

Searching for equality in ELT

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There are two main issues that have preoccupied me during my professional life.

The first is, does it really matter if the person giving a plenary or a keynote at an international ELT conference is a man or a woman?

Your reply will most likely be: No, it doesn't matter, as long as the speaker is a professional. However, for many years, I wondered whether there were no female Big Names in ELT precisely because the vast majority of plenary and keynote speakers were, and in many events still are, men. Women are under-represented at the top of the tree even though ours is a profession where most practitioners are women. I don't mean to say that conference organisers actively discriminate against female speakers. Maybe they just don't think about it, and I do see that as a problem, because there are many women on the organising boards of these conferences.

The second issue is a passport-related one.

I arrived in Spain 16 years ago, and soon afterwards I started offering my services as a teacher of English. Although I had considerable experience teaching a range of levels and ages, was in possession of a post-graduate degree from a British university, had served as a Cambridge Oral Examiner in my home country, Argentina, and was already a published ELT author, I found I lacked what apparently was 'the most important qualification': I wasn't a Native Speaker. 'You have a fantastic CV but you're not 'a native' was the mantra I kept hearing. And I wasn't the only one! However, I have also discovered that native English teachers could also be discriminated against. Some employers demand specific accents: British as opposed to American or Scottish or Irish, not to mention African native speakers of English.

In due time, I joined TESOL-SPAIN and I must say I have been very lucky to find a group of like-minded fellow members and Board members, male and female, native and non-native, who actively work to eradicate discrimination in all its forms.

For many years, even when gender balance was not an issue in ELT, TESOL-SPAIN Annual Conference Coordinators tried hard to ensure equal representation in the line-up of their plenary speakers. In recent years, we have extended our efforts to ensure that this balance is also present in our line-up of keynote and general speakers for our Annual conventions as well as in our regional events.

In 2018 and 2019, we received an EVE (Equal Voices in ELT) awards for our Madrid and Oviedo Annual convention line-ups, for which we are deeply grateful.

As for the NEST/NNEST issue, TESOL-SPAIN is particularly worried about the situation in Spain, where it is common for non-native English speaking teachers to be discriminated against, in favour of native English speaking teachers, regardless of their respective qualifications, even for positions in official government organisations.

Back in 2014, the Board issued the following position statement against discrimination:

In compliance with Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, TESOL-SPAIN stands in opposition to discrimination against teachers on the basis of their national, ethnic or linguistic background, religion, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation, in terms of hiring, promotion, recruitment for jobs, or employment conditions.

With respect to the common, long-standing notion, unsupported by research, that a certain ethnicity, accent, or national background gives a person an advantage as a teacher of English, TESOL-SPAIN firmly believes that all teachers should be evaluated and valued solely on the basis of their teaching competence, teaching experience, formal education and linguistic expertise. Therefore, TESOL-SPAIN does not condone job announcements that list “native English,” “native command of English,” “native-like fluency,” “standard accented English,” or similar, as required or desirable qualities.

There's still a lot to do to achieve equality in the workplace at all levels, but we feel that if teachers' associations, researchers and teachers all work together, we can make the change and set an example to other sectors. We are educators, and we can fight against discrimination at all levels through education.

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