

RACE AND EMPLOYABILITY IN PRIVATE LANGUAGE SCHOOLS

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What racial identity do you need in order to be considered a competent English language teacher? This question may seem absurd because race seemingly has nothing to do with one's ability in English language teaching (ELT). However, in a small study examining the experiences of 10 teachers of colour looking for work in various private language schools in Toronto, Canada (see Ramjattan, 2015), I found that these teachers came to understand from employers that being white meant that one was better qualified to teach English. Therefore, the opposite message was that people of colour lacked the competence to teach the language.

These employer sentiments do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, they should be seen as ongoing manifestations of racist, colonial thinking that persists in the field of ELT. Indeed, there is a strong connection between nativeness/expertise in English (teaching) and embodied whiteness, which started with the global spread of English being facilitated by British and later American colonial efforts to “civilize” various colonized peoples and continues with such things as western-based learning materials and methodologies being promoted as the standard for the global ELT industry (e.g. Motha, 2014; Jenks, 2017; Phillipson, 1992). This connection between English and whiteness may be especially pronounced in the context of private language schools for several reasons. In fact, since they are mostly unregulated and often operate as businesses that treat students as almighty consumers (Clark & Paran, 2007; Ramjattan, 2015), these institutions may resort to questionable practices in order to generate revenue. Thus, if students are willing to pay to attend schools with mostly white teachers, employers may resort to racist hiring practices that disadvantage teachers of colour in spite of their actual qualifications.

However, since overt racism is socially unacceptable in countries like Canada, the employer preference for white instructors is articulated in a more subtle manner. Regarding the experiences of the teachers of my study, this articulation took the form of racial microaggressions, everyday slights that contain a racist meta-communication for people of colour (Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015; Sue, 2010). For the remainder of this article, I highlight some of these microaggressions that subtly communicated that race is a central component in being perceived as employable in the context of the private language school. After detailing these experiences, I offer some initial suggestions on how we can dismantle racial inequalities in the hiring of instructors (in private language schools).

Maria: A white name will land you an interview, but not the job

Names are an intrinsic part of our identities as they often reveal our ethnic backgrounds. Yet names and ethnicity do not always correspond since, for example, people of colour may have names typically associated with white ethnic groups. This is the case for Maria (all teachers are given pseudonyms), an ethnically Japanese teacher who is originally from Brazil. Because of her European-sounding name coupled with taking her husband's German last name, Maria notes how she can pass as white when submitting résumés for teaching positions. However, even though her white-sounding first and last names may help her get callbacks for interviews, her racial identity often prevents her hiring. One instance of this trend is seen in the following narrative where an employer seemed dumbfounded upon discovering that Maria did not look like her name:

When the employer saw me for the interview, the first thing that came out of her mouth was, "What's your name? Why do you have this last name?" I explained that I'm married and that's why. From the moment she saw me, I knew that she did not want to hire me as she mentioned right away that the position had just been filled. (Ramjattan, 2015, p. 697)

Despite her superior qualifications, Maria understood that the employer's questioning of her name and subsequent mentioning that the position was no longer available were subtle indicators that she was racially unqualified to be an instructor at the school. If she physically matched her name, perhaps she would have received a job offer.

Josh: Nonnative by association

Aside from confusion about their names, another type of microaggression experienced by the teachers involved the employer use of the term *native speaker* to euphemistically refer to a white person when describing ideal job candidates. This term was particularly salient in the following conversation between an employer and Josh, a mixed-race teacher who, being born and raised in Canada, identifies as a native speaker of Canadian English:

[The employer asked,] "Where did you do your studies?" And I replied, "Here in Toronto." She went, "And anywhere else?" I replied, "No." She then asked, "What language do you speak at home?" And I said, "At home, I speak English." She then asked, "And your parents?" "They speak about six or seven different languages all mixed up," I replied, "But I can't speak those languages. I can only speak English." And after that, she went, "But when you communicate with them, how does that work?" I said, "They have jobs in Canada. They understand English perfectly." And then [...] she said, "Okay, but we're really looking for a native speaker." And I said, "That's fine because I am a native speaker." Just as I said that, a white woman came out with a Scottish accent. And I thought, "Gee,

she's not a native speaker [because her first language may be Gaelic or Scots] and she's working here." So I didn't know what to take from it, but they never called me back. (Ramjattan, 2015, p. 698)

As suggested by the employer's questioning, Josh was deemed a nonnative English speaker by his association with nonnative-speaking parents. Indeed, in spite of explicitly stating that he is a native speaker and furthermore doing so in a so-called Canadian accent, Josh was unable to convince the employer that he was linguistically qualified for the job. When Josh noticed the Scottish worker who may or may not have spoken English natively, he realized that the employer's desire for a native speaker was truly a desire for any white teacher regardless of actual language background.

Q: Not what students are looking for

Of course, the reason why employers desire white teachers is that these individuals are the desired worker for student-customers. This point leads to one final type of microaggression: employers shifting the source of racism to consumer preferences. For example, consider this story from Q, an ethnically Indian teacher who was deemed an inappropriate job candidate:

[The employer] said outright, "Are you a teacher of English? Are you an English teacher?" From the sound of it, it was okay if I was teaching math [...] but not English. I replied, "Yes, and here's my résumé. I've got a CELTA [Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults], and I have [...] experience." She looked at my résumé and commented, "Oh, you have been teaching actually." I said, "Yeah, that's what I said." She then said, "Unfortunately, I don't think our students would accept you." (Ramjattan, 2015, p. 699)

What makes this microaggression story unique is its explicit nature. In fact, in contrast to the above narratives, the interviewer directly told Q that she would be an unacceptable teacher despite acknowledging her qualifications and professional experience. Nevertheless, this interaction remained microaggressive as the employer shifted blame onto students' bigotry. That is, she had no choice but to adopt racist hiring criteria because not doing so would upset students and therefore not be good for business.

Dismantling racial inequalities in ELT hiring practices

Although the above instances of employment discrimination against teachers of colour certainly do not represent the hiring practices of every private language school in the local context of Toronto and beyond, the mere fact that they can occur warrants some sort of action. Therefore, to conclude, I wish to present some general recommendations on how we can address the racial inequalities that can be embedded in the hiring practices of private language schools:

1. Since they are typically unregulated, private language schools need to be overseen by some regulatory body that could enforce equitable hiring practices. In the Canadian context, this suggestion may already exist with Languages Canada, an organization that promotes the Canadian language education industry. To be a member of this organization, schools must adhere to a code of conduct, which includes embracing the cultural/ethnic diversity of their employees (Languages Canada, n.d.). Therefore, instead of voluntarily doing so, all private language schools should be required to join organizations like Languages Canada.

2. Along with increased regulation, more action research is needed to explore employment discrimination in private language schools. When we discuss action research in the context of ELT, we tend to think about teachers conducting investigations on how to better their own pedagogical practices and/or their students' learning. However, we can also conceive of action research as informal studies that seek to bring social change in the private ELT industry. This is where the power of storytelling emerges. In fact, when teachers of colour who experience hiring discrimination have the opportunity to share their experiences to a larger audience (either in the form of collective documentation of their stories on social media or through more formal outlets like *CONTACT Magazine*, for instance), there is the increased possibility that others will sympathize/empathize with their predicaments and feel inspired to enact further anti-racist efforts, etc. Action research must be done by white allies as well. For example, white administrators and teachers could investigate why their schools are not hiring any/more qualified teachers of diverse racial backgrounds.

3. Perhaps the most important recommendation for change, which interconnects with the previous two, is simply acknowledging that race and racism are an inherent part of the ELT profession. As I mentioned in the beginning of this article, the employer dismissal of the teachers of colour in my particular study reflects wider held notions of whiteness being tied to nativeness and thus expertise in the English language. Therefore, terms like *native speaker* become synonymous with *white person* as seen in Josh's narrative, for example. Whether it be through teacher education programs or conferences, then, we need to understand that language in general and English in particular cannot be divorced from notions about race (see Rosa & Flores, 2017, for how the emerging field of raciolinguistics addresses this very issue). The implication of this point is that even if we believe that we are solely critiquing someone's (perceived) language ability when considering their suitability for a teaching position (at a private language school), we may also be making judgments about their racial identity.

Admittedly, the above recommendations require much more thought and planning than what I can offer here. However, I hope that they at least spread the message that the appropriate qualifications for ELT should not be racially embodied. Rather, we must go back to the idea that having the necessary amount of formal education, training, and experience is what makes a qualified English language teacher.

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