

TEFL Equity Advocates

Marek Kiczowski

When you start looking at ELT job ads in the private sector, what will immediately strike you is just how often the word 'native speaker' is used. Just to give you a few examples I've seen today:

- No experience necessary. Must be a 'native speaker'.
- 'Native Speaker' teachers wanted.
- Join our team of 'native English speakers'.

The list is endless. In fact, research shows that over two thirds of all job ads are for 'native speakers' only. For example, Mahboob and Golden (2013), who studied job ads in the Middle East, found 88% of them to be discriminatory, mainly on the basis of the applicant's mother tongue. Ruecker and Ives (2015) looked at the language in ELT job ads on 59 websites observing that on 81% of them the 'native speaker' requirement was present. Several other studies confirm this trend (Kiczowski, 2015; Mahboob, Uhrig, Newman, & Hartford, 2004; Selvi, 2010).

Now, the question is, why is this the case?

One of the most common answers is that students (and their parents) demand 'native speaker' teachers. In fact, when I interviewed one recruiter as part of the study I'm conducting (you can still take part in it by filling in this short, 5-minute, 12-question [questionnaire here](#)), I was told that one of the clients initially refused to have classes with a teacher – who was actually a 'native speaker' – because of the teacher's French surname.

On the other hand, other recruiters have told me that students very quickly forget about their initial bias against 'non-native' teachers once they spend a few hours in class with them. Pacek (2005), who studied students of English in British universities noted that while at the beginning of the course over a third expressed concern about their teacher being a 'non-native speaker', only 2% raised any concerns at the end of the course. Similar results were also obtained by other researchers (Cheung & Braine, 2007; Lipovsky & Mahboob, 2010; Moussu, 2002, 2006, 2010; Mullock, 2010).

In addition, one school director based in Spain told me that they have lost more clients due to poor rapport than due to the teacher being a 'non-native speaker'. In fact, in an analysis of 50 learners, Walkinshaw and Duong (2012) found that students valued experience, qualifications, friendly personality, enthusiasm, ability to make classes interesting as well as understanding students' culture more highly than 'nativeness'.

And research seems quite clear that students don't unanimously prefer 'native speakers'. Far from it. For example, Moussu (2006), who studied 643 participants from ten different L1 backgrounds in US universities, found that 87% of students at the time taking classes with a 'non-native speaker' agreed that they were a good teacher, while 79% would recommend having classes with a 'non-native speaker' to a

friend. In Spain, Lasagabaster and Sierra (2005) found that 70.2% of the Spanish university students they studied would prefer a combination of the two groups (in comparison to only 50.6% who expressed a preference for 'native speaker' teachers). These are but two examples of dozens of studies on the topic which seem to point in the same direction: students appreciate the strengths of 'non-native speaker' teachers, and many would ideally like to be taught by both 'native' and 'non-native'.

What's also interesting is students' opinions when they are not explicitly prompted by the label 'native speaker'. For example, when researchers asked 76 ESL students to rate different qualities of the teachers who were teaching them at the time, such as their attitude to learners, teaching style or personality, without being prompted by the 'native' and 'non-native speaker' labels, it turned out that there was no statistical difference between how students rated the two groups of teachers (Aslan & Thompson, 2016). In other words, these students perceived 'native' and 'non-native speaker' teachers as equal.

The question is: what do the school directors think? Why do so many advertise posts for 'native speakers only'? Is there a perceived demand from clients where these directors are based?

Unfortunately, there has been very little research on this topic. To date, only two studies have been conducted examining recruiters' attitudes to hiring 'native' and 'non-native speaker' teachers. Clark and Paran (2007), who studied recruiters in UK language schools and universities, show that 45.6% of the respondents thought that being a 'native speaker' was a very important trait in a prospective candidate, while only 11% viewed it as unimportant at all or relatively unimportant. Mahboob et al. (2004), who examined 122 administrators of Intensive English Programmes in the US, one of whose roles was recruiting new teachers, found that almost half (45.9%) considered that being a 'native speaker' was a moderately or highly important characteristic.

That's why I have decided to try to fill this gap in research and investigate recruiters' attitudes to hiring 'native' and 'non-native speaker' teachers. To do this, I am using an [on-line survey](#) and optional follow-up interviews.

So if you are responsible for recruiting teachers at your school, I would love to hear from you. Please take 5 minutes to [complete the survey here](#).

I'm looking forward to your responses and to sharing the results with you in one of the future issues of TESOL-SPAIN Newsletter.

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