**Discriminatory job advertisements for English language teachers in Colombia: An analysis of recruitment biases**

**Abstract**

Numerous studies have explored the persistence of discrimination against “non-native English speaker teachers” of English as a foreign or second language in various contexts. However, the author could find no study which explores the prevalence of “native-speakerism” and other forms of discrimination in English language teacher recruitment in South America. The current study thus investigated the extent to which online postings for English language teachers in Colombia express a preference for “native English speaker teachers”, and how this discrimination intersects with other inequitable hiring practices. Content analysis was conducted on job ads found on two prominent Facebook groups for English language teachers in Colombia. The findings reveal evidence of discrimination in nearly half of the 95 job ads analyzed. These ads discriminate based on age, gender, nationality, variety of English, the location where a prospective teacher gained his/her qualifications, and “nativeness”. The study tentatively concludes that this discrimination has several dimensions with those further from the colonial “center” facing greater degrees of discrimination. The mutually reinforcing constructs of “coloniality” and “native-speakerism” help account for the persistence of such discrimination, which is also reflected in the Colombian governments’ linguistic policies.

*Keywords:* English as a second/foreign language; Teacher recruitment; Colombia; Non-native English speakers.

**1. Introduction**

Jenkins, quoting the UN Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention from 1958, highlights how making “any distinction, exclusion or preference made on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction or social origin” (United Nations, 1958 in Jenkins, 2017, p. 373) counts as discrimination. However, it took over three decades for the profession to condemn the practice of employing teachers purely on the basis of their mother tongue (TESOL, 1991). Following this, a non-native English speaker teacher (NNEST) caucus was established by TESOL International Association in 1998 (Braine, 2010), which has since developed into a movement (Kamhi-Stein, 2016). In addition, resolutions by three more prominent English language teaching associations have been made condemning bias against NNESTs (Kamhi-Stein, 2016). Despite these welcome developments, widespread discrimination continues, as a body of research shows (e.g. Clark & Paran, 2007; Mahboob, Uhrig, Newman & Hartford, 2004; Mahboob & Golden, 2013; Moussu, 2006; Selvi, 2010). However, the vast majority of this research has been conducted either in EFL contexts in the Middle East and Asia or in ESL contexts. By contrast, the prevalence of native-speakerism and the different manifestations of discrimination in English language teacher recruitment remains an underexplored area in Latin America (González & Llurda, 2016; Viáfara, 2016). The present study aims to address this gap. Whereas prior studies have focused on “native-speakerism” in documents issued by media outlets and governments in Latin America (González & Llurda, 2016); and “NNEST” subjectivities in Colombia (Gómez-Vásquez & Guerrero, 2018; Viáfara, 2016), this study analyzes online job advertisements for English language teachers in Colombia for evidence of discrimination in the context of the country’s recent English policies. This issue is of particular importance in light of the decision by several governments in the region to prioritize strategies which promote English language learning, and the increasingly “native-speakerist” slant of these strategies (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017; González & Llurda, 2016). Given that an estimated 75% of English language teachers worldwide are “NNESTs” (Canagarajah, 2005), this issue is of relevance beyond Colombia.

**2. Theoretical Framework**

As the aim of this paper is to explore issues related to discrimination against NNESTs in a country which experienced centuries of colonial rule, coloniality forms the first part of this paper’s theoretical framework. Coloniality refers to the power-relations that continue in the post-colonial era between former colonies and their erstwhile oppressors (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). “A system of domination structured around the idea of race” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 244), coloniality persists “in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243). This theory helps account for the low self-image of “non-white” inhabitants in former colonies such as Colombia and their perceptions of their homeland as backward and inferior to the countries of the North. In particular, the North is seen as the “model” for Latin America to imitate (Grosfoguel, 2000). Thus, coloniality not only helps the White Creole elites in post-colonial countries such as Colombia maintain their economic, political and cultural dominance over the non-White population (Grosfoguel, 2000), but also assists the former colonial powers in their project to maintain cultural and linguistic hegemony over other parts of the globe (Phillipson, 2017). Since this hegemony is reinforced by the ideology of native-speakerism (Holliday, 2006), this concept forms the second part of this study’s theoretical framework. Native-speakerism, the belief that “teachers represent a ‘Western culture’ from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology” (Holliday, 2006, p. 385), furthers at least five objectives for Anglosphere countries: it “territorializes language” (Canagarajah, 2017, p. 6) by associating it with identity and place; it perpetuates the colonialist discourse that the periphery is unable to succeed without the colonial center’s assistance (Holliday, 2006); it allows native English speaker teachers (NESTs) to universalize their own interests and values (Phillipson, 2016); it perpetuates the “self-marginalization” of NNESTs (Kumaravadivelu, 2016, p. 80); and it helps sustain the lucrative market for English language instructional materials and English language “experts” from Anglophone[[1]](#footnote-0) countries (Phillipson, 2017).

Before moving on, the terms “discrimination”, and “NS/NNS” require clarification. With regards to the former, since this study investigates recruitment biases in Facebook groups, I follow this organization’s definition, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of “personal attributes such as race, ethnicity, color, national origin, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, family status, disability, medical or genetic condition” (Facebook, n.d., para 1). By including personal characteristics such as gender identity and disability, Facebook’s interpretation of discrimination is actually wider than the definition cited by Jenkins earlier in this paper, and is more consistent with the UN’s current understanding of discrimination (UN, n.d.). With regards to the latter, since the terms NS/NEST and NNS/NNEST represent false ideological constructs which can delegitimize non-native speakers (Holliday, 2008), I understand that their use is problematic. However, as Moussa and Llurda (2008) point out, researchers who are attempting to show that “nativeness” is not a relevant characteristic of a language teacher also need to accept the dichotomy between these terms “in order to start constructing their supporting argumentation” (p. 318). I therefore employ this terminology “AS USED within the ideology” (Holliday, 2008, p. 120).

**3. Literature Review**

*3.1 Discrimination in teacher recruitment ads*

Research confirms that native-speakerism is present not only in teacher recruitment practices in postcolonial contexts such as the Middle East and Asia (Mahboob & Golden, 2013; Selvi, 2010; Wang & Lin, 2013), but also in the U.K. (Clark & Paran, 2007) and the U.S. (Mahboob et al., 2004; Moussu, 2006). For example, Selvi (2010) researched native-speakerism in teacher recruitment by conducting content analysis on online job postings for English language teachers. These ads, the majority of which were for positions in the Middle East and Asia, reflected a strong bias against NNESTs. Selvi concluded that this discrimination has several dimensions. These are the degree to which a teacher is considered a native-speaker (NS); the variety of English s/he speaks (with a preference by employers for American English); her/his nationality or place of residence (with teachers from Anglophonecountries preferred); and the location where s/he gained her/his qualifications (again with a preference for candidates who studied in Anglophone countries) (Selvi, 2010). In a similar study, Mahboob and Golden (2013) conducted content analysis on 77 job postings published on the website [www.esljobsworld.com](http://www.esljobsworld.com). Thirty-five of these postings were for jobs in the Middle East, while the other 42 were for positions in East Asia. Eighty per cent of all job ads analyzed revealed evidence of discrimination. Mahboob and Golden’s study also found a greater preference for NESTs in East Asia, and they speculate that this is due to the region’s colonial history and the greater value placed on the English spoken by those from Western countries. They also found that NESTs seem to be associated with Inner Circle countries rather than Outer or Expanding Circle countries[[2]](#footnote-1) (Kachru, 1985), which substantiates findings by Amin (2001). As with Selvi’s study, Mahboob and Golden show that native-speaker bias intersects with other forms of discrimination. However, their study reveals two dimensions not found in Selvi’s study: gender and race. The latter dimension is corroborated by additional research which suggests that for English learners the prototypical English teacher is a white, Anglo male (e.g. Amin, 2001; Todd & Pojanapunya, 2009; Mahboob & Golden, 2013). In light of these findings, it is hardly surprising that NESTs are associated with “First World” Inner Circle countries, which are predominantly white, as opposed to “Third World” Outer Circle countries, which are not (Ruecker & Ives, 2015). Thus, one defining feature of native-speakerism appears to be that, as with coloniality, it is a “system of domination structured around race”.

A final paper into NNEST discrimination in postcolonial contexts of relevance to the current study reports on how the governments of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and Korea promote native-speakerism, which manifests itself in the recruitment policies of these countries and administrative regions (Wang & Lin, 2013). For example, the authors describe how the vast majority of participants in Japan’s JET programs are recruited from Anglophone countries. For these “teachers” qualifications and experience is optional, although their remuneration is considerably higher than the starting salary of Japanese primary teachers (Wang & Lin, 2013). These findings corroborate financial discrimination against NNESTs reported elsewhere (e.g. Griffith, 2015; Jung, 2014) and sends the message that brand “native” is of greater value than professionalism. This study is particularly interesting since by highlighting how government policy and discourse can shape English teacher recruitment practices and marginalize NNESTs in the public sector, it contradicts assertions that native-speakerism is more prevalent in for-profit institutions, which, the argument goes, are simply acquiescing to market demands (Ruecker & Ives, 2015).

*3.2 Understanding native-speakerism*

It may seem puzzling that this ideology has proven so resilient, yet native-speakerism is also supported by widespread misconceptions in the ELT industry. One such misconception is that students prefer NESTs. However, a body of evidence suggests that this is not the case (e.g. Benke & Medgyes; Cheung, 2002; Moussu & Braine, 2006). For example, a large-scale study by Cheung (2002) in Hong Kong found that the majority of learners would rather learn with local NNESTs than NESTs. In a similar study by Benke and Medgyes (2005), only 5.9% of participants wanted *only* NESTs. Some research indicates that students would prefer a combination of NESTs and NNESTs (e.g. Gurkan & Yuksel, 2012; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2005; Lipovsky & Mahboob, 2010), but only a handful of studies report a preference for NESTs, particularly when pronunciation and speaking is taught (e.g. Levis, Sonsaat, Link & Barriuso, 2016; Walkinshaw & Duong, 2012). At any rate, the argument that discrimination is permissible because the student demands it surely holds no water (Holliday, 2008).

A second misconception, which is reflected in instructional materials and educational institutions (Clark & Paran, 2007; Todd & Pojanapunya, 2009), is the widely held view in the industry of the idealized NS as the “only reliable source of linguistic data” (Selvi, 2010, p. 156). This view can be traced back to Chomsky (1965) who elevated the NS to the status of linguistic authority because of his/her ability to use the language fluently and appropriately (Ma, 2012). However, it also reflects an era when it was not possible to separate the teaching of language from the teaching of culture (taken to mean the culture of Anglophone countries) (Phillipson, 1992). Thus, “in practice, it might seem reasonable to say that students would benefit more from a native-speaking teacher with ‘perfect’ knowledge of the language and pronunciation” (Clark & Paran, 2007, p. 409). However, there are many objections to this view. First of all, no NS possesses “perfect” knowledge of the language or pronunciation (Ma, 2012), and it is a matter of debate as to whether allNSs could be said to speak the language more fluently and more appropriately than NNSs (Ma, 2012). In addition, there is little consensus on which varieties of English qualify as “native” (Clark & Paran, 2007). For instance, Clark and Paran (2007) themselves write that “the Republic of Ireland is the only native English-speaking EU country other than the UK” (p. 420), while neglecting to mention that English is also widely spoken in Malta. Similarly, although Graddol (2003) claims that English is commonly spoken in at least 83 countries, the British Government considers only 17 countries as English-speaking for immigration purposes (“Prove your knowledge of”, n.d.). Another objection is that in a globalized world where English NNSs now outnumber NSs, monolingual NSs cannot be viewed as the “only reliable source of linguistic data”, and must now share the language with those who have recently joined the community of English speakers (Canagarajah, 2006; Llurda, 2004). One consequence of this is that English as an international language has been decoupled from cultural identity and geographical boundaries (Canagarajah, 2006; Graddol, 2003; Llurda, 2004). Another consequence is that NSs are now in many regards at a disadvantage compared with NNSs as they lack the resources and competencies necessary to communicate effectively with the majority of English speakers (Canagarajah, 2006). These competencies include proficiency in the learners’ mother tongue, which is particularly important for relating to learners and avoiding breakdowns in communication (Mejia, 2006). Indeed, a body of research highlights the benefits of language teachers being able to use and understand learners’ first language (e.g. Canagarajah, 1999; Ma, 2012; Seidlhofer, 1999; Tang, 1997).

As the literature reviewed above illustrates, native-speakerism can be located in the attitudes of learners; in instructional materials and educational institutions; in the discourse of linguistic scholars; and in government policy. Indeed, so pervasive is this ideology that even some NNESTs have internalized the superiority of their “native” counterparts, which manifests itself in the form of an impostor syndrome (Bernat, 2009). Thus, native-speakerism, as with coloniality, persists “in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense”, and “in the self-image of peoples”. None of the aforementioned studies, however, was conducted in Latin America. The following section therefore analyzes the limited research into native-speakerism in this context and the role that governmental policy plays in its proliferation in Colombia.

*3.3 Native-speakerism and coloniality in Colombia*

Aside from San Andrés and Providencia, few opportunities are available in Colombia for interaction with English speakers, either in the workplace or in the wider community (Herazo, Jerez & Lorduy, 2012). In other words, societal conditions conducive to learning EFL are absent (Herazo et al., 2012). Instead, the demand for EFL has been stimulated by a series of linguistic policies introduced by the Ministry of Education (MEN) over the last decade and a half. These policies, which I will refer to collectively as Colombia’s English programs[[3]](#footnote-2), aimed to raise the English proficiency of all Colombians to internationally comparable standards (González & Llurda, 2016) and created “opportunities and incentives” (Herazo et al., 2012, p. 109) for English language learning in at least three ways. First, a decree was issued that all university graduates should achieve a level of B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in a second language (Alcaldia, 2015). Given its status as a global lingua franca, this has led to the introduction of EFL as a compulsory subject in higher education in Colombia (Bonilla & Tejada-Sánchez, 2016; Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017). Second, as English is compulsory in primary and secondary schools in Colombia, the MEN has stipulated that teachers in these schools achieve a level of B2 on the CEFR (MEN, n.d.). Third, in line with the objectives of the PNB, English proficiency is tested on the country’s university admissions and exit exams (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017; MEN, 2007). Such is the importance of these exams that they have become the primary reason for Colombians to learn English according to a British Council study (2015). Thus, Colombia’s English programs have also stimulated a demand for English language learning, and, by extension, English language teaching, that would otherwise not have existed (Herazo et al., 2012).

However, Colombia was ill-prepared for such demand. For example, in 2006 one diagnostic test highlighted that from 11,000 Colombian English teachers, only around 35% achieved a level higher than A2 on the CEFR (MEN, 2005), while a more recent test in 2017 found that only 14% of English teachers employed in public schools achieved the required B2 level (MEN, n.d.). Furthermore, a deficit of 32,000 public school English teachers in 2011 was reported (Sánchez & Obando, 2008), and in 2014 a lack of teachers was the reason given for 36% of secondary students not receiving the recommended number of hours of English instruction (MEN, n.d.). By way of a solution, the MEN sanctioned the hiring of 1,770 foreigners between 2014 and 2018 to work in 372 different educational institutions alongside Colombian English teachers (MEN, n.d.). On one program these “native foreign educators” (MEN, 2016) receive a monthly salary of $520 in addition to health insurance, accommodation for the first month, a domestic flight, an end of contract bonus, and training (Internships Colombia, 2018). As such, in many cases, these “volunteers” or “interns” (Internships Colombia, 2018), who are not required to have a teaching qualification, have better working conditions and higher salaries than local teachers (Gómez-Vásquez & Guerrero, 2018; Mackenzie, 2020).

Indeed, while the importation of foreigners may seem a reasonable solution to the problem of English teacher capacity in Colombia, there are at least two lines of objection to this argument. First, to the best of my knowledge, no research paper on Colombia’s English programs suggests the mass recruitment of foreigners as a solution to address the failings of the MEN’s linguistic policies, and little empirical research could be found to support the effectiveness of such a solution (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017), Second, as one of the reasons for this shortfall is that teachers receive significantly lower salaries than other professionals (Estrada, Mejía & Rey, 2015; Sánchez, 2013), offering greater financial incentives to Colombians to enter the profession and to engage in professional development would have been a more socially just solution (Cárdenas, González & Álvarez, 2010; Sánchez, 2013).

In light of these objections, how can we account for the MEN’s decision to employ thousands of English teachers from abroad? The MEN’s use of the perplexing phrase “native foreign educators” provides a clue. This term suggests that the recruitment of these “volunteers” was not simply a case of meeting the increase in demand brought about by the country’s English language programs. Indeed, it hardly seems coincidental that the overwhelming majority of these foreigners have come from a handful of Anglo-Saxon countries (MEN, 2016) while the inhabitants of English-speaking regions and countries in the Caribbean, which are geographically closer and culturally more similar to Colombia, have been overlooked. Further evidence of the discourse of native-speakerism is provided by the following quote:

The mission of these native foreign educators is...to foster motivating cultural environments; to promote dynamic pedagogical methods that allow the students to use English in their educational institutions, and to support the Colombian teachers so that they improve their communication in English. (MEN, 2017: para 5)

By claiming that these foreign teachers promote “dynamic pedagogical methods” and “allow the students to use English”, the Ministry of Education implies that Colombian teachers do not (Mackenzie, 2020). This positions homegrown teachers as somehow backward or inferior and dependent upon the “dynamic” instructional methods which only “natives” can provide (Holliday, 2006; Mackenzie, 2020). Such a “colonial mentality” (Gómez-Vásquez & Guerrero 2018, p. 6), helps the Centre to maintain cultural and linguistic hegemony over periphery countries such as Colombia (Phillipson, 2017). Thus, the MEN’s strategy of recruiting “native foreign educators” reflects the intersecting discourses of native-speakerism and coloniality (Gómez-Vásquez & Guerrero 2018; González, 2007; Mackenzie, 2020).

Two other instances of coloniality are the MEN’s use of the CEFR as a benchmark for learners’ and teachers’ language level (Bonilla & Tejada-Sánchez, 2016; Correa & Usma, 2013) and the implementation of the country’s English programs in partnership with the British Council. The latter led to the imposition of standardized teaching qualifications such as the Teaching Knowledge Test to the detriment of localized and contextually sensitive alternatives (Álvarez, Cárdenas & González, 2011; Bonilla & Tejada-Sánchez, 2016). The adoption of these British and European frameworks, partners and qualifications suggests that the MEN sees the North as a model for Colombia to imitate (Grosfoguel, 2000). This positions locals as passive consumers of Centre-produced knowledge (González, 2007); “legitimize(s) the dominance of Centre professionals/scholars” (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 85); and perpetuates a “system of domination structured around race”.

Taken together, then, native-speakerism and coloniality pervade official government policy and discourse in Colombia (Gómez-Vásquez & Guerrero, 2018). But how prevalent are these ideologies in wider Colombian society? Although not directly addressing this issue, Gómez-Vásquez and Guerrero’s study (2018) into the subjectivities of four NNESTs reports that a Colombian company required all English teachers to be “native speakers or foreigners” (p. 57). In the same study, a participant describes that one school had chosen to recruit only NNESTs for its bilingual program, while other participants described differing pay scales and responsibilities for NNESTs and NESTs (Gómez-Vásquez & Guerrero, 2018). Another study by González & Llurda (2016) found evidence of NNEST discrimination in news articles and official government documents in Mexico, Chile, Ecuador and Colombia. They suggest that the recruitment of “backpacker EFL teachers” (p. 100) is one example of this, which is contributing to the deprofessionalization of the industry. Importantly, they also highlight how the media reproduces the native-speakerist bias of their respective governments. Finally, Viáfara (2016) explored pre-service teachers’ perceptions of nativeness in relation to both English and their L1 in two Colombian universities. The participants expressed anxieties regarding the unlikelihood of achieving “native-like” proficiency, but had a high opinion of themselves as educated “native” Spanish speakers.

As indicated in the introduction, the current paper differs from these previous studies. It may not only be the first to explore native-speakerism and other forms of discrimination in the Colombian ELT job market, but could be the first to do so using coloniality and native-speakerism as a theoretical lens. Moreover, it analyzes these ads in light of the Colombian government’s English-Spanish bilingual programs, which have boosted demand for English language learning in the country.

**4. Methodology**

As previously stated, the present study analyses job advertisements on Facebook for English teachers in Colombia for evidence of discrimination and explores the different forms that these discriminatory practices take. Following Selvi (2010) and Mahboob and Golden (2013), content analysis (CA) was used to analyze these online job ads. Given the difficulties inherent in conducting studies which seek to determine NNEST bias in occupational settings, CA was considered an unobtrusive alternative (Prasad, 2008). Indeed, this method, which analyzes data in its original “context of use” (Krippendorf, 2003, p. 18), is well suited to the investigation of prejudice and discrimination (Prasad, 2008).

Few English teaching jobs in Colombia are posted on internationally known websites such as those in Selvi’s and Mahboob and Golden’s studies. Instead, ads for positions as English language teachers in Colombia are much more common on social media, perhaps because, in contrast to most job websites, such advertising is free, and posting is time-efficient. Two prominent Facebook groups for English teachers in Colombia were chosen as the main sources of data in this study since they were the largest in terms of number of members that could be found on this social network using the search terms “English”, “teacher/teaching” and “Colombia/Colombians”. One of these groups is public while the other is closed, which meant that I had to request permission from the group administrators to join it. Joining, however, is straightforward.

Although both groups are for English teachers in Colombia, many of the ads were for positions outside of the country. Other ads in these groups included those for positions as proofreaders or translators. I did not include either of these in the analysis as they are not directly relevant to the research questions. Still other ads were for online teachers. Where these were to work for companies outside of Colombia, or to teach students outside Colombia, these were also discarded. Only those ads for positions teaching students inside Colombia were included in the analysis. A total of 95 ads were analyzed, which represents the total number of relevant ads that could be found on both webpages using the search terms “work”, “job”, “employment”, and “position” over a six month period. In some cases, a job ad appeared on both pages. Where this was the case, they were counted only once according to the page where they first appeared chronologically.

Since the sources of data exist prior to the research (Hopkins, 2008), they were not subject to social desirability bias (Lavrakas, 2008). However, when using CA, coder reliability is a significant methodological issue (Prasad, 2008). The coding scheme was adapted from the categories developed by Mahboob and Golden (2013), which, it was hoped, would lead to fewer inconsistencies in the coding process. However, to further enhance reliability, a colleague and I independently coded a small sample of job ads using Mahboob and Golden’s (2013) categories. If a category was mentioned twice or more in a job ad, it was counted only as one token. Any incidental data was coded under the heading “miscellaneous” and left out. In most cases, the unit of analysis was a short phrase (e.g. “female English teacher” or “native teacher”).

It should also be pointed out here that some ads provided only basic information such as the address and/or teaching schedule followed by an invitation to respond by private message, while in some cases ads were posted by a third party such as an individual or an agency. Given the limited information in some job postings, it was not possible to establish definitively whether, for example, teachers were being recruited as part of the MEN’s “native foreign educators” program. Nor was it possible to draw certain connections across the data such as whether private schools prefer native-speakers, or whether K-12 schools prefer female teachers.

One reason for the lack of detail in some ads might be because recruiters are conscious of discrimination and avoid being overtly discriminatory. Of course, the possibility remains for recruiters to discriminate in the selection process without making it explicit in the ad. Another reason for not listing criteria when posting job ads is because doing so might run the risk of violating Facebook’s community standards. Thus, even evidence of discrimination in a small percentage of job posts suggests that the practice could be far more widespread.

**5. Findings and Discussion**

The present study conducted a content analysis of job ads posted on Facebook groups for English language teachers in order to investigate the issue of discrimination in Colombian recruitment practices. Following Mahboob and Golden (2013), the units of analysis were initially separated into two overarching themes: Professional factors and biographical factors. As no job ads could be found which explicitly discriminated on the basis of race, this category was discarded. However, three additional factors emerged which are absent from the data in Mahboob and Golden’s study: Second or other language; level of English; and language of the advertisement. Depending on the individual, level of English could be both a professional *and* a biographical factor since, for most NSs, English linguistic competence is a result of their upbringing rather than any effort on their part to enhance their employability. By contrast, for most NNSs, the ability to speak fluent English is a result of a great deal of hard work. However, although this “personal attribute” gives NSs an advantage over NNSs, it does not count as discrimination, at least not according to Facebook. In any case, in order to reduce ambiguity, these three categories were instead coded under a third theme: Linguistic factors. I did not categorize accent under this theme since this construct has only a limited impact on effective language use, and resists easy definition by linguists (Lippi-Green, 2012). Instead, accent was coded as a biographical factor since accent is very difficult for the majority of people to change, and is commonly interpreted as a marker of regional, national or racial identity (Lippi-Green, 2012).

*5.1 Overview of themes*

Table 1

Overview of themes

Include Table 1 about here

Table 1 provides a broad overview of the occurrences of these three main themes in the job postings in terms of percentages. As the table highlights, professional factors were mentioned in 91.5% of job ads. By contrast, 36.8% of ads refer to linguistic factors, not including one key linguistic factor: the language of the advertisement (Spanish or English). This factor, which is discussed in greater depth below, is not included in Table 1 since it does not strictly constitute a category (all ads were written in either Spanish or English). Finally, biographical factors were referred to in 43% of the job postings.

It is hardly surprising that by far the most common theme is professional factors, and that linguistic factors are also mentioned by many employers when hiring English language teachers. However, according to Facebook (n.d., para 1), posts “must not discriminate or encourage discrimination against people based on personal attributes such as race, ethnicity, color, national origin, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, family status, disability, medical or genetic condition”. Thus, the high percentage of ads which refer to biographical factors (43%) not only demonstrates that the social network site has yet to perfect its filters, but also that, at least on the face of it, discrimination is still alarmingly widespread in the Colombian ELT sector.

Tables 2, 3 and 4 below provide greater detail regarding each of these three factors, and list the categories beneath each theme, including how many times each category occurred. The tables also express these data in terms of percentages. Key findings are discussed beneath each table.

*5.2 Professional factors*

Table 2

Professional factors

Include Table 2 about here

As Table 2 shows, educational qualifications were mentioned in 52.6% of all job ads. An ELT certification (e.g. CELTA, TESOL or equivalent) was the only requirement in 30.5% of ads while 8.4% of employers asked for an undergraduate degree. Just over 12.5% of ads requested both these qualifications. In addition, experience was mentioned as a factor in 34.7% of job postings while 4.2% of jobs specified, “no experience required”.

The large number of postings requiring either no experience, or a certification that can be easily obtained in one month or less, can be read as a reflection of the enormous global demand for English language teachers (Goddard, 2012; The International Research Foundation for English Language Education, 2017). This demand, as we have seen, has been stimulated in Colombia by the MEN’s introduction of English programs from 2004 onwards. We have also seen how the number of qualified and linguistically proficient Colombian teachers is insufficient to cope with this increase. Thus, the country’s English programs, by creating “opportunity and incentive” for English language learning that would otherwise not exist, may be inadvertently contributing to a climate of unprofessionalism. This could be encouraging the employment of “backpacker EFL teachers” whose only credentials may be a basic teaching certification and their NS status (González & Llurda, 2016 p. 100). This is suggested by the fact that all jobs specifying “no experience required” were in English, and therefore are more likely to have been targeting NSs than postings in Spanish. Unfortunately, though, none of these four ads explicitly listed NS status as a requirement, so the task of establishing a relationship between these two factors must be left to future studies.

A final finding of note in this section is the request in one posting for a teacher with “certified experience abroad”. Although categorized as a professional factor, this stipulation actually constitutes discrimination against all Colombians who cannot prove that they have studied or worked in another country. Such discrimination has an economic dimension since it is typically teachers from low-income backgrounds who lack the financial resources to pursue their studies abroad.

*5.3 Linguistic factors*

Table 3

Linguistic factors

Include Table 3 about here

As Table 3 shows, 8.4% of recruiters mentioned Spanish as a requirement in their job ads. This may simply reflect pragmatic considerations: since only a very small percentage of Colombians have achieved B1 proficiency or above in English (British Council, 2015; Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017), these recruiters may see Spanish as a necessary pedagogic tool. It is also noteworthy that 22% of all job postings were in Spanish, which implies that job seekers must at least understand this language in order to apply for these positions. The fact that five of the job ads in Spanish requested NSs suggests that the reason for writing these ads in the first language of the vast majority of Colombians is not simply in order to target Colombian teachers. Indeed, these findings seem to suggest that at least some employers have moved away from the “monolingual native speaker paradigm” (Phillipson, 2016, p. 85) towards an acknowledgement that both NESTs and NNESTs should be either bi- or multi-lingual (Butzkamm & Caldwell, 2009; Phillipson, 2016).

As for English level: 28.4% of ads mentioned this professional factor. As shown in Table 3, almost all of these postings specify a B2 level or above. While it is, of course, reasonable to expect English teachers to be more proficient than their students, as alluded to earlier, the English level of most Colombians is below B1. Thus, the specification for at least a B2 level of proficiency might have more to do with the Ministry of Education’s stipulation that all primary and secondary English teachers are proficient at least to this level. Strikingly, only three ads failed to reference the CEFR when specifying English level, which is an indication of how “common” this European framework has become. The MEN’s adoption of the CEFR when implementing the English language programs may explain recruiters’ familiarity with this framework, but the use of this foreign model as “a criteria for academic performance” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243) also highlights the presence of coloniality. In other words, the use of the CEFR as opposed to any locally produced or more contextually appropriate alternative underscores the hegemonic status of this Centre-produced knowledge, which also helps “legitimize the dominance of Centre professionals/scholars” over countries in the Global South such as Colombia.

*5.4 Biographical factors*

Table 4

Biographical factors

Include Table 4 about here

As Mahboob and Golden (2013) point out, the biographical factors of age, gender, nationality, nativeness, and race should have no bearing on a candidate’s suitability for a position as an English language teacher. It is therefore disappointing to find *any* mention of biographical factors as criteria for employment in job postings. In line with Selvi’s (2010) findings, the biographical factors in this small-scale study reveal intersecting dimensions of discrimination along the lines of age, nationality, variety of English and nativeness. However, as with Mahboob and Golden’s study, evidence of discrimination based on gender was also found. Each of these dimensions will be discussed in turn.

*5.4.1 Age*

Six ads discriminated on the basis of age. This is far fewer than in Mahboob and Golden’s study, where age is a factor in over a quarter of all cases, though they found that age was a much more common recruitment criterion in East Asian job ads (in 18 cases) compared to Middle Eastern job ads (three cases). This might suggest that age is a bigger preoccupation of employers in East Asia compared to the Middle East and Colombia. No scholarly research could be found on age bias in ELT, but several sources acknowledge that age discrimination in ELT is common (“Are you too old?”, 2018; Hargrove, n.d.; “Teaching overseas”, 2012; Walsh, 2012). However, this discrimination seems to be based on restrictions for people over 60 or 65 applying for working visas. By contrast, no pattern emerges regarding the reasons for age discrimination in the current study.

*5.4.2 Gender*

As Table 4 illustrates, 5.3% of ads discriminated based on gender, and in all cases the suitable candidate was expected to be female. While Selvi’s study does not reference this category, Mahboob and Golden (2013) report gender as a factor in four of the 77 job ads they analysed. In contrast to Mahboob and Golden’s findings, however, where three of the four ads requested a male teacher (all for positions in the Middle East), in the current study, all ads requested a female teacher. As classes in the Middle East can be segregated, it is understandable (though clearly not acceptable) that the teacher should be of the same gender, but in Colombia, the request for a female teacher is harder to fathom. This finding also contradicts research in other contexts that suggests a preference for male teachers in the profession (e.g. Amin, 2001; Kobayashi, 2014; Taqi, Al-Darwish, Akbar & Al-Gharabali, 2015). One possible explanation, which is suggested by three of the ads, is that female teachers are required for private classes with female students, or for positions in all-girls schools. The other two ads, however, provide no potential clues as to the reasons for this gender discrimination. Thus, in order to ascertain the reasons for this gender bias in favor of female teachers in Colombia, further research using a much larger data set would be needed.

*5.4.3 Nationality*

Nationality was slightly more important than age and gender in English teaching job ads with eight mentions in total. Interestingly, though, in two cases, a Colombian teacher was requested, *not* a foreign teacher, while another advertisement specified that the teacher should be “of Latin descent”. Additionally, one ad simply specified that the candidate should be “foreign”; another requested a citizen of “an English-speaking country”; a further two ads stipulated that the teacher should be from the U.S.; and a final ad specified “either Canada or the U.S.” as the place of origin.

The specification that English language teachers should be Colombian may be related to the fact that non-Colombian teachers have to obtain a work visa in order to be employed. This is highlighted in one ad which stipulated that, “We're NOT currently hiring foreigners who do not have a Colombian resident visa or permanent Cédula de Extranjería[[4]](#footnote-3)”. This finding is interesting for two reasons. First, it illustrates how more stringent laws regarding the employment of foreigners in countries such as Colombia might actually discourage native-speakerism. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it raises a broader question: what, actually, constitutes discrimination in ELT recruitment? As we have seen, for NSs, English level is a biographical factor, but it is also a personal attribute, and, according to Facebook, ads “must not discriminate or encourage discrimination against people based on personal attributes”. However, Facebook does not list “English level” as a personal attribute. By contrast, “national extraction” *is* listed by Facebook as a personal attribute, so employing individuals on the basis of their “national extraction” - be they Colombian, American or Canadian - would count as discrimination, at least according to the social media giant.At the same time, given that the practice of employing “nationals only” is supported by a majority of citizens in both the US and Colombia, and is even, in some countries, enshrined in governmental legislation (Cooray, Marfouk, Nazir, 2018), some readers may take issue with the characterization of such practices as discriminatory. One way out of this dilemma is suggested by the ad quoted above, which does not rule out the recruitment of foreigners so long as they are documented. This distinction is relevant since preferring documented over undocumented workers is a legal requirement in many countries even if doing so can be considered an example of “institutionalized discriminatory practices” (Selvi, 2011, p. 170).

While it may therefore be understandable (albeit unacceptable) that some ads request Colombians or Colombian residents for Colombian positions, we need only reflect on what the public response would be in countries like the UK or the US to news that certain jobs, which locals are perfectly capable of doing, are only available to foreigners. Indeed, the specification in three of the ads that English teachers *in Colombia* should have a U.S. passport (or Canadian in one case) adds weight to Canagarajah’s (1999, p. 83) assertion that “Whereas Center-based teachers are assured of ESL jobs in the Periphery communities, Periphery teachers find it difficult to teach in the centre”. From this perspective, then, such discrimination, while arguably just as discriminatory as those ads requesting Colombians, serves to highlight the unequal power relations that the discourses of native-speakerism and coloniality reinforce. In addition, the requirement for North Americans discriminates not only against NNESTs, but against all speakers of English who are not from the colonial Center (or a country that borders it). As for the ad requesting citizens “of an English-speaking country”: this conveniently ignores the fact that English speakers populate the Colombian islands of San Andres and Providencia. This corroborates findings from previous studies (e.g. Amin, 2001; Mahboob & Golden, 2013) which suggest that NESTs are associated with Inner Circle countries and neglect NESTs from Outer or Expanding Circle countries. With reference to one ad’s request for an English teacher of “Latin descent”: If the recruiter had wished to recruit a Spanish speaker, it would have made more sense to explicitly state this. Thus, a more plausible explanation for such discrimination is that the employer was looking for a foreign English teacher with an understanding of Latin American culture. However, it is equally plausible that the employer hoped to discourage NESTs from applying, perhaps as a result of negative experiences with “backpacker” EFL teachers who typically only stay in one place for a relatively short term period before “moving on”. In any case, the “Latin descent” stipulation, while clearly discriminatory, highlights how the discourses of native-speakerism and coloniality can be interrupted (in this case by a recruiter), and therefore need not determine the behaviour and modes of thought of subaltern populations. Finally, while some ads discriminated against all those who are not from the U.S., one ad simply specified that the candidate be “foreign” thus discriminating against all Colombians. These findings seem to suggest that there are degrees of discrimination in the field of ELT in Colombia with those with progressively fewer affiliations to the colonial centre facing progressively greater levels of discrimination. Indeed, the results in this study echo Amin’s (2001) observation that “the native speaker model divides the profession according to a caste system” (p. 100).

*5.4.4 Nativeness*

Twenty-two mentions of native or native-speaker in the job ads analyzed shows that even nearly 30 years since the practice of recruiting teachers based on their nativeness was condemned, such discrimination is alive and well in Colombia at the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century. Of these, two specified that candidates should have “a U.S. accent”, while one ad requested that Colombian teachers should have “native-speaking country citizenship”. Additionally, one asked for a “standard accent” while another stated “native or C2 level”.

Importantly, of the 23.1% of ads which specified nativeness as a requirement, 8.4% requested “volunteers” whose role is to “assist high school Colombian English teachers for grades 9th to 11th”. The “stipend” offered in these positions is equivalent to between $440 and $500, which is roughly the same as the full-time salary for newly qualified Colombian teachers working in the state sector (‘Cuanto ganan,’ 2017). Surprisingly, these ads mention no other requirements beyond nativeness. The descriptions in these ads are consistent with those outlined by the MEN in their “native foreign educators” program (MEN, 2017), and given that applicants need to apply for a “V Visa” (a visitor visa), it seems likely that these volunteer positions have government support. However, as the recruiter is a third party, this conclusion remains speculative. In any case, in these job postings we can detect the presence of the twin discourses of coloniality and native-speakerism. As we have seen, “native English speakers” are associated with ‘Western culture’ and their recruitment as unqualified and inexperienced “volunteers” who earn the same as many full-time local teachers highlights their superior status. This reinforces the low self-image of Colombian English teachers who are reminded that they are unable to succeed without the assistance of the Global North (Holliday, 2006).

As for the specification in two ads that English teachers should have a “U.S. accent”: this corroborates Selvi’s (2010) study which found discrimination along the lines of variety of English spoken. According to Amin (2001), accents “are a linguistic manifestation of nativism, and constitute a new and effective form of racism” (p. 92). As such, ads which specify certain accents contain a racial dimension. They thus highlight another way in which coloniality, which, as we have seen, is a “system of domination based on race”, seems to be present in these job postings. Not only this, but, accent conspires, along with other ideologically-charged concepts such as nativeness and fluency, to construct the image of a model English teacher, which serves to delegitimize all those who do not conform to this image (Sayer, 2012). From this perspective, the closer a NNEST is to the fictitious “idealized native speaker” (Sayer, 2012, p. 171) of the colonial Center in terms of biographical factors such as nationality, nativeness, and accent, the greater her/his claims to English teacher legitimacy.

**6. Conclusion**

This study set out to analyze job postings on Facebook groups for Colombian English teachers for discrimination in light of the Colombian government’s English-Spanish bilingual policies. These postings were coded into three main themes: Professional factors, linguistic factors and biographical factors. An analysis of professional factors revealed that, in 30.5% of ads, the only educational qualification required for an English teacher is an ELT certification which can be obtained in one month or less, while 4.2% of ads stipulate that “no experience” is needed. This could reflect the growth in demand for English teachers as a result of the Colombian government’s English language programs, which, to the benefit of NESTs and the detriment of qualified and experienced NNESTs, may also be contributing to a “backpackerization” of the profession. An analysis of linguistic factors revealed that the CEFR is by far the most commonly used indicator of language level. The Ministry of Education’s adoption of this Centre-produced model when implementing its English programs, which may help account for its widespread use by Colombian recruiters, suggests the presence of the discourse of coloniality. In addition, the prevalence of ads in Spanish, which included some ads targeting NESTs, as well as the requirement for Spanish as a second language in 8.4% of ads is interesting since this indicates that some recruiters may be moving beyond the monolingual paradigm. However, this may also be a result of pragmatic considerations since the low English level of most Colombian students may, at least in the eyes of recruiters, require the teacher to have some Spanish knowledge. Finally, an analysis of biographical factors reveals that discrimination in hiring practices is still discouragingly widespread in Colombia. Disturbingly, 23.1% of ads refer to nativeness, which highlights the continued presence of native-speakerism in the profession. In addition, a number of postings request applicants to be either from the U.S., Canada, or to have a U.S. accent. This preference for English teachers from North America marginalizes not only “local” teachers, but also all NESTs who were not privileged enough to be born near or in the colonial Centre. This suggests that native-speakerism intersects with the discourse of coloniality. The Colombian government’s “native foreign educators” programme may account for some of this discrimination against NNESTs, and some of the ads seem to be recruiting for this programme. It is also important to bear in mind that while ads requesting “Colombians only” can be interpreted as discriminatory against non-Colombians, as we have seen, it is common practice to give preferential treatment to workers with the correct documentation, and it is actually illegal in some countries not to do so. This highlights the complexities regarding the issue of employment discrimination in the ELT industry. Mentions of other biographical factors such as age, accent, and gender provide evidence of further dimensions of discrimination in job postings for English language teachers in Colombia, and show how some English teachers may face multiple levels of discrimination. However, the low percentage of ads which reference these dimensions (5-6%) illustrates how they are less prevalent than discrimination based on nationality (8.6%).

As mentioned earlier, one major limitation of this study is the lack of detail given in many of these job ads, which precluded a more sophisticated analysis. Thus, the conclusions remain provisional: further research into the hierarchization of discrimination in the profession is needed to support the evidence here. Nevertheless, this study adds to others which have found evidence of bias against NNESTs in other contexts. In particular, it provides evidence for the resilience of the ideology of native-speakerism in the field of ELT, which seems to be reinforced in Colombia by the intersecting discourse of coloniality.

So what can be done to end such injustice? One way to counter such discrimination is outlined by Selvi (2009) who argues that awareness, advocacy and activism are needed to overcome “native-speakerism”. In Colombia, however, where teachers can either be killed or receive death threats for their activism (UNESCO, 2016), this may not be the best advice. Indeed, given the precarious nature of many employment contracts for EFL teachers in post-colonial settings, many professionals might even be reluctant to engage in advocacy. Thus, the efforts of English language educators to counter prejudice in such settings are often limited to the classroom. In such a context, as an alternative to Selvi’s (2009) three “As”, I would like to suggest the three “Es” of engagement, exploration and exposure as a strategy for fostering meaningful transformation. For example, in a classroom discussion, one student might suggest that NSs are better teachers. The teacher can respond by engaging the student in dialogue about their prejudice rather than condemning it straight off. The prejudice can then be explored, either in the students’ L1, or in English, by means of probing questions such as “why do you think that?” or “how would you define a native speaker?” or “can Latin Americans be native speakers? Why/Why not?” Finally, the prejudice can be exposed by means of additional questions such as “how is this different from other forms of discrimination?” or “how would you feel if you couldn’t get a job in your own country because of your nationality?” This non-confrontational three-step strategy, which, aside from raising awareness, may trigger a lively classroom debate and deeper reflection, could also be employed outside of the classroom by any member of the TESOL community when discrimination is encountered, such as in online job ads.

Another way to counter such injustice is to end the practice of describing teachers “in terms of what they are not” (Kramsch, 1998, p. 28) since this characterizes them as deficient (Richardson, 2016); denies them equal rights to the language which they speak and teach (Jenkins, 2000); and “others” them, thus reducing their complex professional identity to that of non-standard, non-experts (Holliday, 2008). Thus, those in the TESOL profession should, where possible, advocate that the reductive and misleading terms NS/NEST and NNS/NNEST be replaced in job postings by nomenclature such as “bilingual English teacher” or “multilingual English teacher”. These terms acknowledge the greater linguistic capital that NNSs possess over many of their NS counterparts. Indeed, it behooves us to remind NNESTs that they are “joint-owners” of the language with a “unique multilingual perspective on the foreign language and on its literature and culture” (Kramsch 1997, p. 359). These efforts can boost their self-image and thus help counter the prevailing discourses of coloniality and native-speakerism.

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Table 1. Overview of factors

|  |  | ***%*** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **PROFESSIONAL FACTORS** |  | 91.5 |
| **LINGUISTIC FACTORS** |  | 36.8 |
| **BIOGRAPHICAL FACTORS** |  | 43 |

Table 2. Professional factors

| **PROFESSIONAL FACTORS** |  | ***No. of tokens*** | **%** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Educational qualifications** | | | |
| * Degree & ELT certification required |  | 12 | 12.6 |
| * Only ELT certification |  | 29 | 30.5 |
| * Only degree |  | 8 | 8.4 |
| * Certified experience abroad |  | 1 | 1.1 |
| * Not stated |  | - | 47.4 |
| **Teaching experience** |  |  |  |
| * Required |  | 33 | 34.7 |
| * Not required |  | 4 | 4.2 |
| * Not stated |  | - | 61.1 |

Table 3. Linguistic factors

| **LINGUISTIC FACTORS** |  | ***No. of tokens*** | **%** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Second or other language requirement** | | | |
| * Spanish required |  | 8 | 8.4 |
| * Not stated |  | - | 91.6 |
| **Level of English** | | | |
| * B2 level required |  | 4 | 4.2 |
| * C1 level required |  | 13 | 13.7 |
| * C2 level required |  | 7 | 7.3 |
| * Not related to CEFR |  | 3 | 3.2 |
| * Not stated |  | - | 71.6 |
| **Language of ads** |  |  |  |
| * In Spanish (targeting NSs) |  | 5 | 5.3 |
| * In Spanish (not specific) |  | 16 | 16.8 |
| * In English |  | 74 | 78 |

Table 4. Biographical factors

| **BIOGRAPHICAL FACTORS** |  | ***No. of tokens*** | | **%** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Age** |  |  | |  |
| * Over 21 |  | 2 | | 2.1 |
| * 21-29 years old |  | 1 | | 1.1 |
| * Over 30 |  | 1 | | 1.1 |
| * Under 40 |  | 2 | | 2.1 |
| * Not stated |  | - | | 93.7 |
| **Gender** |  |  | |  |
| * Women (for female students) |  | 3 | | 3.2 |
| * Women (no other information given) |  | 2 | | 2.1 |
| * Not stated |  | - | | 94.7 |
| **Nationality** | | | | |
| * Colombian or Latin descent |  | 3 | | 3.2 |
| * U.S. or Canadian |  | 3 | | 3.2 |
| * Foreign |  | 1 | | 1.1 |
| * Citizen of an English-speaking country |  | 1 | | 1.1 |
| * Not stated |  | - | | 91.4 |
| **Nativeness** | | | | |
| * Native |  | 12 | | 12.6 |
| * Native “volunteer” |  | 8 | | 8.4 |
| * Native with U.S. accent | | | 2 | 2.1 |
| * Not stated | | | - | 76.9 |

1. Typically the U.K., the U.S.A., Ireland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Inner Circle countries are those where English is spoken as a first language. Outer Circle countries are those where English is spoken as a second language in institutions (Kachru, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. The names of Colombia’s English language programs have changed several times since 2004 when the first ‘National Bilingual Program’ was launched (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017). I do not use the term “bilingual” to refer to these programs out of respect for the speakers of one or more of the country’s 65 non-European languages (Ministerio de Cultura, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. “Foreigner’s identification card” in English [↑](#footnote-ref-3)