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## How does Race Factor into TESOL?

Sun, 07/31/2011 - 16:10 Asian-American ESL-EFL Jobs Non-Caucasian TEFL Teachers Race Racism in the TEFL Industry Teaching English Abroad Teaching English in Taiwan TESOL

Many TESOL (Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages) companies and schools advertise job openings that look to provide the recently graduated and inexperienced teacher, or laid-off professional with years of experience, hope for a job placement. The outlook for teaching English overseas seems bright; multinational companies (such as Pegasus) promise plane tickets and board; others (such as Hess) promise qualified TEFL certificate training. Online companies such as [tesoltraining.net](http://tesoltraining.net) talk about self-study courses leading to a combination of certificate and placement assistance. What are the realities behind the flashy videos of sensational overseas teaching jobs? How does race factor into these training promises?

Firstly, it appears that most of these companies and schools, whether based here in the United States or Canada, express a strong preference for Caucasian teachers, preferably young, good-looking ones. They won't tell you this outright, but in fact, the evidence is implied. The videos are exclusively white and young. The job ads state "25-35 yo preferred." Whether it is the photos or written testimonials, the catch seems to be that you are mostly or most certainly pass for white. Why else do they insist upon applicants sending photographs, scans of passports, and even scans of college degrees or transcripts? (Don't get me on the angle of the black market for undercover agents, since I've already sent Epoch Training (Beijing), and Hess all the requested materials).

According to David, blog owner of *Teaching English in Taiwan--The Complete Guide to Teaching English in Taiwan*, skin color and ethnicity seem to matter over qualifications, especially at the many private schools or *buxibans*. In "Who Can Teach in Taiwan," he writes under subheading "Is Skin Color Important?":

Yes. If you are not white, you will find it harder to find a teaching job in Taiwan. Many might disagree with me, but I know this to be true from having met and spoke to people who faced problems finding employment because they weren't white. This doesn't mean you won't find a job, but you will be turned away by many schools as soon as they discover that you aren't white. (<http://www.teachenglishtaiwan.net/who-can-teach-english-in-taiwan/>)

It is patently ridiculous that Asians who are technologically so progressive can be so culturally narrow in their perspective; maybe it is time for us to change the term "minority" into less of a pejorative.

The evidence is corroborated by the observations of many others; for instance, in "Wanted: English Teachers. Asians Don't Apply," Lisa Takeuchi Cullen describes how in their ignorance regarding professional standards and educational background "some schools have taken to hiring whites who don't even speak English as a first language" ([http://workingprogress.blogs.time.com/2007/10/29/wanted\\_english\\_teachers\\_asians/](http://workingprogress.blogs.time.com/2007/10/29/wanted_english_teachers_asians/)).

Such misconceptions regarding "English speakers looking their part" only fans the myth that native speakers must be white in order to teach English, despite the fact that the West has always been, and is increasingly, multicultural and consists of many highly qualified non-white educators with multiple degrees. Not only this, but these schools also ought to consider that Asian-Americans awarded opportunities to live and work in China are less likely to concoct and spread unfavorable or slanted myths (eg. Dr. Greg's unit "Narcissistic Types Among Chinese Women").

In defense of their prejudicial hiring practices, many TESOL recruiters and schools implicate the preferences of the parents: demand favors hiring white teachers. In "Standards of English and politics of inclusion," linguist Adrian Holliday argues:

I am not at all sure that this is a valid excuse. It certainly would not hold if we were to make the excuse that employers should hold on to the idea that certain occupations should be carried out by women or black people because their customers demand it. We all have a responsibility to educate our customers (Holliday, 2008, p. 121).

In "Race and the Identity of the Nonnative English Speaker," Nuzhat Amin puts forth a related argument based on her own experiences teaching English as an ethnic Canadian Pakistani; her adult ESL students seemed to struggle with notions of acceptance of her as a "real Canadian" (Amin, 1997, p. 580). Her article aspires to challenge and dissociate the intermingled concepts of authenticity, race, and English teaching ability.

...TESOL in Canada and the U.S. should clearly define the terms native and nonnative, emphasizing that there is no intrinsic connection between race and ability in English. So far, race has not been addressed in debates about native versus nonnative speakers. I think that the above-described assumptions, which permeate the ESL classroom in Canada and disempower the non-White teacher, need to be acknowledged and addressed for the TESOL profession to become a level playing field for non-White teachers (Amin, 1997, p. 582).

Fourteen years later, however, TESOL programs are still run by respected institutions (such as at American University) that limit the number and type of graduate candidates accepted to mostly white students. One can observe from the photographs that the published graduates are mostly Caucasians, and most of the graduate assistants as well. Furthermore, it is no secret that graduates hired on fellowships are frequently on the fast track for Fulbright or other college-level teaching opportunities, thus tending to further the gap in multi-racial representation.

In my case, it seems that the myth of non-Caucasians being less qualified in TESOL has even become a self-confirming prophecy. Why? Because of the deliberate shut-outs or starvation opportunities encountered. Even when offering to teach ESL at my former church (St. Matthew's), there was blatant discrimination. I was purposely shunted towards tutoring or serving as hostess, where white applicants (whose professional lives ranged from banking to computer software engineering) were immediately offered teaching placements. Mark, this kind of discrimination occurred at a time when I had completed all the English degree requirements at the undergraduate level, including post-graduate education courses. Now armed with a graduate degree in English, will these self-same non-profits offer a flurry of better excuses? Can they not see that having experienced manifold unhelpful attitudes as an engineer (armed with engineering degree, then license), that I recognize the underlying reason as clear as the tolling bell? Would they not know that by now, I have experienced the self-same signals at several other ESL outfits in the metro region?

Okay, the manifold of Catch-22 type of excuses include lack of fluency in Spanish--or the perception that I am non-Spanish speaking fluent. Even working with Asians, there is the fear that I may pose a threat to their egos. Why is the notion that whites are stereotypically middle-class working to continually self-perpetuate over other races? Does this not go back to ingrained unconscious awareness of sweatshops and human trafficking? Are we not constantly inundated with the image of prostitutes who are willing to avail themselves, even in those heinous acts, at lower cost than other races, since there are most certainly all races involved in the dreaded human trafficking rings?

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U.S. Adult ESL programs, as in the East Asian countries, have proved complicit in their stated preferences, ignoring or overlooking the idea that Asian-Americans are just as capable or maybe more than capable based upon qualifications. Another poor excuse (but used nevertheless) is that one is not already working (grooms like a yuppie), or lacks adequate experience (forgetting they were willing to hire so-and-so without said degree).

In the 21st century, must we continually be affronted by the image of the bottle-blond and fair-skinned as quintessentially more American and inherently superior in native-speaking English? Do these people not realize that beauty and race are only skin deep? What right do they have to specify preferences based upon looks, youth, or cultural understandings? For shame!

In East Asian countries where people work six days a week (Taiwan), where people willingly accept Western ideas as doctrinaire at least by face value (Singapore), where the exchange rate is astronomical (Korea), who could foresee what happens if one makes the drastic mistake of settling there? Having grown up surrounded by lack of opportunity among the round-eyes, is it not inevitable that retiring as an ex-pat in an East Asian country, no one will be willing to avail oneself to help should the going get rough?

This is not to say that there aren't exceptions to the Caucasian preference in TESOL training and employment programs. Of course there are--the odd Asian graduate fellow in the American TESOL program, the rewarded experience as reported by Gilbert Wong from Hess International, the successful East-Indian teaching English in Korea. But these are far fewer in number than one would expect --even here, gender plays a factor--many more are males of color than females--which goes back to my theory of the massive unconscious appreciation of human trafficking, since males are more likely avail themselves of such fleshly offerings with less social risk, thus making it worth the trade.

One thing which everyone should question is the notion of any kind of official regularity in TESOL/TEFL certificate training standards. There actually is no uniform standard, nor is there likely to ever be a policing of such because the adoption of adult English Language Acquisition standards varies by the state (Visit Adult Education Content Standards Warehouse <http://www.adultedcontentstandards.ed.gov/Source/getStandard.cfm>). Simply stated, adults are less subject to stringent monitoring, such as what is in place for K-12 instructional standards, since many cannot even afford to attend classes regularly. While from an international perspective, Tesol.org has developed standards ([http://www.tesol.org/s\\_tesol/seccss.asp?CID=364&DID=1981](http://www.tesol.org/s_tesol/seccss.asp?CID=364&DID=1981)), again these standards are strictly voluntary. This would account for the great variability in what comprises a TESOL Certificate--whether this is via the Oxford Seminars (6 days with a 40-hour online component, total price only \$1200) or American University (5 graduate courses valued at \$18,000). One can see that even if one school appeared to be less of a scam than the other, what minority non-white post-baccalaureate student in their right mind would want to embark on an over-priced quest to teach in China when both TESOL Certificates are equally valid, and when, in fact, China values the bottle-blond whose non-Native language is not English, over the American-Chinese post-graduate?

This is not to deny that there are possibly legions of well-intentioned TESOL instructors; nevertheless, the mindset reigning among TESOL employers and associated institutions in host countries is shamelessly neocolonialist. How ironic, given that there are so many American-Asians willing to serve as teachers and ambassadors from America, to be shut out by their countries of origin. If only these Asian nations knew what they were losing out on, the voices of immigrants who understand the true costs for becoming American; not the white missionary perspective touted by corporations.

In closing his article Adrian Holliday included these TESOL recommendations:

The standard must also be authentic within a COSMOPOLITAN world. It must in itself be cosmopolitan in the sense that it encompasses diversity and complexity, and can be located and meaningful in specific political settings. Removing the element of nation and the ascription inherent in speakerhood, the standard should be PROFESSIONAL in the sense that it should relate to what people can do professionally, rather than what they cannot do (as might be implied by the term 'NON-native speaker'). This means that possessing the standard should be EARNED in the sense that it can be learned and achieved, and not born into with any form of 'native' advantage (Holliday, 2008, pp. 128-129).

For certain, with the shallowness of TESOL recruiters and companies regarding skin tone over qualifications, one needs to be mindful of the better longer-term opportunities and benefits of trying to stay in America after all. To my regret, this summer alone, I invested approximately \$8000 in my quest for a TESOL Certificate; now if anyone ever cites me over my lack of overseas experience, I will defend myself with these words to the wise:

I AM, and HAVE ALWAYS BEEN and WILL CONTINUE TO BE a part of Everyman's American overseas experience!

Maybe one benefit one could claim as a minority is that diversity is written into the gene pool, but an article on how the term "minority" has outlived its usefulness awaits!

#### References

Amin, N. (1997). "Race and the identity of the nonnative ESL teacher." *TESOL Quarterly*, 31 (3), 580-583. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3587841>

Holliday, A. (2008). "Standards of English and politics of inclusion." *Language Teaching*, 41 (1), 119-130. doi:10.1017/S0261444807004776

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