught and discuss with them what the differences in educational settings may involve. For example, if a NNES professional had taught English in a vocational setting, the candidate and I might discuss how the goals of a vocational student are viewed both inside and outside the U.S.

KF: One of the hiring criteria often mentioned is whether or not the ethnic or language background of the NNES teacher reflects the larger community or setting of the ESL program. Sometimes, however, NNES teachers are chosen because they reflect the population of the students who make up a large portion of the ESL program. Some school administrators feel that at least one person on staff should be knowledgeable about the students' culture and be able to assist other teachers if a cultural misunderstanding occurs.

GG: Most colleges and universities in the U.S. have a diversity mandate that requires hiring minorities. Some schools also require that the faculty include members of minority groups that reflect the community where the college is located. For IEPs, diversity involves reflecting cultures and languages from around the world. In community colleges that serve local needs, there is a strong desire for faculty to represent the major immigrant groups that reside in that particular community. On some campuses, diversity is a buzzword. Instead, diversity should be a way of life that is fostered so that it can become the culture of the classroom (Gulikers, 2000).

Question 2: Once NNES professionals are hired, what kinds of mentoring or support should programs or program administrators provide them? Is there a difference or should there be a difference in the support provided to NNES professionals and their native English-speaking colleagues? Finally, how should NNES professionals be evaluated?

GG: What new NNES teachers need is either professional support or a mentoring system or both provided by more experienced instructors. An ESL program that can offer such support will provide a smooth transition for new teachers. Administrators do not need to provide all of these services themselves. Experienced teachers can serve as mentors to provide their peers with information on the intricacies of the program. Support groups of newly-hired teachers can help with voicing concerns, and instructional specialists or coordinators can work with the newly-hired teachers on the implementation of successful practices.

NNES professionals need a workshop or discussion time with their program administrators or instructional specialists on how to deal with student attitudes toward their nonnativeness. With the strong support of the program administration, all teachers should become confident in their abilities and professionalism. The more experienced they are, the more confident they will become.

KF: Every new teacher needs a mentor and NNES professionals are no exception, even if they have been teaching for a few years. The rules of the classroom in a new country or setting are different. If the program does not provide mentors, the NNES professional should ask another teacher, ideally a full-time instructor or a senior part-time teacher, to serve in the role.

If the NNES teacher is fairly new to the teaching profession, some additional support (e.g., a meeting time) should be scheduled to discuss the American classroom and what may seem either strange or new. If problems surface, this is a good time to discuss classroom objectives and to schedule the new NNES teacher to observe other more senior instructors.

If the program maintains a file of sample course outlines or syllabi, the new NNES teacher should be asked to spend time looking at these samples. Discussing one or two of these samples could be a springboard to some very valuable discussions focused on instructional practices rather than on the NNES teacher. This approach can set the teacher at ease since it reflects the types of activities (e.g., critiquing) which the teacher may have experienced as a graduate student.

The whole evaluation process, including the concept of peer evaluation, needs to be spelled out very clearly since evaluations may be done differently in the NNES professionals' country of origin. If this is an area of discomfort, NNES teachers should ask more questions about the evaluation procedure when meeting with their mentors.

The program administrator may find it valuable to keep a list of the topics with which new NNES instructors need assistance. This list can be given to the mentors and the members of the support group and used when they meet to keep discussions on track. If program administrators use the same list of topics with all new instructors, then a sense of fairness will permeate the mentoring process.

Question 3: How should NNES professionals bring their professional concerns to the attention of coordinators or program administrators? How should NNES professionals react if they are perceived not to be "American" by their ESL students?

KF: I would hope that new NNES instructors would have a good enough working relationship with their program administrators to voice concerns and questions. The program administrator should schedule a meeting a few weeks into the semester or have a regularly scheduled meeting to discuss general issues. These meetings need not be formal. Indeed, formal meetings tend not to happen because of time constraints. I ask my new teachers to have lunch with me in my office on a regular basis, for example, two or three times in the first three months on the job. This saves us the trouble of scheduling a formal meeting and makes it more likely that we will sit down and talk. "Coffee chats" could serve the same purpose.

As for how NNES professionals should react if they are perceived not to be "American" by their students, I would suggest that they begin by asking a mentor or an American friend what makes them seem "foreign." Friends can sometimes give valuable advice in this area. NNES teachers may be perceived as "non-American" by ESL students because of their accent, their way of dress, or even their body language.

An ESL instructor related to me that his students kept asking him where he was from. He is of Asian background but was born in the U.S. He explained this to his class, but they did not seem to accept this explanation. Later in the semester, the students explained that there was something different about his gestures that made him appear to be foreign-born and therefore not a native speaker of English. This reaction was expressed by most of the students regardless of their own country of origin. Sometimes this feedback is needed.

Newly-hired NNES teachers may need to be aware if some aspect of their body language seems non-American to students, or if they need to work on accent reduction. Dress can sometimes set a teacher apart. Students are curious observers and spend hours in the classroom with the teacher each week. They can easily recognize what is different but may not be able to articulate why something seems different to them. If a NNES teacher shares students with another instructor, the other instructor might be able to discuss diplomatically with them the perceived differences and pass along this information to the NNES teacher.

GG: NNES teachers should make their students aware of their nonnative status. They should engage their students in discussions about where they think their teachers are from or have them guess their teachers' home languages. Other discussion questions could focus on whether students know how many dialects of English are represented in the faculty, and whether they are aware of the many different varieties of English spoken around the world. Then teachers should tell their students about their professional training as ESL and EFL teachers and, if relevant, share information about their teaching experience (e.g., places of work and teaching assignments) and about the many advantages of having NNES instructors.

Some of the advantages include but are not limited to the following:

1. NNES teachers can be role models. Students can see that it is possible to become good English speakers, readers, and writers, regardless of how difficult the language is for them currently.

2. NNES teachers can often predict where their students will encounter grammatical difficulties and have an in-depth understanding of how to explain the intricacies of grammatical points.

3. Students won't offend NNES teachers if they tell them what they do not like or do not understand about the U.S. For example, the NNES teachers may begin the discussion by admitting their own confusion about the U.S. measurement system with its Fahrenheit temperatures, distances measured in miles, and size calibrated in inches.

4. Most ESL learners are aware that they will never sound like native speakers of English. The NNES teacher, thus, serves as a more realistic model, having achieved a high level of intelligibility in producing the sounds, rhythm, and intonation patterns of English.

5. NNES teachers have an excellent understanding of acculturation because they have been through the process themselves.

Question 4: What role, if any, should MA TESOL programs play in the placement, mentoring, and professional development of NNES professionals?

KF: MA TESOL programs should provide certain core courses in grammar and curriculum. Every MA TESOL program should offer a practicum course. If possible, students should have opportunities to teach or observe other teachers in a variety of academic settings, for example, in an IEP, in a community college ESL program, or in a high school or elementary school class. Placement is much easier for MA candidates who have done in-class teaching prior to their graduation from an MA TESOL program.

Additionally, MA TESOL program faculty should be aware that NNES teachers may need some extra information about areas such as what to expect the first year on the job and what the norms are for the U.S. classroom. The practicum course, much like other MA TESOL courses, could provide NNES teachers with information in these areas. Moreover, MA TESOL programs should encourage students to become members of TESOL and their state's TESOL affiliate (e.g., CATESOL) and to attend conferences; further, they should make attendance at such conferences part of the curriculum. Finally, MA TESOL programs should encourage students to become members and participate in interest groups that serve their specific needs (e.g., Nonnative English Speakers in TESOL; Nonnative Language Educators in CATESOL).

As for placement, most ESL programs need part-time teachers year-round. MA TESOL program coordinators should have a list of local programs so students can be hired either after they have received their degree or after they have completed the majority of their courses. Some programs are able to hire students while they are writing their MA theses or are studying for their comprehensive exams.

GG: Faculty in MA TESOL programs should discuss the job search process with their NNES students and help them develop realistic expectations. Ideally, there needs to be a very open channel of communication between the practicum supervisor and the mentor teachers and ESL program administrators directly in charge of the NNES teacher's field experience. Assuming the practicum supervisor receives feedback on the NNES teacher's skills, the supervisor can then serve as a conduit for providing feedback (in a non-threatening way) about which skills the teacher needs to "polish" to be more competitive in the job market. The practicum supervisor should be sensitive to the fears and reactions of program administrators and teachers who are reluctant to mentor a NNES student in their program. If the practicum supervisor can provide the host environment with clear expectations and requirements for the student teacher, the reluctance to work with a NNES student can be dramatically reduced. Another suggestion is for the MA TESOL program to have a placement service for its MA candidates that is attuned to the special profile of its NNES professionals.

Question 5: What are some recommended interviewing strategies for NNES professionals? What questions would you encourage them to ask of their potential employers?

KF: NNEss, even more than other job candidates, should practice the interview process before going to the actual interview. They should make up a list of questions and then ask professors and fellow students to suggest more; they should also have classmates or colleagues ask them the questions several times. NNES job candidates may wish to audiotape themselves and listen to their answers. If they are brave, they could have a colleague give them feedback on the tape. If job applicants are concerned that their body language makes them appear foreign, they could have their practice interview videotaped. Videotaping may make them more nervous and would certainly involve more effort than setting up an audio-cassette recorder but could be

worth the extra effort. Job candidates should also find out about the school or program where they plan to interview via the World Wide Web and from professors and friends. Most Web sites list the basic information about programs and have brief biographies of the faculty.

Once NNES candidates have identified specific schools or programs in which they hope to find employment, they should call and request a brochure about the program. The brochure information revealed during an interview can impress the interviewers with the candidate's knowledge of the program and school. The NNES candidate can also prepare a few informed questions concerning areas such as the curriculum and the process of student assessment and placement. Finally, the NNES candidate should be ready to inquire as to which classes the full-time instructors would be expected to teach. If this is a full-time job, job candidates should also ask if there are other NNES professionals who have full-time status. These questions will make job candidates look knowledgeable about the program and how it is administered and will emphasize their sincere interest in teaching in the program.

If the job is part-time, probably fewer risks are involved and the NNES candidate may have fewer questions. Job candidates should ask whether benefits are an option for part-time faculty and whether office space or meeting rooms are available. Are there department meetings and is attendance open to part-time faculty? Attending such meetings would be a good way to meet the full-time faculty who will surely be on the next full-time hiring committee.

GG: What follows is a list of questions for NNES professionals to ask at interviews. Specifically, NNES professionals should ask the hiring committee or administrators:

1. Is there an established mentoring system for all new hires?
2. What is the mission and vision of the program?
3. Is there a process to ensure a timely and appropriate response to classroom problems?
4. What is the ratio of native English-speaking (NES) teachers and NNES teachers in the program? What is the program's interest in understanding the NNES's role within the program?
5. What are the evaluation procedures for new hires?
6. What means are available to help NNES teachers learn from their new environment and contribute to the program as representatives from another culture?
7. What kinds of professional development activities are available?

Question 6: What factors, if any, should NNES professionals consider in accepting or declining a job offer?

GG: One of the main factors that NNES professionals should consider in accepting or declining a job offer is the level of support for new teachers and the manner of evaluation. If it becomes clear that teachers have just one shot at succeeding but will not receive adequate support to be successful, they should not put themselves into a disastrous situation, no matter how much they want to get an "American experience." Another factor to consider is the

type and extent of communication between the new hire and the administration or other teachers. If there is little day-to-day interaction, teachers may feel isolated or insecure. Above all, teachers should consider the areas that are important to them in their professional lives. For some, this may involve fitting in with the rest of the team; for others, opportunities for professional development may be more important.

KF: NNES professionals should consider whether they would feel comfortable in a specific setting. NNES professionals from an urban area may not be ready to accept a job in a small American college town. However, there are many factors to consider at the beginning of one's career. One of them is the importance of getting that first full-time offer. Other questions job candidates may want to ask include the following:

1. How many preparations will there be in one semester?
2. How much extra-curricular activity is required?
3. How many students are in a class?
4. From which countries are the students in the program?
5. What is the degree of literacy of the incoming students?

NNES job candidates may wish to ask if they will be expected to recruit students from their language or ethnic background for the program. Candidates should also consider their own strengths. If the job offer is to teach accent reduction and they are self-conscious about their own accent, then the job may not be the right one for them. They need to ask about the salary and working conditions. Some private ESL companies expect a great deal of work for a relatively low hourly wage. Administrators and hiring committees are trying to find and hire the best "fit" for the program, but job candidates should remember that if they feel uncomfortable during the hiring process, it may be a signal that the job would not work out. If offered the job, perhaps they should decline and continue to explore other options.

Conclusion

The awareness of diversity in today's educational environment and the desire of most ESL professionals to employ fair hiring practices make today's job market a good one for NNES teachers. Getting hired, however, is only one part of the career process. Becoming acclimated to the program and the students, learning and growing on the job, and *enjoying* one's chosen profession are all important factors for success.

Program administrators can assist NNES teachers by being aware of the needs of nonnative English speakers and by implementing procedures for feedback and information exchange. NNES teachers need to be aware of the perceptions held by students and the school's administration and should make an effort to break down any barriers that stand in the way of effective communication. NNES teachers are good role models both for the students in the ESL program and for colleagues in the field. Both groups have much to gain when there is a conscious attempt to have a dialogue about differences and what we all can share.

Authors

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