

**iTutorGroup: A case study of covert native-speakerism
underneath a social justice façade**
**Groupe de tuteur : une étude de cas sur le phénomène de «
native-speakerism » dissimulée sous une façade de justice
sociale**

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article examine les stratégies clandestines que l'iTutorGroup utilise pour discriminer contre les enseignants de nationalités qu'ils semblent considérer comme indésirables. Grâce à l'analyse du contenu de nombreuses soumissions de candidatures, les résultats montrent que le processus d'embauche automatique offre aux enseignants de ces nationalités perçus comme indésirables un salaire potentiel plus bas et seulement une entrevue asynchrone enregistrée sur vidéo, voire même un refus d'une entrevue. Les ressortissants britanniques, australasiens et nord-américains, bénéficient d'un salaire potentiel plus élevé ainsi que d'une entrevue individuelle en direct. La compagnie dissimule ces stratégies discriminatoires sous une façade d'égalité puisqu'elle est l'un des partenaires globaux de l'association internationale TESOL. En tant que partenaire global, iTutorGroup suit en prétendant respecter les politiques de non-discrimination.



ITUTORGROUP: A CASE STUDY OF COVERT NATIVE-SPEAKERISM UNDERNEATH A SOCIAL JUSTICE FAÇADE

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the covert native-speakerist strategies iTutorGroup utilizes to discriminate against teachers of nationalities the company appears to deem as undesired. Through content analysis of numerous job application submissions to iTutorGroup's website, results show iTutorGroup's automatic hiring process offers teachers of these nationalities a much lower potential wage and only a video-recorded asynchronous interview, if not complete refusal to an interview. In contrast, British, Australasian, and North American nationals are afforded a much higher potential wage as well as a one-on-one live interview. The company conceals these nuanced discriminatory strategies with a façade of equality since they are one of TESOL International Association's Global Partners. As a Global Partner, iTutorGroup follows suit in pretending to uphold TESOL's nondiscrimination policies.

GROUPE DE TUTEUR : UNE ÉTUDE DE CAS SUR LE PHÉNOMÈNE DE «NATIVE-SPEAKERISM» DISSIMULÉE SOUS UNE FAÇADE DE JUSTICE SOCIALE

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article examine les stratégies clandestines que l'iTutorGroup utilise pour discriminer contre les enseignants de nationalités qu'ils semblent considérer comme indésirables. Grâce à l'analyse du contenu de nombreuses soumissions de candidatures, les résultats montrent que le processus d'embauche automatique offre aux enseignants de ces nationalités perçus comme indésirables un salaire potentiel plus bas et seulement une entrevue asynchrone enregistrée sur vidéo, voire même un refus d'une entrevue. Les ressortissants britanniques, australasiens et nord-américains, bénéficient d'un salaire potentiel plus élevé ainsi que d'une entrevue individuelle en direct. La compagnie dissimule ces stratégies discriminatoires sous une façade d'égalité puisqu'elle est l'un des partenaires globaux de l'association internationale TESOL. En tant que partenaire global, iTutorGroup suit en prétendant respecter les politiques de non-discrimination.

My interest in carrying out this case study stemmed from an experience I had looking for online employment as a language teacher. As I began my job search, I decided to visit the TESOL International Association web page to see if there were any worthwhile job offers. On the site, I noticed that some of the association's Global Partners at the time were online English language schools (e.g., VIPKid, Qkids, GOGOKID, iTutorGroup) and so I decided to apply to one. I visited several websites from the list, but they all had a discriminatory requirement that disqualified me from being a potential applicant (e.g., required to be a native speaker of English, to hold a passport from an anglophone country). Finally, I visited the iTutorGroup website to learn about the company and see whether I could apply for a position. The first thing I did when I accessed the iTutorGroup application website was to check the FAQ section to see whether I was qualified, according to their requirements, to teach for the school. This began what would soon become a research case study to investigate the company's discriminatory hiring practices.

I am from Argentina and am a multilingual speaker of English, Spanish, French, and Chinese. I have a background as an English language teacher. More specifically, I hold a Bachelor of Arts in English Teaching as a Foreign Language, an MA in TESOL, and a Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA) from the International House World Organisation. I also have more than ten years of experience in teaching English to a variety of age-groups (children, adolescents, adults) in many different cultural contexts (e.g., Argentina, the United States, China, Canada). I have taught general English, business English, as well as English for specific and academic purposes. I am currently pursuing doctoral studies in Canada, with a research focus on inequitable hiring practices rooted in ideological assumptions about race and native language fluency (otherwise known as *native-speakerism*).

I have found that particularly in Asian countries (e.g., Japan, South Korea, and China), I have often been automatically disqualified from even applying to some job postings as I am not considered a native speaker of English. In the case of the iTutorGroup application, to my relief, there was no explicit native speaker requirement. I was pleased to learn that I already fulfilled several of the eligibility requirements established by the company: "a passion for teaching," a bachelor's degree (or higher), a teaching certificate, a year of teaching experience, a willingness to commit 5 hours a week (or more), and a reliable internet connection (iTutorGroup, 2020b). As I started filling out my application, I noticed the fourth question, which inquired into my nationality. The form (with its drop-down list) gave priority to the British, Australasian, and North American (BANA) countries (the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia being on top of the list), which raised some suspicions. Once I completed my profile, I received an automated indication of what my potential wage would be, and I had the option to set up an interview.

Based on my profile, I would receive an hourly wage of up to 13.4 Canadian dollars. This automated result piqued my interest. I started to wonder whether the hourly wage would differ had I indicated a different nationality, perhaps one of the BANA countries, spurring further investigation.

BACKGROUND

In academia, the monolingual bias is fading, slowly but surely, and making way for a multilingual paradigm by which non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) are multilinguals who come with their own set of unique affordances (Calafato, 2019). However, a monolingual bias is still prevalent in the English language teaching (ELT) markets outside of academia, where native-speakerist ideologies often lead to discriminatory hiring practices that significantly reduce employment opportunities for those deemed to be NNESTs (Alvarez, 2020; Braine, 2010). Particularly in Asia (namely, Japan, South Korea, and China), native-speakerist practices can range from enforcement of national policies that dictate which passport holders are considered appropriate to be teachers of English (English Program in Korea, n.d.; State Administration of Foreign Affairs, 2018) to racist practices by school recruiters (Hsu, 2005; Liu, 2018). In the latter case, being a native English-speaking teacher (NEST) is sometimes not as important as being ethnically White (Fithriani, 2018).

Online schools that employ the same practices as the aforementioned Asian countries are not the exception in terms of discriminatory practices. Some outright require applicants to “be an English native speaker from the U.S. or Canada” (Magic Ears, 2019). Other schools, such as Qkids and VIPKid, use requirements such as nationality and/or authorization to work as gatekeeping tools to source their teachers from certain inner circle countries (i.e., countries whose primary native language for their population is English; Kachru, 1992). For example, the VIPKid company prides itself in delivering curriculum “based on Common Core State Standards in the USA” (personal communication, June 11, 2020), which is why they say that they require applicants to have the legal right to work in the United States or Canada. Aside from the inconsistency that Common Core State Standards apply to the United States only (and not in Canada), VIPKid teachers are not necessarily trained Common Core teachers as they are permitted to hold a bachelor’s degree in any subject, not just teaching. From the examples just given, it is noticeable how some companies take a more subtle approach to discriminating among, and against, teachers. Taking overt discriminatory stances could jeopardize their relations with TESOL International Association, which has denounced discriminatory hiring practices via two anti-discrimination statements (TESOL International Association, 2001, 2006); Qkids and VIPKid, for example, have been strategic partners of TESOL. With the exception of Ruecker and Ives (2015), studies on covert discriminatory hiring practices in the English as a foreign language (EFL) market are scant. This article, building on Ruecker and Ives, intends to help address that gap.

The following sections detail a case study of the covert native-speakerist strategies that iTutorGroup utilizes to discriminate against teachers of certain nationalities perceived as undesired, which is a proxy for linguistic identities perceived as undesired (i.e., those who are not monolingual English speakers coming from BANA countries). To these teachers, the iTutorGroup automatic hiring process offers a much lower potential wage and only a video-recorded asynchronous interview, if not complete refusal to an interview. In contrast, British, Australasian, and North American nationals are afforded a much higher potential wage as well as a one-on-one scheduled interview with a human interviewer. The implications of these findings are significant in tracking the movement of discriminatory hiring practices from overt to covert. This study shows how one particular recruiting organization, iTutorGroup, has moved from explicit to more indirect and nuanced discriminatory strategies for its teacher recruitment and hiring practices. This recruiter utilizes a façade of equality to carry out their agenda, which materializes in recruitment descriptions such as “iTutorGroup welcomes anyone with a passion for teaching to join us!” Minimum requirements to apply include an idiomatic level in English, a bachelor’s degree or higher, a teaching certificate (CELTA-type), recognized teaching experience, a commitment of 6 peak hours per week, and a computer with Windows or macOS (iTutorGroup, 2020b). The company’s hiring approach mimics policies upholding equality within the ELT market. Like other organizations, they also number among TESOL International Association’s Global Partners. TESOL International Association’s nondiscrimination policy includes, but is not limited to, “language background, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, sexual orientation, nationality, disability, appearance, or geographic location” (TESOL International Association, n.d.). As a way to protect its own image while still making use of discriminatory hiring practices, iTutorGroup has resorted to concealing these discriminatory practices under a veneer of equality. The case study in the present article exposes these practices through content analysis of the company’s wage and interview offers to candidates of different backgrounds.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF NATIVE-SPEAKERISM IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Native-speakerism, as Holliday (2005) argues, implies that “native speaker teachers represent a Western culture from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology” (p. 6). In a practical sense, this definition suggests that the native speaker is the most successful teacher of a target language and is attributed superior status. First, as perceived owners of the English language (Widdowson, 1994), NESTs are believed to have superior language skills, skills which conform to the norm of native-speaking models (Kachru, 1992). These norms are understood to indicate an optimal target-language role model (Phillipson, 1992; Rao, 2009), especially with pronunciation teaching (Jenkins, 2005). This conceptualization of the NEST fosters inequality, significantly diminishing NNESTs’ chances of successful

employment, as eligibility requirements position place of birth and mother tongue at the forefront, relegating teaching qualifications and experience to secondary requirements. Particularly within countries where English is taught as a foreign language, or what Kachru would call the *expanding circle*¹ (Kachru & Nelson, 1996), native-speakerism materializes in blatant discriminatory hiring practices, with certain discriminatory patterns depending on the region. By “expanding circle,” Kachru and Nelson (1996) are referring to countries “in which English has various roles and is widely studied but for more specific purposes than in the outer circle, including (but certainly not limited to) reading knowledge for scientific and technical purposes” (p. 78). For example, within East Asia, the amplified Whiteness factor is present in how teachers might be perceived to be NESTs (or not) regardless of whether they are actually NESTs or NNESTs, which can lead to racist hiring practices when stakeholders seem to idealize the successful teacher as a White Anglo-Saxon NEST (Fithriani, 2018; Kubota & Lin, 2006; Ruecker & Ives, 2015).

It is important to understand recruiters’ and students’ attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs since they can influence teacher hiring practices. The biases of recruiters and students, as customers with demands (Holliday, 2008), could play an important role in discriminatory hiring practices. To date, not much research has been conducted into recruiters’ hiring practices (Akcan et al., 2017), perhaps due to logistical issues. Studies can be categorized into two types of sources: a) those with direct access to school administrators, managers, recruiters, and policy makers; and b) those that analyze job ads, policy documents, and teachers’ accounts of employers. In regard to the first, the few direct accounts obtained from recruiters within East Asia include Stanley’s (2013) conversations with a foreign recruiter in mainland China and a self-account of Keaney (2016), a project manager with years of experience in East and South-East Asia. Keaney argues that NEST schemes are justified due to the lack of local teachers with enough language proficiency, which is what NESTs bring into the picture. However, Keaney recognizes that NESTs who are genuinely qualified and experienced are a rare find. For Stanley (2013), the recruiter in their account summarizes the prevalent view on recruiting in many Asian contexts: “He prefers to employ teachers who are young, blond, bubbly, attractive, and entertaining, even if unqualified” (p. 156). The racist aspect of this view is further corroborated by teacher accounts such as Shao (2005) and Hsu (2005) who detail their challenges and racial discrimination suffered with recruiters in China.

The second branch of scholarship which has provided a useful window into recruiters’ attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs is the analysis of recruiter websites or job ads on the web. Studies that have paid specific attention to international job ads for teaching positions in East Asia are Mahboob and Golden (2013), Rivers (2016), Ruecker and Ives (2015), and Song and Zhang (2010), all of which have revealed that being a NEST was a primary requirement, if not the most important requirement, to apply for a teaching position. In Song and Zhang,

analysis of ten websites revealed that 71.6% of job ads for ELT positions in Korea demanded NEST status, while 79.3% of ads requested the same for positions in China. In Mahboob and Golden, an analysis of 44 job ads for positions in East Asia revealed NEST status to be a requirement in 34 of them, with two ads explicitly specifying that applicants should be White (in one ad) and Caucasian (in the other). Ruecker and Ives' analysis of 59 websites recruiting for a specific language school showed that 81% of job postings had NEST status as one of the requirements, expressed in different ways: sometimes requiring applicants to be NESTs and sometimes requiring candidates to hold passports from anglophone countries. They also showed, through their TEFL Heaven website analysis, how language schools' recruiting websites portray the ideal NEST through the images utilized in website design. With the use of particular images, websites can imply that the ideal NEST is ethnically White. Finally, Rivers conducted a study on 292 ELT job ads within the context of Japanese higher education. Results showed that 58 of those ads demanded applicants to be NESTs. Also, Rivers argued that a racist undertone was present in 146 job ads' requirement that applicants submit a recent photograph.

In terms of recruiters' ethnic preferences as expressed through online job ads, Rivers (2016) has pointed out that "it would certainly not be in the best interests of the institution to be making public proclamations, in English to an international audience, favoring one race or ethnicity over another" (p. 81). As Rivers explains, that kind of discourse is not compatible with the accepted rhetoric used on mainstream job billboards or web pages aimed at international Western audiences in countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Even though racism and a preference for White teachers is a prevalent factor in countries such as South Korea, Japan, and China (Braine, 2010; Kubota & Lin, 2006; Leonard, 2019; Lowe & Pinner, 2016; Rivers & Ross, 2013; Ruecker & Ives, 2015; Stanley, 2013), it is an issue that is only visually alluded to on recruitment websites (Ruecker & Ives, 2015) rather than explicitly mentioned (with two exceptions in Mahboob & Golden, 2013). It seems that even though many recruiters in these countries actively look to find what they believe to be ideal NESTs by attracting White NESTs for their schools, they are, at the same time, aware of the potential negative consequences should they explicitly voice that desire. Having one's school branded as racist cannot be good for business. Despite these latent ethnic preferences, demanding that potential teachers be only NESTs has not yet received international recognition as a form of discrimination to the same degree as gender or racial discrimination. As such, while mechanisms have been put in place to uphold gender and racial equality in general recruitment practices, protections to ensure an equitable hiring process for English language teachers remain lacking.

Native-speakerist discriminatory language would appear to be decreasing on websites of internationally renowned institutions as well as institutions compelled to follow anti-discriminatory policy and regulations in specific countries. One

example is *tefl.com*, one of the biggest ELT job search engines, which used to have up to 70% of its hosted ads include a native speaker requirement as a prevalent component (Kiczkowiak, 2014). A quick search on the website now shows a significant decrease in native speaker requirements in its advertisements over the last few years. Another relevant organization is the British Council, which does not phrase its qualification requirements in terms of nativeness. This could have been prompted by the British Association of Applied Linguistics in 2012 (Rivers, 2013) with their drafting of a formal policy against the use of “native speaker” in their online advertisements, which has influenced a number of renowned British institutions in the ELT space. A similar decrease in discriminatory language can be seen across institutions in North America, which do not usually use “nativeness” as a requirement in job ads as this would contravene local laws as well as values conveyed by the TESOL International Association in two anti-discrimination statements (2001, 2006). Other institutional responses against the use of nativeness-related terminology include KOTESOL (2019); TESOL-SPAIN (2017); Asociación de Centros de Enseñanza de Idiomas de Andalucía (Association of Language Teaching Centres in Andalusia; 2017); and the Association of British Columbia Teachers of English as an Additional Language (BC TEAL; 2014).

It stands to reason that language and educational institutions, in pursuit of worldwide recognition, look for the endorsement of renowned organizations, such as TESOL International Association, to further their national and international outreach. However, to form such a partnership with TESOL, they must abide by their nondiscriminatory policy which includes, but is not limited to, language background, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, sexual orientation, nationality, disability, appearance, or geographic location (TESOL International Association, 2020). Indeed, it is for this reason that certain language teaching companies and institutions advocate for equality via their media outlets so as to meet the requirements of well-known associations’ nondiscriminatory policies and regulations even if, in reality, they do not practice what they preach. An example of contradictory hiring practices is seen in the present case study on the iTutorGroup company. Until now, literature reporting on these covert discriminatory hiring practices has been scarcely available, which is where this research study comes in to fill the gap by uncovering how iTutorGroup’s hiring scheme continues to systematically discriminate against non-NEST, non-White teaching professionals.

PRESENT STUDY

This article details a case study examining iTutorGroup’s discriminatory hiring processes, focusing on two specific aspects: a) an analysis of the company’s online application form, with its automatic allocation of a potential wage depending on an applicant’s specific background;² and b) an analysis that compares components

of the two types of interviews offered by the company after the online form is filled out. The guiding questions for this study were:

1. Within the iTutorGroup hiring scheme, how does the applicant's profile influence their wage offer?
2. In what ways do the findings reflect the literature on discriminatory hiring and recruitment practices?

A company background of iTutorGroup

The iTutorGroup company, founded in 1998 and based in China, is currently one of the biggest education online platforms in the world. It recruits teachers for its partner companies TutorABC, tutorJr, vipJr, and TutorMing. TutorABC services Taiwan and mainland China, offering English language courses for adults. TutorJr provides English language courses for students aged 6–18 in Taiwan, while vipJr provides English language, mathematics, and “other diverse teaching services” (Online English Teaching, n.d.) for students aged 6–18 in mainland China. Finally, TutorMing offers Chinese language courses for learners of Chinese worldwide. With more than 30,000 teachers (iTutorGroup, 2020a) and around 200,000-plus students (China's iTutorGroup Targets \$2 Billion Valuation Ahead of IPO, 2018), iTutorGroup provides 24/7 language teaching services. Valued at 1 billion USD (iTutorGroup, 2015), the company stands as one of the biggest competitors in the ELT space alongside VIPKid, DaDa, and other major online English language schools in China.

The iTutorGroup company prides itself on “providing individualized, personalized learning experiences to hundreds of thousands of students & business professionals [by] leveraging big data analytics and utilizing advanced algorithmic matching between students, classmates, teaching consultants and digital content” (iTutorGroup, 2020a). Indeed, a similar approach is taken to the recruitment process of teachers via the use of an AI-driven online system (iTutorGroup, 2020a). In the section below, I detail the mechanics of this online AI-recruitment system as well as what a typical recruitment process looks like on the platform.

The recruitment process of iTutorGroup

The iTutorGroup company claims that it “welcomes anyone with a passion for teaching to join us!” (iTutorGroup, 2020b) and showcases the fact that it employs 30,000 teachers (iTutorGroup, 2020b) from 135-plus countries. Once an applicant determines that they meet the eligibility requirements (e.g., qualifications, experience, internet connection), they sign up on the web page at <https://join.itutorgroup.com>.³ The candidate will then be redirected to a different section of the web page where a new profile needs to be created. The candidate can use their Facebook, Google profile, or e-mail to set up a new account. After that, an online form needs to be filled out which asks for:

- name,
- gender (male or female options),
- date of birth,
- nationality (countries in alphabetical order with the exception of the BANA countries located on top),
- current location (i.e., where the candidates reside currently),
- cell phone number,
- highest level of education (drop-down menu with bachelor's, MA, PhD, post-doctorate, or "None of the above" options),
- "How much teaching experience do you have?" (drop-down menu options: less than 1 year, 1-2 years, 2-3 years, 3+ years),
- "Aside from ESL teaching, I have expertise in the field of" (a number of options for selecting fields outside of ESL),⁴
- teaching certificates (options: TESOL, TEFL, CELTA, "other certifications"),
- a referral code (in case being referred from another teacher), and
- "Where did you hear from us?" (drop-down menu to choose from several media outlets).

When all the fields have been filled out, the applicant clicks on "Submit," and a pop-up window will appear where the applicant can double-check and confirm the information entered. Upon submission of the online form, the applicant is redirected to another page that displays the candidate's earning potential in a box under the heading "How much can I earn?" Depending on the candidate's profile, they will be able to earn "up to" a certain wage. Also, there is another box that indicates the minimum number of hours the candidate is required to commit to (usually around 5 hours per week). At the bottom of the page there appear a number of options with offers to continue the application process: The candidate can opt to book an appointment for a one-on-one interview with one of iTutorGroup's recruiters or can choose to attend an automated interview. After either interview option, the applicant must wait for their application's final result to learn whether they were hired or not.

METHODS

A case study approach was taken in order to understand the "particularity and complexity of a single case" (Stake, 1995, p. xi), namely, here, iTutorGroup's hiring procedure. Data collection was carried out via content analysis, which "involves the counting of instances of words, phrases, or grammatical structures

that fall into specific categories” (Dörnyei, 2006, p. 255). In this particular case, content analysis data collection focused on the results obtained from different types of profiles entered as job applications on the iTutorGroup website. Results indicated the potential wage offer for a teacher, as well as the option to follow through with the application via either an asynchronous video-recorded interview or a synchronous live online interview.

Procedure

The job application online form was filled out several times. Each time, I started by entering a random e-mail address and password in the sign-up section of the iTutorGroup web page (<https://join.itutorgroup.com>). The relevant fields in the online form comprise nationality, location of residence, highest level of education, years of teaching experience, and teaching certificates. The “Name,” “Phone,” and “Where did you hear from us?” fields were filled out with random letters. Although “Gender” and “Date of birth” were variables that could also be used to discriminate against teachers, the analysis of these falls beyond this study’s scope. Given that this study aimed to cover native-speakerist related phenomenon, the gender field was set to “Male” and the “Date of birth” to March 6th, 1988 for all applicants.

The literature on discriminatory hiring practices, supported by anecdotal evidence in discussion forums on sites such as Indeed and Glassdoor (via employee feedback) as well as in articles on blogs such as Online English Teaching (n.d.) and Teach&GO (2020), pointed my research towards investigating variables such as nationality, location of residence, highest level of education, years of teaching experience, and teaching certification. The aforementioned sources indicated, above all, that native speaker status, location of residence, a bachelor’s degree, and 1 year of experience were needed, but these sources did not indicate whether a better wage was attainable by holding more advanced degrees or having any further teaching experience. I entered a number of profiles in such a way as to see how much weight would be placed on nationality, location of residence, degrees, and teacher experience.

The following profiles were entered:

Category 1: PhD and CELTA certificate holder, 3+ years of teaching experience (the maximum that can be entered)

Category 2: Bachelor’s degree and TEFL⁵ certificate holder, less than 1 year of teaching experience.

As can be seen in Table 1 below, the following nationalities were chosen for all two categories: the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa, Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, Germany, France, Spain, China, Japan, Singapore, the Philippines, India, Nigeria, Ghana, and Cameroon.

For location of residence, all nationalities were entered with their corresponding country of origin; in addition, non-BANA nationalities were paired up with residence in Canada to compare potential differences in wages while BANA countries were paired up with residence in Canada, Germany and Argentina, to also see any potential differences among wages. For example, in the non-BANA category, a total of four applications were entered per teacher nationality:

- a Venezuelan living in Venezuela with a PhD and 3+ years of teaching experience,
- a Venezuelan living in Canada with a PhD and 3+ years of teaching experience,
- a Venezuelan living in Venezuela with a bachelor's degree and less than 1 year of teaching experience, and
- a Venezuelan living in Canada with a bachelor's degree and less than 1 year of teaching experience.

For the BANA category, a total of eight applications were submitted per teacher nationality:

- an American living in the United States with a PhD and 3+ years of teaching experience,
- an American living in Canada with a PhD and 3+ years of teaching experience,
- an American living in Germany with a PhD and 3+ years of teaching experience,
- an American living in Argentina with a PhD and 3+ years of teaching experience,
- an American living in the United States with a bachelor's degree and less than 1 year of teaching experience,
- an American living in Canada with a bachelor's degree and less than 1 year of teaching experience,
- an American living in Germany with a bachelor's degree and less than 1 year of teaching experience, and
- an American living in Argentina with a bachelor's degree and less than 1 year of teaching experience.

TABLE 1. Profiles entered in iterations of job application

Nationality	Location Same as Nationality	Canada (Location)	Germany (Location)	Argentina (Location)
The United Kingdom	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2
The United States	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2
Canada	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2
Australia	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2
New Zealand	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2
Germany	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	NA ^a	NA
Spain	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	NA	NA
Argentina	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	NA	NA
The Philippines	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	NA	NA
Brazil	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	NA	NA
Venezuela	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	NA	NA
China	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	NA	NA
Japan	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	NA	NA
Singapore	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	NA	NA
France	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	NA	NA
India	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	NA	NA
Nigeria	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	NA	NA
Ghana	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	NA	NA
Cameroon	Category 1/ Category 2	Category 1/ Category 2	NA	NA

^a Stands for "Not analyzed."

Entering each profile in the application form returned an automatic response that varied depending on the specific profile. Each response included the potential wage the applicant could earn along with the possibility for a video-recorded or live interview (with the ability to choose) or, with some profiles, the possibility of only a video-recorded interview. In some cases, no potential wage was offered at all and a message indicating the application was “under evaluation” would be displayed.

Each response was analyzed according to the wage offer amount, whether a choice was offered of a pre-recorded or live interview, and whether the “under evaluation” message was displayed. Similar responses were grouped together into categories, and characteristics in the profiles were analyzed for what they had in common to produce similar wage offers and interview responses. Profiles with characteristics that produced similar responses were likewise grouped into categories.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As can be seen in Table 2 below, the division of teachers between category 1 (PhD and CELTA certificate holder, 3+ years of experience) and category 2 (bachelor’s degree and CELTA holder, 1 year of experience) is missing. The reason for this is, as data collection progressed and different profiles were iterated through application forms, it became clear that both the potential wage offer and the interview type were exactly the same regardless of the applicants’ different qualifications. That meant that a novice teacher with a bachelor’s degree and a less recognized teaching certification could earn the same wage as an experienced teacher of the same nationality with a PhD, 3+ years of experience, and a CELTA certificate. Consequently, the level of qualifications beyond the minimum requirements to teach English seem to be irrelevant for the application. Differences in potential wage earnings and the type of interview a candidate can choose lie mainly (if not exclusively) on the applicant’s nationality.

To discuss specific findings, I will use categories under the labels of “desirable,” “less desirable,” and “undesirable,” which will help organize the different nationalities and locations of residence. By “desirable,” I aim to describe those nationalities iTutorGroup looks to for hiring their ideal candidates. By “less desirable,” I aim to describe those nationalities iTutorGroup will accept but punish with a lower wage for being those that do not stereotypically portray a native speaker image. Finally, I call “undesirable” those nationalities the company might try to avoid hiring, or to which it provides fewer opportunities to reach the hiring stage.

TABLE 2. *Potential wage offers and interviews*

Nationality	Nationality Same as Location	Canada (Location)	Germany (Location)	Argentina (Location)	Interview Options
The United Kingdom	16.6 GBP (22.88 USD) ^a	28.2 CAD (22.48 USD)	17.2 USD	17.2 USD	Automated or 1-1 ^b
The United States	21.6 USD	28.2 CAD	17.2 USD	17.2 USD	Automated or 1-1
Canada	28.2 CAD (22.48 USD)	28.2 CAD	17.2 USD	17.2 USD	Automated or 1-1
Australia	20.2 USD	26.6 CAD (21.20 USD)	16.2 USD	16.2 USD	Automated or 1-1
New Zealand	18.4 USD	24 CAD (19.13 USD)	15 USD	14.6 USD	Automated or 1-1
Germany	15.2 USD	19.8 CAD (15.78 USD)	NA ^c	NA	Automated
Spain	12.2 USD	15.8 CAD (12.59 USD)	NA	NA	Automated
Argentina	10.2 USD	13.4 CAD (10.68 USD)	NA	NA	Automated
South Africa	105 ZAR (7.41 USD)	9.8 CAD (7.81 USD)	NA	NA	Automated
The Philippines	6.2 USD	8 CAD (6.38 USD)	NA	NA	Automated
Brazil	6.2 USD	8 CAD	NA	NA	Automated
Venezuela	6.2 USD	8 CAD	NA	NA	Automated
China	“Evaluating ...”	“Evaluating ...”	NA	NA	None
Japan	“Evaluating ...”	“Evaluating ...”	NA	NA	None
Singapore	“Evaluating ...”	“Evaluating ...”	NA	NA	None
France	“Evaluating ...”	“Evaluating ...”	NA	NA	None
India	“Evaluating ...”	“Evaluating ...”	NA	NA	None
Nigeria	“Evaluating ...”	“Evaluating ...”	NA	NA	None
Ghana	“Evaluating ...”	“Evaluating ...”	NA	NA	None
Cameroon	“Evaluating ...”	“Evaluating ...”	NA	NA	None

^a The conversion to USD in brackets is only an estimate for clarification.

^b Stands for “One-on-one interview.”

^c Stands for “Not analyzed.”

Wage offer

Clearly, teachers of BANA nationalities, as desirable nationalities who teach in their country of origin, enjoy the best possible potential wage outcomes. Taking into consideration current conversion rates, teachers with British, American, and Canadian nationalities rank first, with roughly the same wage for teaching in their own country, followed by Australia and New Zealand in last place. It is interesting to note that even within BANA countries, there is a hierarchy, based on wage offerings, in which American, British, and Canadian English enjoy the top positions. It is not surprising that American and British English might be the most desirable as, due to colonial legacy, their dialects are usually considered exemplary varieties. Along with them, Canadian English might enjoy a high-paying position due to its (perceived) similarities with Standard American English. The overall results in the desirable category agree with the available literature on native-speakerist job ads that demand candidates to be NESTs from specific countries, often including some or all of the countries mentioned in this section (Mackenzie, 2021; Mahboob & Golden, 2013; Ruecker & Ives, 2015; Selvi, 2010).

The less desirable nationalities – including Germany, Spain, Argentina, South Africa, the Philippines, Brazil, and Venezuela – occupy the second tier, characterized as nations where non-native speakers of English abound. It is interesting to note iTutorGroup’s view of South Africa, as can be seen via the wage offer of 105 ZAT (roughly 7.41 USD). South Africa has, indeed, occupied a position of controversy within Asian countries’ foreign teacher policies, some of which do not consider it a native English-speaking country (a common category to address the countries English teachers come from). For example, South Korea seems to consider South Africa a less legitimate English-speaking nation, as it imposes further restrictions on South Africans who want to apply for an English teaching position (English Program in Korea, n.d.) by demanding documentation that can prove they have attended anglophone primary and secondary school. On the other hand, China considers South Africa a native English-speaking country, granting South Africa equal standing and legitimacy (as it does BANA nationalities) when applying for an English teaching work visa (State Administration of Foreign Experts Affairs, 2018).

In terms of determining the degrees of nationality desirability, it is clear why BANA countries are considered as more desirable versus non-BANA countries as less desirable: BANA countries are where native speakers abound. However, questions remain as to how iTutorGroup determines different salaries for different non-native teachers based upon their nationality. Teachers of German

nationality are the best paid (15.2 USD), while teachers of Filipino, Brazilian, and Venezuelan nationality occupy the lower end of the wage scale (6.2 USD). Wage does not change much even if the German, Filipino, Brazilian, or Venezuelan teacher worked in Canada (as a common point of reference). It is difficult to speculate what parameters iTutorGroup uses to measure different non-native English-speaking nationalities. Even though German and Spanish nationalities garner the highest wage offers, teachers of French nationality were not even offered a potential wage, being relegated to the undesirable group of nationalities. European nationalities, overall, are not necessarily considered superior as a monolith in their English-speaking ability according to iTutorGroup.

In determining the degree of legitimacy of teachers from non-native English-speaking countries, the other variable that can be discarded is whether English holds official language status in their corresponding nations. In this study, many of the applications with home countries where English is an official national language (e.g., Singapore, Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana) received worse results in comparison to other countries such as Germany and Spain, whose official language is not English.

The most striking result lies among the undesirable nationalities. Teachers of Chinese, Japanese, Singaporean, Indian, Nigerian, Ghanaian, and Cameroonian nationalities did not even receive a potential wage offer (nor the chance to follow up with an interview). On the contrary, they all received the following message: “Evaluating: Thank you for submitting! Your application is now under evaluation, we will contact you shortly via email. If you have any questions, please contact us at recruiting@itutorgroup.com.” Clearly, these nationalities are positioned as undesirable. The iTutorGroup company is, indeed, providing fewer opportunities to this group of teachers, who could conceivably be equally, if not more, qualified than their desirable counterparts. Results show that a teacher from a BANA country with minimum qualifications (category 2 profile) gets an automatic wage offer and the chance of a follow-up interview, while a highly skilled, qualified teacher (category 1 profile: PhD and CELTA certificate holder, 3+ years of experience) from the undesirable group receives neither a wage offer nor a follow-through interview. The discrimination here is apparent.

We can only speculate as to why the undesirable nationalities are considered as such by iTutorGroup. Upon enquiry with iTutorGroup about their country tier system and wage offers, a recruitment agent stated that the pay structure depends upon “qualification, previous teaching experiences, certificate(s) in hand” (personal communication, June 20, 2020), which contradicts the automatic wage offer results where qualifications and teaching experience did *not* seem to be taken into account. The agent also stated that the pay according to country of location depends upon “economic factors” (personal communication, June 20, 2020). Even if we consider the location variable as valid for the difference in wage offers, it does not account for cases in which applicants of equal qualifications and

experience located in the same country are offered different wages. Ultimately, it appears that country of citizenship, and not current location, remains as one of the key measuring variables in terms of wage offers.

It is noteworthy that, with the exception of the Philippines, all the African and Asian nationalities received less positive feedback as compared to their European and North/South American counterparts (with the exception of France). A possible explanation lies in the fact that these undesirable countries are majority non-White-populated nations. English teaching is, indeed, a racialized profession in that stakeholders idealize the successful teacher as a White Anglo-Saxon NEST (Kubota & Lin, 2006; Amin, 1997). Particularly in Asia, there is an emergent body of scholarship documenting raciolinguistic issues pertaining to ESL teacher recruitment. Students within countries such as Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Taiwan, and mainland China show racial bias by expressing preference for teachers with Western Anglo-Saxon Whiteness (Appleby, 2017; Alvarez, 2020; Fithriani, 2018; Hickey, 2018; Kubota & Lin, 2006; Leonard, 2019; Lowe & Pinner, 2016; Rivers & Ross, 2013; Stanley, 2013). Students' bias provides recruiters with further leeway to exclude non-White teachers since recruiters usually justify discriminatory hiring practices based on their clients' preference for certain types of teachers. Instances of racial discrimination abound in mainland China, which is where a large part of iTutorGroup's clientele resides. For example, Hsu (2005) and Shao (2005), both Chinese American, recount firsthand experiences of racism that were extremely discouraging in their potential English teaching job hunt in China. Shao learnt that parents and recruiters were mostly looking for non-Asian, preferably White-looking, teachers, regardless of their qualifications. For Hsu (2005): "You know, now in China, many students want their foreign teachers to have a white face. It is extreme, but it is understandable."

Liu (2018) further corroborates Hsu's (2005) and Shao's (2005) experiences by receiving confirmation directly from recruiters in China, as more than half of the recruiters interviewed "granted explicit endorsement for White NESTs" (p. 92). Teachers from African and Asian countries further deviate from the idealized White, native-speaking candidate. This bias could be a likely factor playing a role in iTutorGroup's hiring practices and their reasoning for providing fewer hiring opportunities to teachers of Asian and African nationalities.

Follow-up interview

Successful candidates of the first screening (i.e., online form completion) proceed to the next step, which consists of an online interview. As previously mentioned, iTutorGroup offers two types of interviews: a synchronous, live one-on-one interview or an asynchronous video-recorded interview. Based on the results of the present study, iTutorGroup offered both possibilities, synchronous and asynchronous, to applicants of desired BANA nationalities. Applicants of less desired nationalities were offered asynchronous video-recorded interviews, while applicants of undesired nationalities were offered none of the possibilities

aforementioned. Members of undesired nationalities were told that they should wait to be contacted by iTutorGroup's staff with further instructions. Whether this is (or not) a covert practice to deny applicants of undesirable nationalities the possibility to continue their application process, it is a fact that with this feedback, opportunities to follow through with the application are ultimately diminished.

The iTutorGroup company's synchronous/asynchronous interview strategy could be based on the worth they assign to applicants of different nationalities. Applicants of less desirable nationalities could be offered an asynchronous interview since this methodology can "target a very wide audience at a small cost" (Sołek-Borowska & Wilczewska, 2018, p. 25). On the other hand, applicants of BANA countries are offered both types of interviews, which allows the applicant to choose the kind of interview they want based on convenience. However, the important point here is that it is BANA applicants only that are considered worth granting the opportunity of a synchronous interview.

The iTutorGroup company's relations with the TESOL International Association

One last concerning factor about the company is its relationship with the TESOL International Association as a 2019 Global Partner. For any organization, being such a partner is undoubtedly a useful strategy in gaining international recognition and can, consequently, provide a broader platform from which to acquire a larger clientele. Indeed, the TESOL International Association states that with its Global Partnership Program, partners will be able to "grow [their] customer, student, or employee base" (TESOL International Association, 2020). However, the TESOL International Association's Global Partners are to uphold the association's nondiscrimination policy, which is, as this study has shown, not a policy iTutorGroup is adhering to. In fact, iTutorGroup has established a façade of equality to harvest the TESOL International Association partnership benefits while continuing covert discriminatory hiring practices.

A clear example of this marketing façade is iTutorGroup's press release during the 2018 TESOL International Association China Assembly. Here, iTutorGroup reasserts its "commitment" to high educational standards and quality teachers by citing its CEO, Eric Yang:

Dr. Yang firmly believes that education should be quality-oriented, and teachers are key in education. Not everyone who can speak English is qualified to be an English teacher. Just like not everyone who speaks Chinese can be a Chinese teacher. For this reason, iTutorGroup insists on hiring TESOL-certified teachers. (iTutorGroup, 2018)

This statement clearly contradicts the practices observed on the iTutorGroup hiring website. If qualified teachers are key to education, then why would a less qualified/experienced teacher from a BANA country be offered a better wage and interview accommodations than a better qualified/more experienced teacher

from a non-BANA country? It is, hence, imperative that the TESOL International Association address these issues to maintain its social justice integrity. This can be achieved if the TESOL International Association actively ensures that all of the organizations/companies with which it partners honour egalitarian hiring practices within their institutions.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided an overview of the iTutorGroup company and its covert discriminatory hiring practices. These discriminatory practices, which are native-speakerist in nature, border on blatant racism for their disproportionate hiring opportunities, as is evidenced in this study by applications submitted with Asian/African nationalities. Results showed that to pass the initial screening hiring process, less qualified/experienced applicants from BANA countries enjoyed better potential wage opportunities and more flexibility in the interview process as compared to highly qualified applicants (those holding PhD and CELTA certificates and 3+ years of experience) of less desirable or undesirable nationalities. Results align with Sołek-Borowska and Wilczewska's (2018) observations, when they noted the same in a recruitment project in Poland for iTutorGroup that looked for fluent speakers of English, regardless of whether they had any teaching background. Since BANA nationals are associated with ideal standards of native-speaker English, it is clear why they would enjoy the best benefits, this regardless of their teaching experience/qualifications. Finally, it is of utmost importance that TESOL International Association reviews its partnerships with educational companies such as iTutorGroup. Associating with companies like these will only tarnish the image and reputation of TESOL International Association and, in turn, further empower discriminatory educational companies to capitalize on misinformation and discrimination.

NOTES

1. With the impact of globalization, im/emigration, transcultural flow of information/ideas, and the fluidity of geographical and political boundaries, scholars have questioned the limitations of Kachru's circles in modern society (Leimgruber, 2013). More specifically, Yano (2009) describes how even inner circle countries are experiencing demographic changes that question the concept of the inner circle native variety (e.g., the increase of Hispanics and immigration in the United States in the last ten years; the emergence of native speakers of Singaporean English in Singapore who speak the language not only at school, but at home and other environments). However, it is the fixity of Kachru's circles (regardless of whether academics agree or not) that works as a useful metaphor in this article to express the ideology espoused by stakeholders in Asia: a fixed viewpoint as to what a native speaker is/looks like and how that can lead to conflating ethnicity, native language, and nation-state imageries all together based on stereotyping. This is why concepts such as "foreign authenticity" play an important part in explaining

stakeholder perceptions. It helps to illuminate how teachers obtain authority based on the fixed stereotypes espoused by stakeholders as to what a foreigner/native speaker is (or should be).

2. “Background” entails the teacher’s nationality, place of residence, teaching qualifications, and experience.
3. At the time of preparing this issue for publication, iTutorGroup appeared to have disabled the application page. The links in the text to the iTutorGroup website are to archived versions of the site as they appeared when this case study was performed.
4. This question was coincidentally introduced at the time of data collection when a number of applications had already been sent as part of data collection. The applications sent with the added question had the option “Other” selected and “~” in the clarification box to indicate the candidate did not have experience outside of ESL teaching.
5. This acronym is usually used as a generic label to refer to certificates from different institutions that are usually less recognized than International House and the CELTA certification.

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