


STUDY

# Privilege and prejudice in private online English teaching: Discourses in school-owned recruitment websites

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## Abstract

Numerous studies have analyzed various aspects of English language teaching to uncover discriminatory employment practices within the field. However, there is a gap in the research regarding the discourses present in school-managed teacher recruitment websites (TRWs), particularly in the field of private online language education (POLE). This study aims to address this gap by investigating how the preferred online English teacher is characterized and what benefits they are promised when visiting these webpages. Using critical discourse analysis, the author analyzed the textual elements of 32 TRWs of online English schools operating in six major markets in Asia. The findings reveal that although a few schools show signs of relatively fair policies and emphasize professional qualifications, most of them appear to exploit native-speakerism through their application requirements and compensation policies that often favor only some groups. The implications emphasize the benefits of creating equitable employment opportunities and professionalizing POLE by leveraging the qualifications and experience of teachers from diverse backgrounds, while ensuring fair compensation. Finally, this study provides practical strategies for present and prospective online teachers on how to take advantage of the opportunities of digital language work while contributing to the attainment of equity in the industry.

## 1. Introduction

When someone searching for an online teaching job through Google visits the teacher recruitment website (TRW) of a prominent Japan-based online English school (OES), they will be greeted by an image of a young, professionally dressed Caucasian woman. Below the picture there is text that states: ‘We are currently looking for native English speakers with a standard accent of the following countries: U.S.A., U.K., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland.’ This school’s preference for individuals from the six English-dominant countries is not a novel occurrence within the English language teaching (ELT) profession. In fact, numerous scholars have directed their research towards this teacher hiring practice in recent decades, shedding light on the resultant bias against applicants from other countries, as seen in the sentence following the above statement: ‘If you are not a native English speaker but are fluent in both English and Japanese, we have a different standard of requirements.’

This prejudicial practice is attributed to NATIVE-SPEAKERISM, a linguistic ideology claiming that so-called ‘native’<sup>1</sup> speakers of a language are inherently superior teachers of that language due to their purportedly higher linguistic and cultural proficiency, in comparison with their ‘non-native’ counterparts (Holliday, 2005). While the concept of ‘nativeness’ traditionally hinged on language skills, this construct is profoundly entwined with non-linguistic factors, such as country of birth, race, accent, and even name (Braine, 2010). Still a subject to intense debate, the dichotomy of ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ speakers perpetuates a division that undermines the principle that effective language

teaching is rooted in expertise, pedagogical skills, and an understanding of linguistic nuances, rather than mere categorization based on linguistic background. In recent years, ‘nativeness’ has been increasingly recognized as a complex, socially constructed notion (Moussu & Llorca, 2008). With this development comes a proposal to replace the ‘toxic terms’ (Dewaele et al., 2022, p. 25) ‘native/non-native’ with ‘L1 user/LX user.’<sup>2</sup> The new terms, as Dewaele (2018) argues, promote equality and equity and are capable of encapsulating the complexities of the current linguistic realities, such as multilingualism.

Extensive research has delved into various aspects of native-speakerism in ELT, including its influences on the choice of contents within textbooks (Kiczkowiak, 2022; Si, 2020; Tajeddin & Pakzadian, 2020), selection of plenary speakers at conferences (Kiczkowiak & Lowe, 2021), teacher representation in recruitment websites (Domingo, 2022), and the perceptions of learners towards L1/LX teachers (Aslan & Thompson, 2017; Chun, 2014; Comprendio & Savski, 2020; Rao, 2010). Moreover, studies on how it dictates or affects the policies on English teacher recruitment have been conducted using various methodologies, such as surveys and interviews with human resource personnel (Alenazi, 2014; Kiczkowiak, 2020) and analysis of job postings across social media groups (Alshammari, 2020), online platforms and job repositories (Daoud & Kasztalska, 2022; Mackenzie, 2021; Mahboob & Golden, 2013; Selvi, 2010), and recruitment portals (Ruecker & Ives, 2015). Additionally, these studies were situated in different geographical contexts, mostly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, such as the Middle East (e.g., Mahboob & Golden, 2013), East and Southeast Asia (e.g., Kirkpatrick et al., 2013), Latin America (e.g., Mackenzie, 2021), and Europe (e.g., Kiczkowiak, 2019). There are also studies conducted in English-majority countries, like the United Kingdom (e.g., Atkinson, 2023; Clark & Paran, 2007). Their findings consistently indicate that factors, namely nationality, ‘nativeness,’ and race, could be used as discriminatory measures against certain candidates, often giving advantage to L1 applicants.

The prevalence of such unfair hiring practices has led to the implementation of various initiatives aimed at addressing these issues. Among them is the establishment of the Non-Native English Speaker Teachers movement in the 1990s to challenge the biases faced by LX teachers (Braine & Selvi, 2018). Additionally, organizations like Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) consistently condemn such practices (TESOL, 2006). Although these actions have contributed to the collective calls for employers to adopt hiring practices that prioritize academic qualifications, experience, and linguistic competence over language background, nationality, and race, they are often primarily directed to traditional language learning institutions, such as schools and universities.

This study examines a non-traditional landscape of language teaching that is often overlooked by professional groups and has not been widely explored in research: private online language education (POLE), an industry where teachers deliver language lessons to paying customers via video-conferencing or online learning platforms (Domingo, 2024). Specifically, it focuses on POLE’s biggest sector, ELT, by examining online schools’ multi-functional TRWs, designed to invite applicants and process applications. As POLE continues to attract more and more English teachers (Zečević & Biševac, 2022), it is imperative to understand how native-speakerism dictates its operation and influences how online teachers navigate the employment opportunities available in the industry.

This study aims to make a valuable contribution to the ongoing discussions surrounding discriminatory practices in ELT and to provide an understanding of language work in the age of digitalization by mapping OESs according to their recruitment and compensation policies publicly available in their TRWs. To the best of the author’s knowledge, this is the first study on these policies to focus on the POLE-ELT context and the first to examine the contents of school-owned TRWs. To achieve these aims, this project draws on previous research on English teacher recruitment (e.g., Mahboob & Golden, 2013; Ruecker & Ives, 2015) in seeking answers to the following research questions:

- What requirements do applicants need to meet in order to be considered for an online English teaching position? Who might be excluded based on these requirements?

- What salary range is typically advertised for these teaching positions? What additional benefits are mentioned in relation to the job?

The findings of this study have the potential to drive professionalization within POLE and provide insights into promoting equitable employment opportunities for teachers of all backgrounds. Additionally, it hopes to pave the way for future research directions in the areas of digital language work and learning amidst robust discussions on the commodification of English (see Holborow, 2018; Lorente & Tupas, 2013).

### 1.1. Online language work and learning

Advancements in internet technology have not only enabled recruiters to advertise jobs but have also provided language education providers with platforms to offer their services. This development has resulted from the growing influence of neoliberal ideology on education (Hastings, 2019) and effectively addressed the growing demand for convenient and flexible modes of language learning, highlighting how profit-oriented enterprises impact the methods of teaching and learning languages (Simpson, 2020).

As noted by Domingo (2024), while various languages are taught through POLE, English stands out as the largest and most profitable sector largely due to the widely held belief that English proficiency is essential for personal and professional advancement (Kozar & Sweller, 2014), as it has become the language of globalization (Duchêne & Heller, 2011). Different terms have been used in the literature to refer to this field, including ‘private online English tutoring’ (Kozar, 2012) and ‘online English teaching’ (Panaligan & Curran, 2022). In this article, the term ‘POLE-ELT’ is used to acknowledge its connection to POLE’s ‘unique and fully developed nature’ (Domingo, 2024, p. 4).

According to Kozar (2012, pp. 417–418), providers of POLE-ELT can be classified into four categories. The first category (the focus of this study) consists of ‘private online language schools’ operating as web-based institutions that hire teachers and remunerate them for each conducted lesson. The second category comprises self-employed ‘individual online tutors’ who offer their services independently, while the third category includes ‘online catalogues of teachers,’ or platforms enabling teachers to create profiles and set their rate and availability. The fourth category encompasses ‘traditional institutions’ that have incorporated live online lessons into their existing educational services.

Initially rooted in the private tutoring industry, POLE-ELT primarily focused on English tutoring, with the objective of helping learners master their lessons and pass examinations. Over the years, the range of services offered has expanded to cater to diverse customer needs and learning goals (Domingo, 2024). For instance, many OESs in Russia have offered speaking, business English, international exams preparation (Kozar, 2012), and general English lessons for overall proficiency (Domingo, 2024). In Japan, schools emphasize conversation lessons to enhance communication skills, especially in business (Tajima, 2018). The availability of various lesson types has attracted both young and adult learners seeking to improve their skills and advance their careers (Kozar & Sweller, 2014; Tajima, 2018), leading to POLE-ELT’s rapid growth and expansion (Domingo, 2024).

As web-based enterprises, every OES operates a multifunctional website that is tailored to the native language of their target customers. These websites provide essential information about the services offered, pricing, and the conditions of the learning contracts. They often include a frequently-asked-questions (FAQs) page to address additional concerns and employ various marketing strategies, such as videos and testimonials from students, to depict online learning as convenient, affordable, and effective. Furthermore, the websites showcase teachers, allowing students to engage with their prospective instructors before actually meeting them (Kozar, 2015).

In addition to customer-oriented websites, schools either manage a separate TRW or include a dedicated recruitment section on their main website. Typically written in English, these pages are specifically designed for prospective applicants. As suggested in the opening anecdote, TRWs can be easily found by jobseekers through basic job search keywords, such as ‘online English teaching jobs.’

Through these websites, schools can accept applications round the clock, and there is usually no pre-determined number of positions to be filled due to the high demand for teachers and the intense competition among schools to attract applicants.

In the industry's early years, the recruitment process relied on traditional advertising methods, such as posters and brochures, as well as earlier digital platforms like third-party job portals and social media. However, these methods had several disadvantages, including high costs and limited space and audience reach, which hindered optimal business growth. With the emergence of TRWs, schools have the advantage of ample space to provide detailed information about the positions they are recruiting for, including unlimited text and visuals, to invite applications worldwide.

Going back to the TRW discussed at the beginning, visitors can find comprehensive details about the teaching job, including expected salary, along with anecdotes that highlight the flexibility, profitability, and work-from-home nature of the position. One anecdote features a teacher from a small village in the United Kingdom who works for four hours a day. It claims that she starts working after sending her two children to school and earns \$500 per month. Scrolling further down the page, a flowchart of the hiring process is provided, starting with filling out an application form accessible through a link.

It is undeniable that TRWs play a crucial role in the recruitment of teachers and in meeting the demands of the growing market. These websites have evidently become powerful tools that contribute to the growth of OESs and the POLE industry as a whole.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Selection criteria and data collection

Locating OESs is a relatively easy task, owing to their utilization of easily searchable TRWs primarily designed to entice applicants and streamline the application process. As each site reflects the hiring policies of the hosting school, it encompasses abundant online discussions that shape the perception of the POLE-ELT profession and industry.

The selection process for the data corpus began with an initial Google search conducted in August 2021 to identify the primary Asian countries where one-to-one OESs operated. Asia was selected as the geographical focus of the study in the hope to draw significant comparisons with the findings of notable studies that also focused on this context (i.e., Kirkpatrick et al., 2013; Mahboob & Golden, 2013; Ruecker & Ives, 2015). Using the search term 'online English schools in Asia,' the results primarily yielded blog posts compiling lists of schools catering to specific countries (e.g., '12 Places to Teach English Online to Chinese Students') or regions (e.g., 'Teaching English Online to Students in East Asia') in the continent. After going through numerous pages of the results, the author identified six countries: China (including Hong Kong), Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam. With the exception of Hong Kong where English is a second language, it is notable that English is used as a foreign language in the aforementioned countries, a noteworthy factor considering that native-speakerism is more frequently observed in these contexts (Canagarajah, 1999).

From September to October 2021, an extensive search was conducted with a Google search using English keywords commonly used by individuals seeking POLE-ELT jobs, such as 'online ESL/EFL jobs in [country].' In addition to TRWs appearing in the search results, other OESs mentioned in sponsored links, blogs, YouTube videos, and third-party job repositories were also explored, with their respective TRWs sought out by using their names. Each TRW was carefully examined and evaluated based on the following criteria adapted from Ruecker and Ives (2015) for inclusion in the analysis:

1. The TRW was written in English, indicating its purpose for jobseekers.
2. The page was either an official TRW or a recruitment section within an OES website, specifically offering one-to-one English teaching services. Only schools providing exclusively one-to-one lessons were considered, as hiring requirements and salary structures may differ based on the number of students per lesson.
3. The TRW recruited teachers for an online school operating in any of the countries listed above.

A total of 31 TRWs met the criteria. In May 2023, the selection was updated due to China's Ministry of Education implementing the 'double reduction' policy in 2021, which regulated offline and online private tutoring services, leading to the closure of numerous POLE-ELT providers (Ministry of Education, 2021). Upon review, three of the 31 TRWs became inaccessible and were consequently excluded from the data sources. However, four new TRWs were discovered and added, bringing the total number of websites analyzed to 32 (see Table 1). Out of these, 24 were independent websites specifically designed for jobseekers, while the remaining eight were recruitment sections integrated into schools' client-oriented websites. Notably, the majority of TRWs belonged to schools in China and Japan, and four operated in multiple countries. The TRWs varied in size, consisting of one to 21 web pages, each providing a different amount and breadth of information.

While the author acknowledges that websites use both text and visuals to communicate and convey their message (Ruecker & Ives, 2015), only textual data pertaining to two topoi (Wodak & Meyer, 2009), namely criteria used for hiring teachers and compensation packages, were gathered. The focus on textual data is attributed to the precision and clarity that it provides, allowing for the explicit articulation of policies, requirements, and specific terms. Meanwhile, the focus on these two topoi, or themes, is based on the notion that they are the primary factors emphasized by recruiters and sought by jobseekers during the recruitment process. Each TRW was thoroughly examined for 30–60 minutes, covering all sections. Notably, the most relevant information was often found on the homepage, FAQs section, and the 'Career' page.

## 2.2. Analysis

This work understands that when jobseekers engage with the contents of TRWs, they unknowingly construct their knowledge and shape their perception of the online teaching profession. Therefore, building upon Ruecker and Ives (2015) and aligning with the study's aim to explore how discourses within TRWs shape the POLE-ELT field, critical discourse analysis (CDA) was employed. As an analytical approach, CDA aims to deconstruct, expose, and challenge discourses that promote social inequality and create and maintain power dynamics (van Dijk, 2018).

The analysis commenced with the reorganization of the gathered data into a comprehensive analytical matrix (see online Supplementary Appendix A), aimed at facilitating the comparison of information and the identification of prevailing trends. Based on the trends, a coding list for the two themes was created, and a coding scheme was established. In this scheme, numerical codes were assigned to categories within each theme (see online Supplementary Appendix B). The coding process was performed manually and independently by the author and two experienced coders invited to ensure coding reliability. Subsequently, they convened through a video-conferencing tool to compare and finalize the codes.

In presenting the findings, both frequency counts and excerpts from the TRWs were employed. Nonetheless, the names of the hosting schools were anonymized, and direct quotations were used sparingly to adhere to ethical considerations in research involving publicly accessible internet data.

## 2.3. Researcher positionality

With ten years of experience as an online English teacher, the author offers a unique perspective to the research. While he had previously applied to one of the schools examined but was not selected, he is not currently affiliated with any of the OESs in question. His background in POLE-ELT provides valuable insights into the industry's nuances, while his prior application experience informs his understanding of the recruitment process from the perspective of a jobseeker. This amalgamation of experience as an educator and a former applicant shapes the researcher's approach, emphasizing transparency and reflexivity. Furthermore, he acknowledges that both his unsatisfactory experience working for an Asian OES a decade ago and his largely favorable experience with a European school, neither of which are included in this study, might result in unintentional potential biases. Nevertheless, his commitment to impartiality and rigorous analysis remains paramount.

**Table 1.** Teacher recruitment websites managed by online English schools

TRW code	Type	No. of pages	Country/ies of operation
TRW1	Section	1	Japan
TRW2	Website	1	China
TRW3	Website	4	China
TRW4	Section	4	China
TRW5	Website	5	China
TRW6	Website	5	China
TRW7	Website	16	China
TRW8	Website	3	China
TRW9	Website	3	Vietnam
TRW10	Website	6	Thailand
TRW11	Website	5	Japan
TRW12	Website	8	Japan
TRW13	Website	6	Japan
TRW14	Website	8	Japan, Taiwan
TRW15	Website	21	Japan
TRW16	Website	6	China
TRW17	Section	1	Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea
TRW18	Website	5	China
TRW19	Website	4	South Korea
TRW20	Website	6	Vietnam
TRW21	Website	6	Japan
TRW22	Website	18	Japan
TRW23	Section	1	Japan
TRW24	Website	2	Japan
TRW25	Website	6	Japan
TRW26	Section	1	Japan
TRW27	Website	7	China
TRW28	Website	5	China
TRW29	Website	6	Taiwan, China
TRW30	Section	1	South Korea
TRW31	Website	2	China
TRW32	Section	1	China, South Korea

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. Theme 1: Teacher qualifications

A total of 13 websites (see online Supplementary Table S2) mentioned ‘native speaker’ in their listings, typically defined in the post as individuals ‘born or raised’ in or holding a passport from English-dominant countries, a finding consistent with Ruecker and Ives’ study (2015). However, unlike

previous studies finding the majority of job advertisements required the applicants to be L1 users (e.g., Mahboob & Golden, 2013), only five TRWs strictly hired ‘native’ applicants. The remaining eight likewise mentioned ‘native speaker’ in their list of qualifications, but they also accepted ‘non-native’ or ‘near-native’ applicants. Nevertheless, they asked the latter for additional requirements and subjected them to a longer hiring process, giving the former a significant advantage. For instance, TRW30 required applicants from the Philippines, labeled as ‘non-native’ applicants, to have ‘at least 3 years of teaching experience’ and ‘experience in teaching IELTS speaking classes,’ while not demanding the same from their ‘native’ candidates. Meanwhile, TRW27 outlined a five-step hiring process for American and Canadian applicants, while Filipino candidates faced two additional stages: an English test and a mock lesson.

Many TRWs that did not explicitly mention ‘native/non-native’ in their list of requirements indicated their preference for Filipino applicants with a high English proficiency level expressed through various descriptions, such as ‘excellent speaker’ and ‘fluent in both oral and written English.’ Candidates must also possess a ‘neutral,’ ‘excellent, standard American’ accent, along with ‘clean and standard’ pronunciation. To evaluate these criteria, candidates were typically asked to submit a self-introduction video or undergo assessment through a grammar test or a one-to-one speaking examination. These linguistic factors hold great importance for schools relying on Filipino teachers, not only to ensure teacher competitiveness but also to maintain a profitable business model that capitalizes on affordable teaching workforce with favorable and marketable language skills. While English is an official language in the Philippines and considered a mother tongue by certain groups (Martin, 2020), its usage varies across the country and occupies unequal positions (Tupas, 2019). However, the general population is reputed to be among the most proficient L2 speakers of English (Bolton, 2008), with a variety that closely resembles American English. The preference for Filipino teachers solidifies their position, albeit in a subordinate role (Panaligan & Curran, 2022), in the global English teaching market; however, it excludes others, such as those from India and Singapore, from similar opportunities.

Often connected to linguistic requirements, nationality is another criterion specified in 15 TRWs, with seven of them indicating certain nationalities or countries of origin to refer to their target ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ applicants. Unsurprisingly, nationals from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, and South Africa were sought by ten OESs, of which seven schools identified them as ‘native.’ On the other hand, only Philippine nationals were hired by nine schools, which labelled them as ‘non-native’ applicants. Interestingly, TRW23 also employed ‘Japanese bilingual tutors’ that were in the same classification as ‘native tutors.’

Despite the borderless nature of the online teaching job being recruited for, 11 TRWs required applicants to currently reside in specific countries: seven schools accepted applications only from residents in the Philippines, one from residents in Japan, and three from residents in the United States and Canada. TRW12 explained that they only hired Philippines residents ‘due to legal complications’ that could emerge owing to the varying laws in different countries. One such ‘complication’ could be the salary, as the country’s minimum daily wage ranges between \$5.7 to \$10,<sup>3</sup> depending on the location (National Wages and Productivity Commission, 2022). This approach aligns with the school’s low-cost brand and helps them manage their operational costs effectively by paying an amount within what is mandated by Philippine laws. Meanwhile, TRW7 only hired applicants who were ‘legally eligible to work in the U.S. or Canada,’ including ‘those with a degree from outside these countries,’ suggesting that even individuals from other countries may apply if they meet the employment eligibility requirement. Doing so helps TRW7 uphold its brand image as providers of English education provided exclusively by teachers from North America.

Based on the aforementioned criteria so far, it is apparent that OESs in the region can be categorized into three groups:

1. CATEGORY 1 (Cat1) exclusively hires L1 users: individuals who were born, raised, and are citizens and/or residents of countries where English is the most dominant language, namely the United

States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, and South Africa. Ten schools, TRW1–TRW10 in [Table 1](#), belong to this category.

2. CATEGORY 2 (Cat2) consists of schools that only employ highly proficient teachers from or residing in countries other than those specified above, particularly the Philippines, which has long been recognized as an affordable English learning destination (Yeh, 2019). Ten schools, TRW11–TRW20, fall into this group.
3. CATEGORY 3 (Cat3) encompasses schools that accept both ‘native’ and ‘non-native’ candidates and may openly distinguish between them using these labels. Applicants are typically subjected to different sets of requirements and hiring processes, with ‘non-native’ candidates often having to provide more evidence of their language and teaching skills. Twelve schools, TRW 21–TRW32, are classified under this category.

The TRWs have so far shown their preference for L1 and/or Filipino/LX applicants as core elements in their business model, potentially prejudicing non-specified groups. Other recruitment criteria are discussed in the subsequent paragraphs with reference to these categories to illustrate their roles within each group.

In addition to sociolinguistic factors, professional criteria were either required or marked as an ‘advantage.’ First, a bachelor’s degree, often defined as a four-year university diploma, in any field was a requisite in 15 schools: six in Cat1, four in Cat2, and five in Cat3. There were indications in the TRWs’ FAQs pages that these OESs strictly enforced this policy. For example, TRW7 asked applicants to submit proof of their degree for verification. While none of these websites provided specific rationale for strictly requiring a degree from applicants, it can be assumed that the schools recognized the value of this criterion in ensuring the quality of their teachers and maintaining their reputation within the industry as institutions that hire only credentialed applicants. Meanwhile, 16 TRWs made no mention of a degree in their requirements, while one considered it ‘an advantage.’ Overall, unlike the hiring practices for classroom roles, it is notable that being an L1 user does not invariably ensure employment in most Cat1 and Cat3 schools, as one also needs to have a bachelor’s degree. Conversely, a non-credentialed Filipino applicant may have a good chance of securing a job in most Cat2 schools.

Another professional criterion, a teaching license or certification – such as TESOL, Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA), or Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) – typically obtainable through a 120-hour training program, was mandated by only six Cat1 and three Cat3 schools. None from Cat2 mentioned this requirement, besides two TRWs that labelled it as ‘an asset,’ which may suggest that professionalism does not hold a central role in the hiring processes of these schools. However, three Cat2 schools that did not require this criterion noted their commitment to offering new employees free TESOL training as part of their onboarding program and as an incentive.

Lastly, eight TRWs (four Cat1, one Cat2, and three Cat3) explicitly demanded 1–3 years of offline or online ELT experience, while ten considered it advantageous. Additionally, two websites categorically said that it was ‘not required.’ Providing a rationale for not requiring this criterion, TRW21 – a Cat3 school predominantly hiring Filipino applicants – explained that several of their top-performing teachers began with minimal or no teaching experience and that attributes like ‘passion and a strong work ethic are far more important than teaching experience.’

Accordingly, 12 schools across three categories placed emphasis on various personality traits as requirements, with ‘patience,’ ‘passion for teaching,’ and ‘punctuality’ being the most commonly listed, aligning with previous studies (Alshammari, 2020; Ruecker & Ives, 2015). Although merely less than half of the OESs required it, it is important for TRWs to highlight desirable qualities during the hiring stage as schools can risk losing customers to competitors if their teachers do not demonstrate professionalism and enthusiasm. Additionally, teachers are expected to keep learners engaged, which can be particularly challenging in an online setting. TRW2’s description of their ideal applicant summarizes



this well: ‘We are searching for joyful, optimistic, and eager teachers who are willing to confront the challenges of teaching English as a second language to young students.’

Finally, 14 schools – almost equally representing the three categories – required applicants to agree to work during ‘peak hours’ when most students are available, typically from 4:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. to 12:00 midnight on weekdays and throughout the day on weekends, and/or commit to the minimum working hours, which is anywhere from 3–40 hours per week. Setting these conditions is crucial as the need for teachers is usually high during earlier and later hours since the primary customer base is likely to be students and professionals who are busy during the day. To underscore the importance of this criterion, TRWs strategically employ sentence fragments in a concise and straightforward manner, as seen in these quotes from TRW2: ‘Minimum working hours: 3 days per week’ and TRW17: ‘Can commit at least 2 months of work with us.’

### 3.2. Theme 2: Salary and other benefits

Given the intense competition among online schools for teacher recruitment, their TRWs are strategically designed to attract potential candidates through various ways, including providing information about salary and other benefits. Most of the websites displayed the amount they were offering to pay teachers per successful lesson, which typically lasted either 25 or 50 minutes (see online Supplementary Table S3). Although they did not specify the exact per-lesson rates, three TRWs disclosed the potential monthly earnings of their ‘top-performing teachers.’ In general, the salary rates provided in the TRWs showed prejudice against LX teachers, as the figures differed but remained generally consistent within schools of the same category. The rates are discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs, categorized accordingly. In order to provide a clear and consistent comparison, the figures originally stated in Japanese yen (¥) and Philippine peso were converted to U.S. dollars using the following conversion rates: \$1 = ¥140/₱50. Furthermore, to facilitate a standardized discussion of rates, the salary rates for 25-minute lessons have been multiplied by two to reflect rates per 50 minutes.

Cat1 exhibits the highest level of transparency regarding compensation, with eight out of the ten schools disclosing their base salary rates, which ranged from \$10.7 to \$22. On average, Cat1 OESs pay \$15.20 per hour, the highest rate among the categories and within the global hourly wage average of \$14 to \$23 (Deady, 2020). One of these schools owns TRW3, which offered the highest minimum rate of \$22. It is notable that this Chinese institution recruited only individuals from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom and required teaching certification and experience from applicants.

On the contrary, only four out of the ten Cat2 TRWs provided information about their rates, which ranged from \$2.2 to \$6, with an average of \$3.85. This is a significantly lower amount than the rates offered by the two other categories. When considering other criteria, three of the schools required only a bachelor’s degree, while the one offering the lowest rate of \$2.2 did not ask for this or any other professional credentials. Thus, it is likely that these schools target undergraduate students or recent graduates who are not necessarily experienced, in order to justify the meager salary being advertised.

Additionally, three Cat2 TRWs did not specify the hourly pay but mentioned that their teachers could earn between \$1,200 and \$2,000 per month. Whether a teacher reaches these amounts depends on their individual effort and dedication. In other words, teachers are expected to work hard to achieve the mentioned earning potential. This sentiment is well captured in TRW20, which said its top teachers were earning \$2,000 monthly: ‘The more slots the teacher opens, the more chances of getting booked. The better the teacher performs every lesson, the more bookings he/she will have.’ If this figure holds true, it means that the school’s highest paid teacher, working 8 hours daily for 22 days, is paid \$11.36 per lesson. However, whether a Cat2 school pays that amount per lesson or not is a question worth considering.

Lastly, among the 12 Cat3 schools, eight provided detailed compensation information, spanning from as low as \$2.8 to as high as \$23 per hour. Most of these schools indicated a consistent base rate for teachers regardless of their background. For example, TRW21, a school predominantly

employing Filipino teachers, specified a fixed starting salary of \$2.8, extending the same amount even to experienced and L1 teachers. However, the presence of L1 teachers in the school remains unclear as the rate implies a lack of competitive compensation to attract foreign teachers. Conversely, some OESs adopted a more flexible and equitable approach in determining salary rates. For instance, TRW31 indicated that a teacher's hourly rate, ranging from \$8 to \$22, would be determined in consideration of their 'experiences and demo performance.'

Meanwhile, two Cat3 schools explicitly showed in their TRWs that L1 teachers were paid more than LX teachers. Specifically, TRW23 categorized its teachers into three groups: 'native tutors,' 'Japanese bilingual tutors,' and 'Filipino tutors/Non-native tutors.' The page stated that the first two groups were paid \$10.80, while Filipino teachers received \$3. This policy likely aligns with labor laws in Japan, which mandate competitive hourly rates for residents, assuming these teachers also reside in the country. Another possibility is that Japanese teachers were compensated as much as 'native teachers' due to the perceived difficulty of teaching beginning learners using their mother tongue. However, if this was the case, it remains unclear whether Filipino teachers proficient in Japanese were eligible for similar compensation. This stark, blatantly displayed wage disparity, also observed in TRW32, serves as a testament to the existence of race- and country-based discriminatory practices within the POLE-ELT industry.

Another strategy employed by the websites to attract applicants is the provision of a range of financial rewards in addition to their base rates. Twelve schools provided bonuses for each successful lesson or upon meeting specific performance targets at the end of the month or year. At least three of them also promised a bonus for teachers whose referrals get hired, indicating their constant need of teachers. Moreover, four others mentioned the potential for teachers to receive rate increases or promotion as they gained more experience and tenure with the school, demonstrating the schools' intention to foster a sense of long-term commitment with them. However, it is important to note that the responsibility for achieving these rewards lies solely with the teachers themselves. An example from TRW28 exemplifies this concept, stating, 'Teachers are progressively rewarded as they achieve greater tenure. At certain milestones in tenure, you will earn a higher guaranteed bonus per session. You will also raise the rate further each month by teaching more sessions.'

Prominently featured by the majority of websites, non-monetary benefits associated with online teaching serve as a pivotal strategy to attract applicants. Many of these TRWs belong to schools with flexible availability requirements for teacher hiring. These platforms underline the autonomy granted to teachers in managing their schedules and selecting their work locations. For instance, TRW23 affirmed, 'You can do this job from the comfort of your home ... and you can schedule your lessons very flexibly.' Furthermore, certain websites accentuate the convenience of the online teaching role, contrasting it with the challenges and discomforts of traditional work settings. TRW18 promised 'work-life balance' and playfully declared 'No more traffic jams!' alluding to the notorious congestion in Philippine megacities, while TRW17 reassured that teachers need not prepare teaching materials as they are 'ALL' provided by the school.

Finally, at least three schools offered prospects of professional growth and sponsor TESOL certification packages upon hiring, with the intent of enticing even those who lack experience or credentials to apply. For instance, TRW14 presented 'perks and benefits' that include the opportunity to 'learn how to teach ESL the right way' from 'the experts.' Other interesting incentives include a free Japanese language course and the chance to attend regular school gatherings and outings; an attempt to show that despite the virtual nature of the job, there are opportunities for fun and socialization with colleagues and management.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings show that teacher recruitment for POLE-ELT is largely based on nationality and country of residence, with 24 of the 32 TRWs requiring either or both criteria. Unfortunately, the number of eligible countries is limited, with just seven English-majority nations and the Philippines, effectively

excluding applicants from other locations at the initial stage. TRWs use these two factors in enforcing their often implicit but also sometimes explicit employment policies. Nevertheless, it is also worth noting that 18 TRWs ask for one, two, or all of these professional factors: a university degree, an English teaching certificate, and ELT experience, not to mention those that do not require them but consider them valuable. These findings indicate that while POLE-ELT providers may have been replicating some discriminatory recruitment policies observed in traditional ELT institutions, the majority recognizes the importance of professional background in ensuring an effective teaching and learning process.

The TRWs also demonstrate that the hiring school's business model and customer base can be inferred according to the types of teachers being recruited, and thus dictate the characteristics necessary for an 'ideal' applicant. For example, Cat1 OESs primarily target high-income customers, as evidenced by their preference for hiring L1 teachers with professional qualifications and experience. This market segment often believes that the high price of lessons is justified because their teachers are L1 users and professionals. Conversely, Cat2 schools offer cost-effective lessons and focus on budget-conscious customers who may not prioritize their teachers' linguistic or professional backgrounds. This is evident in their recruitment of Filipino teachers, who typically only need to demonstrate high English proficiency and a 'neutral' accent and pronunciation. The target customer base of Cat3 institutions appears to be more diverse. While some OESs focus on providing a wide range of teacher options without specific classifications, others categorize and assign different values to teachers to cater to customers with varying budgets. These institutions hire both L1 and LX applicants, but often subject the latter to a longer and more rigorous recruitment process.

These findings exemplify how POLE-ELT is both a product of and a tool that contributes to the neoliberal ideology, wherein language skills are commodified, sold, and consumed in accordance with market forces (Duchêne & Heller, 2011). The alignment of teacher attributes with market demand highlights how ELT has transformed into a commodified service within the global online education marketplace (Simpson, 2020). That is, Cat1's emphasis on L1 teachers capitalizes on customers' perception that there is prestige and exclusivity in learning from L1 teachers (Comprendio & Savski, 2020), whose perceived authenticity as English speakers can enable them to develop their own valuable and marketable language skills. On the other hand, the exclusive employment of Filipino teachers by Cat2 schools illustrates how language education is influenced by economic considerations (Lorente & Tupas, 2013). Meanwhile, Cat3 institutions' differential treatment of L1 and LX applicants further mirrors the dynamics of the neoliberal market, where diverse teacher options are offered but subjected to varying recruitment standards and, at times, 'sold' at different prices.

As a consequence of neoliberal education policies, POLE-ELT providers operate with minimal regulation (Kozar, 2015), creating opportunities for both L1 and Filipino/LX teachers to work online. This is evident from the nearly equal distribution of schools across the three categories. However, the presence of multiple types of OESs offering the same services has contributed to the perpetuation of social inequalities and stereotypes, notably demonstrated by a substantial compensation discrepancy, with 'native' teachers consistently receiving higher rates. In this light, this categorization can be viewed as a hierarchical ranking, where schools with higher lesson rates hold greater prestige and enjoy a better reputation while their teachers are highly regarded and in demand among wealthier customers, resulting in higher salaries. Conversely, schools lower in the hierarchy tend to hire mainly Filipino teachers, who receive significantly lower rates and cater to less affluent students. The concept of hierarchization is similarly extended to teachers within schools such as those of TRW23 and TRW32, wherein 'native' teachers are positioned as premium offerings, while 'non-native' or 'global' teachers are presented as the more affordable alternatives.

The finding that the highest-paying schools and positions are predominantly reserved for L1 teachers is not new, but while current research attributes this largely to native-speakerism, the same cannot be said in the POLE-ELT context. The analysis shows that the high salaries offered by eight Cat1 schools can be justified by their demand for educational qualification, teaching certification, and experience. This is also evident in a few Cat3 schools, where all teachers are paid equally or in accordance with their professional background. Professionalism, in addition to perceived linguistic

competence, is valued and incentivized by schools and customers, leading to higher remunerations. In contrast, these professional criteria are not often required by schools exclusively hiring Filipino teachers, who may have less remarkable professional backgrounds and perceived English expertise, thereby providing a rationale for their considerably lower salaries.

## 5. Conclusion

If the question ‘Is private online English teaching for all?’ is asked, a quick answer can be found immediately in the opening paragraph of this article. That is, at least in the countries included in this study, POLE-ELT jobs are often limited to citizens and residents of at least eight countries, provided that they meet the required professional and personal criteria and agree to work at specified schedules and frequencies. Those not from or in these countries, even if they meet all other criteria, can theoretically apply to only three of the 32 OESs whose TRWs were analyzed. In other words, the benefits of flexible, convenient, and relatively comfortable working conditions offered by this web-based industry are not for everyone to enjoy.

Related to answering the question is the aim to determine the impact of native-speakerism in the employment practices of POLE-ELT providers. Findings indicate the prevalence of prejudicial practices in most TRWs, which operate within the old notions of the L1-LX divide to varying degrees depending on the schools’ business model/category. Since TRWs are expected to remain in use as long as schools are in operation, they will continually facilitate easy access and widespread dissemination of these constructs, resulting in their enduring influence in the POLE-ELT industry. Nonetheless, it is encouraging to note the presence of a few more reputable OESs that prioritize relevant qualifications and set a rate for teachers based on these criteria, regardless of sociolinguistic background. Their emphasis on professional expertise, despite the non-credit nature of POLE-ELT, marks an improvement from the discriminatory employment practices documented in the region just about a decade ago (see Kirkpatrick et al., 2013; Ruecker & Ives, 2015).

To contribute to this development, this study has practical implications that can benefit POLE-ELT providers and professionals. First, since OESs are in constant need of effective teachers to meet the growing demand of their customers, evidenced by their willingness to pay for ‘referral bonuses,’ they may benefit more from removing linguistic labels, nationality, and residence from their list of requirements. This will allow the available pool of competent, experienced, and passionate teachers from beyond Anglophone countries not only to fill in numerous open positions but also to make the selection process more competitive. It follows that OESs should also refrain from categorizing teachers based on sociolinguistic factors, which can empower learners to select educators based on individual needs and preferences. This can be facilitated by providing teachers’ photographs, locations, professional qualifications, certifications, and teaching experiences on the websites, along with a video or audio introduction to allow customers to gauge their voice, pronunciation, and personality.

Moreover, it is advantageous for OESs to prioritize professionalization within the field by establishing academic qualifications and experience as mandatory requirements. When the teaching force is composed of only credentialed and competent individuals, the reputation of the school may increase, leading to more satisfied and successful learners. Furthermore, it may be unfair and detrimental to paying customers if their teachers are proficient in English but lack fundamental indicators of pedagogical expertise upon hiring, such as the majority of the Cat2 schools. This approach is no different, or perhaps even less acceptable, than the highly criticized hiring of teachers solely because they are L1 users. This study understands that OESs’ teacher preferences are based on their customer bases’ financial capabilities. Given the expanding market, schools may find more growth opportunities by offering their services to various market segments at different price ranges. Nonetheless, lesson pricing, as well as teachers’ salaries, should be based on a teacher’s professional background and other performance indicators, not on sociolinguistic factors.

Current and aspiring online English teachers must realize that they have the power to rectify unfair practices in POLE-ELT. In order to do this, it is suggested that they acquire advanced linguistic skills,

qualifications, teaching certifications, and experience and seek employment in OESs that value these factors and promote equitable employment opportunities. This study finds that there exist a few Cat3 schools adopting fair compensation practices, either paying teachers equally or according to their professional backgrounds, although their hiring standards still appear to favor L1 applicants.

Additionally, applicants must be capable of recognizing red flags when visiting TRWs. For example, they should not apply to a school if their TRW shows indications of categorizing teachers according to their linguistic background or location. Moreover, they should think twice when a TRW shows very high potential monthly incomes but does not reveal its hourly rates; in most cases, the chances of gaining such figures are low. They should also carefully consider if they are willing to work during specific periods and for a certain number of hours, as this may compromise their quality of life and health. If qualified teachers, especially LX users from unspecified countries, cannot find employment among Asian OESs, they may expand their search for more favorable schools operating in other regions of the world, especially in Europe, where the industry is highly popular (Domingo, 2024; Kozar, 2015).

There are several important limitations to consider in this study. First, the analysis focused solely on 32 OESs that provide one-to-one lessons to customers in East and Southeast Asia. This limited sample does not encompass the entire spectrum of POLE-ELT providers, such as freelance teachers and platforms offering group lessons, nor does it include providers operating in other regions. Future research should aim to explore a wider range of providers and geographic locations, as well as POLE providers of other languages, to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Second, this study primarily examined the textual elements found in TRWs. Future studies could benefit from the analysis of visual and audio elements, such as pictures, videos, and audio recordings. These additional components may contribute to a more nuanced portrayal of the recruitment and marketing strategies employed by TRWs. Lastly, it is important to note that this study focused on the analysis of recruitment discourses on TRWs. While these discourses provide insights into the schools' policies as expressed in writing, there may be additional considerations and processes involved in the actual recruitment and working procedures. It is then recommended that future research involves the participation of human resource managers, applicants, and teachers to obtain firsthand experiences and perspectives, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of these processes from multiple viewpoints. These suggestions are not intended to provide more answers to what makes an 'ideal' online English teacher. Rather, they are meant to shift the focus to identifying the characteristics of an 'ideal' employee, a discussion warranted in this era of digitalization, multilingualism, and neoliberalism in education.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The author acknowledges that the terms referring to language users as 'native' or 'non-native' are ideological constructions (Holliday, 2005); thus, they are written, where necessary, with inverted commas. However, they appear enclosed in double quotation marks in sections where they are quoted from other sources.

<sup>2</sup> From this point forward, L1/LX will be used in place of 'native'/'non-native' in solidarity with the advocacy of eradicating the old derogatory terms.

<sup>3</sup> Converted from original figures in Philippine peso (₱) using the conversion rate ₱50 = \$1.

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