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Demystifying the Tenure-Track Job Search: Stories of Four NNES Professionals

■ **Although various career options are available for graduates of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL)/applied linguistics programs, the process of searching for and securing a job is often unclear. This poses a problem particularly for nonnative English speakers (NNESs), who may believe they are at a disadvantage in the job market because of their background even before they begin the search. In this article, nonnative English-speaking (NNES) authors share their personal accounts to demystify the job-search process for tenure-track positions at U.S. universities and suggest ways to make the job-search process successful. While most of the discussion specifically addresses issues that are unique to NNES job seekers, many of the lessons and suggestions gleaned from the case studies are applicable to all job seekers. The appendix provides a list of on-line and off-line job-search resources.**

Introduction

Although many career options are available for those with a graduate degree in teaching English to speakers of other languages

(TESOL) or applied linguistics, the actual job-search process is often unclear. The search for tenure-track positions at U.S. colleges and universities is not an exception. This lack of information on the job-search process is troublesome for all new Ph.D. graduates out in the market for the first time but especially so for nonnative English speakers (NNESs), who may believe that they are at a disadvantage because of their language background. In addition, nonnative English-speaking (NNES) professionals often come from a country where hiring practices and social and cultural expectations of the job search differ greatly from those of the US.

This is not a trivial matter because a significant number of NNESs are attending graduate programs in TESOL and applied linguistics in the US (Kamhi-Stein, 2001; Liu, 1999). While many choose to return to their home countries to apply what they learn in the US to English language teaching overseas, there are also those who are interested in remaining in the US to teach ESL, develop and administer a language program, be involved in teacher education, or conduct research. They complement their native English-speaking (NES) colleagues by providing their unique insights as ESL learners and enrich the educational experience for both NNES and NES students attending American universities.

Our goals in this article are to help demystify the job-search process for tenure-track positions at U.S. universities, identify issues related to the job search that are unique to nonnative English speakers, and suggest ways to make the job-search process successful, meaningful, and even a growing experience. While some points of our discussion apply to NNESs and native English speakers (NESs) equally, most of the discussion focuses on NNES job seekers since there are already resources available for NES job seekers. Besides, as the authors are all NNESs, we can only speculate on what our NES colleagues experience. Furthermore, we do not claim that our stories can address all the questions NNES job seekers have or that our experi-

ences are the norm or typical. However, our experiences are similar enough to illustrate some common threads in the job-search process while different enough to show how the job-search experience could vary from one person to another.¹

NNESs in the Job Market

Publications on the issues of nonnative English-speaking professionals in TESOL, which has grown significantly in recent years, have examined such constructs as the native/nonnative speaker distinction from linguistic, pedagogical, and political perspectives (Canagarajah, 1999; Cook, 1999; Norton, 1997) and surveyed NNESs' own perceptions and reflections on being NNES professionals in this field (Amin, 1999; Liu, 1999; Samimy & Brutt-Griffler, 1999; Tang, 1997).

One area in which NNESs often struggle is finding employment, especially in intensive language programs. As Liu (1999) observes in his discussion of hiring policies, "NNSs [nonnative speakers] are still disadvantaged in the hiring process" and "NSs [native speakers] are still assumed to be the best teachers of the language" (p. 98) among program administrators. The low number of NNES teachers (7.9%) in intensive English programs, despite the high number of them in graduate programs, illustrates how such preference for NESs plays out in actual hiring practices (Mahboob, Uhrig, Newman, & Hartford, 2004).

Studies have identified several possible reasons why program administrators may hesitate to hire NNESs. For example, the administrators may not be confident that NNES teachers have adequate linguistic and cultural competences (Canagarajah, 1999; Jenin, 1998; Thomas, 1999) and are concerned particularly with their accent and fluency (Flynn & Gulikers, 2001). There is also a belief that ESL students prefer and expect to be taught by NES teachers (Braine, 1999; Cook, 1999; Medgyes, 1992), although two recent studies suggest that ESL students are in fact supportive of NNES teachers (Mahboob,

2004; Moussu, 2002). Additionally, the complexity of the legal process may discourage the hiring of non-U.S. citizens, the category to which many NNESs belong (Braine, 1998). Such procedures as proving that a foreign hire did not eliminate a U.S. citizen's chances for employment may seem too cumbersome and costly for some employers even when a NNES is willing to obtain the appropriate immigration status and cover the cost of the process.

Our understanding of NNES hiring, however, is limited mostly to ESL teaching positions in language programs. We have not had much discussion about another type of job opportunity available for NNES professionals—tenure-track positions at U.S. universities—which entails a different set of hiring criteria and job expectations. Browsing through professional journals and conference programs, we can easily identify more than several NNES professionals in TESOL who hold such a position and are actively contributing to the field. Yet, Ph.D. candidates interested in tenure-track jobs in the US are often left wondering how to find such a position because not many resources are available. In the following stories, we will shed light on this lesser-known process of tenure-track job search in the US by sharing our personal accounts.

Four Stories

Aya's Story

Although I did not enter the job market until my last year as a Ph.D. student, my job-search process actually began during my first semester as an MA student when I created my first curriculum vitae (CV). It came out as a simple, one-page document without much content, but this was a good way to understand what kind of professional activities I was expected to engage in for the next 5 years or so. The following year, I began presenting at the local TESOL conferences, serving on departmental committees, and publishing in newsletters. At first I was doing so simply to gain CV lines; however, I quickly realized that participating in such professional activities was the

most efficient way to become engaged in the field, and I came to enjoy the interaction with colleagues that resulted from such activities.

I decided to go on the market during my 5th year in graduate school. Not knowing exactly what kind of job I wanted or qualified for, I began with a very broad search: I applied to all of the applied linguistics positions I found. My biggest concern at first was to hide the fact that I was a NNES, and I made sure that all my documents were free of “nonnative” errors. However, it was clear to the search committees from the beginning that I was a NNES because one of the recommendation letters commented on how good my English was—something you would not mention if a candidate were a NES. I panicked when I found this out, but I soon realized that it was a good thing. The schools that were interested enough to interview me not only knew that I was a NNES but seemed to think I had something special to offer because of being a NNES. Some schools may have decided not to interview me because of my language background, but I probably would not have enjoyed working in such a place anyway.

My job search schedule was typical of those for English department positions. Job applications were due in late fall, and first interviews were held in late December and early January at Modern Language Association (MLA) or Linguistic Society of America (LSA) meetings or over the phone. After several campus interviews—more or less similar to what is described in the other three stories—I negotiated and accepted an offer in February and spent the rest of that spring completing my dissertation.

Seran's Story

I was a stay-at-home mother without a work permit when I decided to seek a tenure-track position in TESOL teacher education in the US. After receiving a MS in TESOL (1990) and a Ph.D. in educational linguistics (1993), both from the University of Pennsylvania, I returned to Turkey without trying out the U.S. job market because I was on a J-1 exchange

scholar visa with a 2-year home residency requirement after graduation. I got a very good job in one of the premier universities in Turkey as an EFL teacher educator and started developing my research agenda. In the meantime I had a son. Then my husband decided to return to the US to pursue an MBA. In 1998, my son and I joined my husband at Indiana University, where I did some independent research. When he was offered a good job upon graduation in 1999, I decided to resign from my position in Turkey, after considerable (and painful) deliberation, and we moved back to the US.

For a year and a half, I kept myself busy with my son. However, I was not completely removed from my field. I did a lot of reading, kept up with developments and new publications in applied linguistics via Linguist List and other resources, wrote a book review, and finished an article for publication. I believe that it is very important to continue one's professional development even when one is engaged in tasks not directly related to one's area of expertise because academia moves too fast for us to catch up with even after a couple of years' hiatus.

By December 2000, I had begun to miss teaching and the vigor of an academic environment, so I decided to look for a tenure-track position in TESOL teacher education. By then, the deadline for many jobs had passed and I had nothing prepared to send in. Being away from my former professors and colleagues from the academic environment, I had no one, except for my husband, with whom to discuss things and no work permit. Yet I was determined. I started with updating my CV and sample course syllabi, made copies of my publications, and gathered information on position openings. I opened a file in the Career Services of the University of Pennsylvania and had my former professors put reference letters there. I also arranged for transcripts to be sent out. I used the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and other resources (listed in the appendix) to familiarize myself with the steps of job search in the US.

By mid-January 2001 I had managed to send out 10 job applications. I was particularly interested in two universities because of their programs and locations, but their application deadlines had passed. I called these schools and told them I was very interested in the position and still wanted to apply. I was pleasantly surprised when they accepted. I could have applied to more places but I limited myself to institutions in or near large cities so that my husband could find a job near me. In the meantime, I gathered information about the process of hiring someone without a work permit in order to answer interview questions about this.

In late January and February 2001, I had three phone interviews, two of which were for teacher educator positions. The third one was for an ESL instructor, which was not clearly stated in the job ad and something I was overqualified for. In February, I was invited to campus interviews by the first two institutions and received offers from both places in March. In mid-March I had another phone interview with a school I was interested in and was invited to its campus for April. But by then I had to respond to the first two offers, so I declined the campus visit and two other phone interview offers. Although it was painful to decline campus visits to places I was interested in, I had to make an early decision to allow for my work permit to be processed by the INS (now U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services) before the beginning of the academic year. I accepted the TESOL teacher educator position at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville and started my new job in August 2001.

Zohreh's Story

My first job search, which was toward the end of the last year of my Ph.D. studies, was limited to the Chicago area, where my husband had already accepted a faculty position. I was not well informed about the job-search process, but I applied to about a dozen nearby higher education institutions, and I was lucky enough to find a three-year contract position

as an assistant professor at a well-known private university. After 3 years, for personal and family reasons, I returned to my home country of Iran and taught at a top university there for 8 years. Then when I returned to the US for my husband's sabbatical leave, it felt as if we were coming back to our second home. This, in addition to a few other factors, encouraged me to look into the prospect of a tenure-track position here in the US.

As a NNES, a Moslem, an Iranian, and a female, I assumed the tenure-track job-search process would be more challenging for me than for others in the field. Hiding my language background was not an option because my name would show my ethnicity and my last 8 years' experience would give away my origin. Since the job search took place after the September 11th terrorist attack, I knew I needed to prepare myself for many nonsubstantiated, discrimination-based rejections.

I started preparing my CV in February 2002. Through that process I realized there were some issues the job recruiters might perceive as weaknesses, including my NNES status. This process of reflection led me to concentrate on my strengths and turn challenges into celebrations. I realized that my GPA and academic performance, my strong recommendation letters, my teaching background in the US and overseas, and my teaching evaluations from students were all evidence of my successes. I also realized that the fact that my entire postsecondary education took place at U.S. research I institutions and that I myself had gone through the process of learning another language could both be emphasized as my strengths.

I knew that my job options included being an ESL instructor at a college or university, a K-12 ESL teacher, an ESL teacher educator, and administrative positions. My goal was to first get back into the system, establish myself, and build my career through networking. Then I could consider other options and relocate if something more suitable came up. Therefore, I decided to start with a broad search. However, given my background, qualifications, and interests, I knew that the ideal

option was a teacher educator position at a university.

At the TESOL convention in March 2002, I was invited to five interviews. After the convention, I had telephone interviews with two other universities and with one of the schools I interviewed with at TESOL. I was invited for three campus interviews and received offers from the three universities. I accepted the offer from Texas A&M University, where I now work as an assistant professor.

Katya's Story

As a third-year international doctorate student, I consciously limited my job search to an ESL teaching or an administrative position at a two- or four-year college or university. Although I had taught methods courses in an MA TESOL program over two summers, my lack of self-confidence and insecurity about my English language proficiency prevented me from seeking a teacher educator position. Moreover, even though I took classes in the methodology of teaching Russian and was finishing a dissertation on Russian morphology, I did not consider Russian-teaching jobs because of my lack of teaching experience in this field.

Having realized that it was almost impossible to find a job close to the university where my husband was working on a Ph.D. in physics, I extended my search to schools all over the country. A perfect opportunity arose at the TESOL convention, where I found a job description that seemed to have been designed personally for me: Its primary requirements were the ability to teach TESOL methods and the Russian language. I summoned my courage and arranged an appointment with the recruiter. This meeting, during which the interviewer described the university and the MA TESOL program and asked about my dissertation and teaching experience, led to a campus interview.

In preparation for the campus interview, I studied the university and the department missions posted on the Web. This research helped me shape my interview talk in terms

of liberal arts education and led me to choose a demonstration lesson over a scholarly presentation. I talked to several friends who had recently acquired university jobs to find out frequently asked interview questions. The most common and challenging one seemed to be, "Why do you want to teach at our university?" I also listed several questions to ask the faculty, prepared sample syllabi of the courses I could teach, and sought the advice of my more-experienced colleagues on the teaching demonstration.

During the two-day interview, which started as soon as I arrived on campus from the airport, I met 22 people. The interviewers were interested in my research, teaching experience in the US and abroad, and attitudes toward teaching, as well as my family situation and visa status. On several occasions during the interview, I was asked to explain why I wanted to teach in this university and how I, as a nonnative speaker, felt about teaching Americans. The teaching demonstration was a true challenge because it involved a multilevel classroom and difficult aspects of grammar—to be taught without any textbook—but the students' responsiveness and friendliness turned it into a motivating lesson. Three weeks later I was offered a tenure-track position as an assistant professor of TESOL and Russian, which I accepted.

10 Suggestions for Job Candidates

As our stories illustrate, the job-search process varies greatly from one person to another. However, there are also some similarities across our experiences. Here is a list of 10 suggestions, gleaned from the four stories above and from many others, that can be useful to other job seekers.

1. Think of the Job-Search Process as a Chance to Examine Your Professional Goals

When on the job market, it is easy to be nearsighted and focus only on securing a job. However, maintaining a vision of long-term professional goals is also important. "Why do

I want this job?” and “What do I want to do after getting this job?” are two questions that need to be asked throughout the process, in addition to the most commonly asked, “How can I get this job?” As mentioned in Aya’s story, most activities that make a stronger job candidate, such as conference presentations and publications, are not just for CV lines but are important parts of our professional lives that continue after securing the job; potential employers are not interested in the “CV lines” themselves but in what they say about the person’s potential for future professional work. Thinking of the job search not as the final goal but rather as a process or part of larger goals in your professional life allows you to explore what you want to do in your career and find a job that you would be really happy with.

2. Become Active and Establish Yourself Early in Your Career

Our second piece of advice, which is related to the first, is to build a strong record in teaching, research, and service and to establish yourself professionally. NNEs have many strengths that native-speaking counterparts may not have, but when searching for a job, you cannot use them to your advantage unless you make the first cut by presenting evidence that your future as a teacher and a scholar is promising. And teaching and research experience is what the search committee looks for as such evidence. In addition, although unfortunate, there is still a bias against NNEs in some schools. In those cases, NNEs need to be not only as good as, but even better than, NES candidates to gain a chance to compete on the same ground. It is never too early to get involved and become active professionally.

3. Diversify and Broaden Your Expertise

Specializing in more than one field increases your chances of securing a job, as Katya’s experience clearly illustrates. Schools prefer to hire faculty with a broad range of teaching experiences and interests over a narrowly focused specialist to meet their

diverse curricular needs. No matter how interesting your dissertation is, you must be able to teach several courses other than those directly related to your dissertation topic and to work with students on a wide range of research projects. Graduate school is a perfect place to diversify your expertise by taking and teaching new classes. Exploring new subjects from both the student’s and teacher’s point of view will help you broaden your knowledge, expand your range of experiences, and develop skills in course design and instructional practice.

4. Know Your Strengths as a NNE Professional

Native and nonnative English-speaking teachers both have their own merits and strengths to offer (Medgyes, 1992; Phillipson, 1992; Rampton, 1990). Phillipson (1992) asserts that NNE teachers have insights into the linguistic and cultural needs of their learners more than NES teachers do, and Medgyes (1994) points out that NNE teachers have an advantage in providing a good model for second language learners, can better anticipate and prevent language difficulties, and benefit from their mother tongue.

As Zohreh’s story suggested, it is crucial to be aware of your strengths and to be able to articulate them clearly and delicately in your cover letter and during interviews. It is also important to reflect on your perceived weaknesses and examine them to turn them into strengths.

5. Familiarize Yourself With the Job-Search Process and Expectations

The job search is a sociocultural event whose norms vary significantly across cultures. Therefore, as mentioned in Seran’s story, it is essential to learn the process and expectations that are unique to the US and adapt to American practices, which may differ considerably from what you are accustomed to. Possible resources for educating yourself about this process include other NNE students, colleagues and friends who

have succeeded in finding jobs, your professors, career services at your school, and various workshops focused on resume and interview skills. The Internet is also useful for such career resources as job listings, job-search strategies, and sample resumes (see Appendix for a list of resources).

6. Be a Potential Colleague

It is important to remember that when being interviewed, you are considered a potential colleague, not a graduate student. Interviews are a two-way process in that the institution wants to impress you as much as you want to impress it. While it is important to show that you would be a nice and interesting colleague to spend time with if you were to be hired, there is no need to have an apologetic or humble tone. In fact, carrying an air of confidence around you would enable you to convey a more professional pose. Some NNEs come from a culture in which a job candidate is expected to be humble and not bring up his or her strengths even during a job interview. However, being self-confident and assertive—but not boastful—when talking about yourself and your strengths is looked on positively by most institutions in the US.

7. Be Prepared for Interviews

Being well prepared for interviews is crucial. Knowing about the program (its mission, main student body, and requirements), the department (its composition and the role of the targeted unit in the department), and the institution (its mission and student body) will make your interaction with the search committee more meaningful and impressive.

Preparing for interviews also means preparing answers for questions you may be asked. For instance, be ready to discuss existing courses you are able to teach and new courses you can add to the program, with a list of textbooks in mind, or even bring sample syllabi and a statement of teaching philosophy. The search committee may also ask about your research plans after the dissertation.

For a campus interview, you will need to prepare a presentation and/or a teaching unit. Find out early about the format (e.g., present your research, teach a lesson, have an informal talk about your work) and audience (e.g., students, faculty, a mixture of both), and prepare a presentation on a familiar topic (rather than something completely new) that is accessible yet illustrates the uniqueness of your work.

Finally, as a NNEs, be prepared to explain, if asked, how your NNEs status might influence your interaction with your students, especially when you are involved in language teaching and/or with students in small regional institutions who might not be used to working with international faculty. Your answer should build on your strengths as an international faculty member and include a brief explanation of how you can use your bilingual status to enhance your position. It is important that you are not apologetic about your NNEs status but present it as a fact of life in a multilingual society such as the US and as a strength in a globalizing world.

8. Know Your Legal Rights and Responsibilities

Many—though not all—NNEs come from a country other than the US and may still be on a temporary visa (e.g., F-1, J-1) or dual-purpose working visa (H-1) when they look for a job. If that is the case, as it was for all four of us, it is important to obtain current information about your legal rights and responsibilities regarding your work eligibility. The best source for information based on your particular case will be the international students and scholars' office at your institution. You need to talk with the staff there about your visa, its home residency requirements, if any, and the procedure involved in your obtaining authorization to work in the US. Equipped with this information, you can then talk with the prospective institution about whether and how it will aid you in obtaining a work permit and permanent residency later on. Though hiring a non-U.S. citi-

zen will involve more paperwork for the institution, this procedure is becoming familiar for many universities given the fact that a significant number of doctorates awarded by U.S. universities—more than half in some fields—go to non-U.S. citizens (Hoffer et al., 2003); however, the employing university may not know the best way to handle your individual case unless you educate it.

9. Evaluate the Offers Holistically

By the time a job offer comes, you may be so exhausted that you may be willing to take any offer. However, it is important to sit down and evaluate the offers closely and holistically. Salary, of course, is important as most raises are defined in terms of the percentage of a current salary; a small difference in the first year may become a big gap down the road. However, there are many other factors that one needs to consider when reviewing a job offer. Job responsibilities, research and other institutional support, department culture, collegiality, and location of the university are some examples. Identify things that are important in your professional and personal lives, prioritize them, and evaluate the offers with regard to what is important in your life—present and future.

10. Be Prepared for the “Two-Body” Problem

If you have a partner, his or her career goals and opportunities also influence your job-related decisions. In fact, all four of us had to address this issue one way or another. For a partner in academia, a spousal offer may be a possibility but is not available in all cases. One may decide to search in a geographical area where his or her partner already has a job or in cities where jobs suitable for the partner are available. A couple may decide to live apart and build their careers until something suitable comes up for one or the other in a closer location. There is more than one way to work out this complicated but important “problem.” Consulting with others in a similar situation (NESs or NNESSs) and communicat-

ing well with your partner are crucial for making an informed decision.

Conclusion

Being on the job market is often a challenging, stressful, and frustrating time in one’s professional life. However, as we hoped to illustrate through our stories as NNESSs seeking tenure-track positions in the US, it can also be a process of self-discovery where a candidate understands his or her strengths and weaknesses as well as goals as a scholar and teacher. This article may not answer all the questions job seekers may have, but we hope it provides enough information to suggest where and how to start a positive and rewarding job-search process.

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Endnote

¹ It should also be noted that this particular piece focuses only on the tenure-track job search in U.S. universities, which is only one of many career options for TESOL professionals. There are, for example, many exciting university jobs in other countries as well as different types of TESOL jobs all over the world. The job-search process for each of these options is quite different, and it is crucial that those interested in other types of career options explore the process for each option.

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Appendix

Job-Search Resources

Here are some examples of useful resources for job seekers. Please note that URLs are subject to change, although they were valid as of September 2005.

Books and Web Sites on Job-Search Information

- Morris, M., & Vick, J. M. (2001). *The Academic Job Search Handbook*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- The Career Network (The Chronicle of Higher Education)*
<http://chronicle.com/jobs>
 "News and Advice" section has numerous articles, stories, and advice columns for academic job seekers. Archive is available at <http://chronicle.com/jobs/archive/advicearch.htm>
- Linguistic Society of America (LSA) Job Page*
<http://www.lsadc.org/index2.php?aaa=inter-vw.htm>
 Provides tips for interviewing.

- Modern Language Association (MLA) Job List*
<http://www.mla.org/jil>
 Guidelines and advice for job candidates and hiring departments (geared toward English and Foreign Languages departments).
- Finding a job in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL)*
http://www.tesol.org/s_tesol/seccss.asp?CID=253&DID=1725
 Information on careers in TESOL, including job database and list of teacher education programs. Information on the TESOL Job Market Place is also available (http://www.tesol.org/s_tesol/seccss.asp?CID=120&DID=1590).
- Preparing and assembling documents for the academic job search (Virginia Tech)*
<http://www.career.vt.edu/GraduateStudents/Documents.htm>
 Description of various documents needed for the academic job search are available, as are tips and samples to assist preparation.

Job Databases

- TESOL Job Finder*
<http://www.vv-vv.com/tesol/R45975OR.cfm?A=JML&B=0,0,0,0>
 Allows you to search for jobs, post your resume, and apply for jobs on-line; email alert is also available.
- The Career Network (The Chronicle of Higher Education)*
<http://chronicle.com/jobs>
 Updated weekly; lists academic jobs in all disciplines; free email notification of new jobs is available.
- American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL) Job Register*
<http://aaaljobs.lang.uiuc.edu/current.asp>
 Updated regularly; lists jobs in applied linguistics.
- Linguistic Society of America (LSA) Job Page*
<http://www.lsadc.org/index2.php?aaa=joblist.htm>
 Lists jobs in various areas in theoretical and applied linguistics.

Modern Language Association (MLA) Job List

<http://www.ade.org/jil/index.htm>

Password required; many U.S. universities are institutional members and students and faculty can access the database, which is updated weekly, with the institution's ID and password. Paper version is also available four times a year.

The LINGUIST List Job Database

<http://saussure.linguistlist.org/cfdocs/new-website/LL-WorkingDirs/jobs/index.cfm>

Lists job announcements in linguistics

that were posted to the LINGUIST mailing list after December 31, 2001.

Institutional and Organizational Support

Workshops hosted by a program, department, college/school, institution, or professional organization.

Job-placement services available at your school.

Professional organizations (e.g., TESOL NNEST Caucus)

People: Your advisers, professors, and friends, as well as alumni of your program