

Ageism: A Barrier to Plans to Boost Fluency in English?

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Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm 64? (Beatles song)

In a number of East Asian countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, Korea, and across much of the Arab world, there is a discriminatory impediment to improving the quality of English teaching that should be addressed: ageism in work permit laws. Ageism, best defined as “systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old” (Templer, 2002, 2003) is common in many countries. Ageism in employment involves setting arbitrary mandatory age limits for employees, such as teachers or civil servants, or practicing discrimination, often hidden, in hiring or retaining employees even in their 40s and 50s. It may be especially insidious directed against older women. A survey by the author of EFL job openings posted in Thailand in March 2004 indicates that some ads specify that candidates over a set age (often 45, sometimes 30, in one case 58) need not apply. Clearly, some of this is overt ageism.

“IRON CEILING”?

In Thailand, highly experienced and qualified teachers of English from abroad who have reached the age of 60 normally cannot be hired by a state educational institution. Why not? The barrier: a mandatory age maximum of

60 laid down in regulations for obtaining a work permit for a foreign national, in effect a kind of “iron ceiling” on non-Thai teaching staff (under special circumstances, exceptions can be granted to age 65). That is also true in Saudi Arabia (ceiling at 55) and several other states on the Gulf very actively recruiting expatriate staff, and today with far fewer interested qualified applicants due to the international situation. In Japan, over 91 percent of all enterprises have mandatory retirement ages set at 60, though many workers stay on in the labor force at a huge pay cut (Yoshizawa, 2002). Some Japanese universities have set retirement age at 70 (Seiwa College near Osaka), others at 65, even 62, depending on institution, since there is no national retirement law. Retirement age in South Korea is normally 60, though slated to be raised. In Malaysia, highly qualified ex-pat teachers cannot be retained past their 65th birthday.

OPEN THE DOORS TO SENIOR TESOLERS

Premier Thaksin Shinawatra’s government in Bangkok is now drawing up pragmatic, wide-ranging plans to boost English language skill levels across the country. A senior Ministry of Education official recently said that “if the country does not overhaul the teaching of English, it could lose its competitive edge internationally” (Thaksin Pushes for Thais to Speak English, 2003). The Ministry generally recognizes that many English teachers in the nation’s schools require in-service training to upgrade their skills. Addressing that task will necessitate inventive, low-cost alternatives.

Let me suggest a modest practicable proposal: countries in Asia with shortages in TEFL staff should strike out on a fresh path, opening doors for the recruitment of experienced teachers from abroad who are near or beyond the age of retirement. Such seasoned experts, their ranks growing in the international EFL profession, generally have savings, perhaps a pension.

THAILAND: A CASE IN POINT

There are a number of senior TESOLers from abroad who would probably be eager to work at a local Thai lecturer's salary in a challenging new teaching environment. No doubt numerous schools, colleges and firms would be pleased to hire older ex-patriate professionals, who might be interested in staying on longer-term, for specific openings. Their unique know-how could be a shot in the linguistic arm for Thai education, strengthening existing English departments, especially outside the capital. Attached to the Rajabhat Institutes, the backbone of Thai regional tertiary education, for example, they could serve as mentors for younger staff members, or as facilitators in training modules or weekend seminars for EFL teachers in the schools. These 41 institutes are sorely in need of foreign EFL teachers well-grounded in phonetics, syntax, applied English linguistics and cultural studies. Other experienced hands could be assigned to programs inside the Education Ministry, on direct contract for EFL supervision and innovation, including new initiatives for education in hill-tribe schools. The 70 international schools now operating in the country could actively seek older retired staff from abroad. In a related vein, Thai industry and academe could use more highly skilled, low-cost language editors with native fluency and proven expertise in vetting and rewriting texts in academic, technical and general English.

That need is doubly heightened by the fact that the Thai Department of Export Promotion (DEP) in the Ministry of Commerce has launched a fresh, longer-term initiative to promote international education in the country, hoping to gear the nation towards becoming an "education hub" for the Greater Mekong Sub Region and Southeast Asia. The aim is both to attract international students and encourage Thai students to continue their education at home, perhaps even in the English medium (there are some 8000 Thai students studying abroad). For the past two years, the DEP has been extolling the benefits of studying in Thailand to neighbors including Vietnam, Myanmar, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Korea. "We can raise the

country's revenue from the foreign students and maintain a large sum of money invested by Thai parents who want to have their children educated to an international standard within Thailand," said Pimpaparn Chansilpa, deputy director-general of the DEP. "Our job is to do the marketing, introducing Thailand's education to prospective customers and raising the number of foreign students. But it is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and local education institutes to improve the education standard and quality" (Schooling as a Commodity, 2004).

Moreover, at the university level, expert staff from abroad is in short supply across a number of disciplines. Chinda Tejavaniya, director of the International College at Sripatum University has noted:

While the international schools business is quite established, the international programmes in tertiary education are only at the infancy stage. There are already many of them, but their quality is in doubt. Many programmes that claim to be international programmes are actually not. They are really just programmes offered in English (Schooling as a Commodity, 2004).

Chinda stressed that an international program needed an international curriculum and international faculty members. There are now 43 universities and colleges in the country offering 520 different international programs at undergraduate and graduate level.

In Thailand in particular, turnover in the ELT teaching ranks is high, an EFL "backpackerism," as tourists decide to reinvent themselves as "instant" instructors and join the burgeoning "English language industry." That spiraling problem is well recognized in ThaiTESOL. And in the government: Chinda noted that

not every native speaker can teach English. You need those with degrees in TESOL or TEFL to teach English. ... We're afraid that if the government does not do anything, the teachers, especially the good ones, would opt to work in other countries because it's too much trouble here (Schooling as a Commodity, 2004).

I would suggest that this structural deficiency in fulfilling staffing needs in EFL can be remedied in part by opening the doors to senior practitioners.

PROMOTING “AGE DIVERSITY” IN TEFL ACROSS ASIA

Unblocking the pathway for ex-patriate professionals over 60 is simple: add a new paragraph in Thai labor law—or labor legislation elsewhere—that specifically exempts “foreign experts in critical fields” from present age restrictions for work visas. This can be instituted separate from laws governing mandatory retirement of a country’s own nationals. Analogous policy in the People’s Republic of China is effective and flexible. Although the “official” age limit is 65 for foreign experts, colleges can easily obtain visas for applicants from overseas who are in their seventies, including retirees who have decided to go back to work. Their knowledge is proving a boon to the huge Chinese effort underway to improve English teaching across the nation, especially in tertiary institutions. Macao also has expatriate TESOLers of retirement age in the classroom. Wisely, Laos has no age restrictions whatsoever for foreign nationals working in the country. Nepal is likewise very flexible, as is Vietnam. In the U.S., colleges are re-employing retired scholars as full-time “mentors,” due to a shortage in the senior professorial ranks. There is also some evidence that some older Americans and Australians deciding to strike out in a new profession are choosing EFL and looking for a TEFL job in Europe or Asia. That trend, which will increase as cohorts in the baby-boomer generation in the U.S. begin to reach retirement age, should be encouraged. It is in the interest of the field and our students.

Opening the doors to senior professionals is in the democratic interest of improving teaching across the public sector in Thailand, Korea and elsewhere; it is in the spirit and ethos of the Second World Assembly on Ageing held in 2002 in Madrid (URL: <http://www.un.org/ageing>), and its regional follow-up in Shanghai. The U.S. Peace Corps has long known the benefit of integrating expert seniors in its diverse programs, as has the

organization Global Volunteers, boasting an EFL teacher in the field at 89.

In the European Union, a drive is on to eliminate mandatory retirement ages, as in most sectors in the United States, where nearly 13% of those over 65 are in paid employment and a higher percentage working regularly as “volunteers.” Gordon Lishman, director general of Age Concern, which supports scrapping retirement ages in Britain, said it was time to “revolutionise” the attitude to old-age employment: “There is no point being constrained by old-fashioned notions of fixed retirement ages. There are critical vacancies in key industries and fewer people entering the labour market. A significant number of older workers want to continue working past mandatory retirement ages imposed by employers” (Ahmed, 2002). As the slogan of the new voluntary Code of Practice on Age Diversity in Employment in the UK counsels: “Age prejudice—you’re old enough to know better.”

CREATE AN ACADEMIC VISA, AGE NO BAR

Why not institute an “academic visa” with no age restrictions, easily renewable, wherever TESOLers are needed? Thailand, for example, should prioritize age diversity in the field of English teaching and other understaffed subject areas, unbolting the door to veteran hands from abroad, whatever their chronological age. Countries elsewhere in Asia with arbitrary age restrictions in national law, such as Malaysia—or age barriers in the practices of individual institutions, as in Japan—and nations further afield like Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Oman, could also follow suit, tapping a growing reservoir of experience, talent and expertise. The profession needs to discuss these issues and press for needed change.

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