
Ageism in TEFL: Time for Concerted Action

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Ageism seems to be the last major demographic dimension of western social prejudice to have escaped significant self-reflective attention in popular media and academic discourses (Coupland, 1997, p. 44).

In social perception and everyday encounters, we all tend almost automatically to categorize other persons along three dimensions: race, sex, and age. Conscious or not, noticing these attributes drives our interactions with others. Although the social and behavioral sciences have given much attention to the stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination that arise from this in the analysis of racism and sexism, ageism—the “systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old” (Butler, 1969)—has been relatively neglected. Indeed, scholars are just beginning to scratch the complex surface of this long neglected area of prejudice research (Wilkinson and Ferraro, 2002). Yet age bias, often unconscious or implicit, remains “one of the most socially condoned and institutionalized forms of prejudice in the world—especially in the United States—today” (Nelson, 2002a, p. ix). It frequently goes unchallenged and even unnoticed in many societies, may be reinforced by the media and can lead to various forms of overt and subtle discriminatory practices. McCann and Giles (2002, p. 188) conclude: “It is beyond question that ageism plays a particularly pernicious role in the workplace,” where older workers are “the targets of ageist attitudes, ageist communication, and age discrimination.”

The rapidly expanding global profession of TESOL, uniquely international in its spread, is not immune to ageism, especially in emerging patterns of hiring and employment practices in diverse areas of the planet. This paper seeks to spark reflection and dialogue by spotlighting and exploring some of ageism’s distinctive manifestations in the ESL profession and beyond, suggesting a blueprint for action to uncover and reduce it in our workplaces. Moreover, the discussion and analysis of ageism in the English-speaking countries and within the diverse societies where we work—and the related problem of negative attitudes and patronizing or authoritarian behavior toward the *young* based solely on their age, termed “adulthoodism”—should, I argue below, become part of the array of topics we deal with in our ESL classrooms

and syllabi. We need to encourage critical examination of the representation and “imaging” of age in films, the entertainment media and TV, literature, and society.

Five Pillars of Ageism in TEFL

Occupational Hazards

TEFL is especially susceptible to the abuses of ageism in the workplace. Its distinctive political economy of diverse job settings across the globe—coupled with low job security and high mobility by teachers—opens the doors to the effects of “cultures of age bias” in numerous national locales. Despite the planet-wide boom in the profession, ever more expatriate TESOLers in their late-40s and upwards who try to extend contracts or (re)enter the job market run up against prejudicial practices in recruitment and contracting: age and experience are disvalued, connected with an unspoken maxim that “more is less.” In many corners of the international job market, EFL job-hunting at age 50 or 55 can often be a daunting task, qualifications notwithstanding. Once you reach 60 you may find your job applications go unanswered, as hiring practices in the field convey the message you are “ready for the scrap heap,” “fading fast” or “best left to rest on the shelf.”¹

The Youthquake and EFL

The global spread of English is closely interwoven with consumerist youth culture and the special value of youthfulness permeating many of the societies and institutions where we work—and the attitudes of our students and superiors in the workplace. This may drive a pattern of preference for “enthusiastic, young” EFL teachers wherever available, whatever their combination of experience or its lack. Those in charge of hiring, especially at private schools, often believe that learners under the age of 30 want teachers under the age of 30, especially from abroad. This phenomenon is reflected in part in the mounting flood of barely qualified native-speaker teachers along TESOL’s Pacific Rim and in Southeast Asia, whose “dynamism” may be one of their chief qualifications. Moreover, a number of the older practitioners in TESOL have been trained in linguistics, foreign languages and other fields, and entered TEFL at a time when there were far fewer specific degree and diploma programs. As a result, they may have extensive experience and publications, but do not possess a specific recent certificate like CELTA/DELTA or an academic degree with a major in EFL. That formal lack may be held against them when reentering a job emporium now filling with ever more young teachers armed with minimal but recognized TEFL qualifications. Such teachers are often cheaper to hire than experienced older candidates, and easier to fire. Indeed, there are few teaching professions where a one-

month intensive course (even via correspondence) and native fluency are considered sufficient basis to work as a language instructor in a private or state school or university. In this respect, TEFL may well be unique.

The Emergence of the Virtual Job Emporium

The growth of Internet job boards has radically transformed the employment market over the past four years, making it far easier for anyone seeking a position to be systematically informed about openings and apply online, a manifestation of the dense “global hypermedia environment” that has developed within TESL (Corbel, 2000). As a distinctively transnational field spanning the planet, the impact of this electronic revolution on the political economy of TEFL is especially powerful. At the least, it has served to lure growing numbers of experienced teachers back into the job market as they discover attractive options online, adding fuel to a sense of dissatisfaction with one’s present position. How many seasoned older teachers of EFL who never thought seriously of venturing out onto the job hunt again have now been tempted to do so by an online vacancy posting, especially in East Asia, only to find they stand in a cyberline with half-a-hundred other applicants, most much younger?

The Iceberg of Discrimination: Subtle, Unchallenged, Invisible

The greater majority of discriminatory practices against EFL specialists over the age of 45 go unreported and undocumented, in part because of the opacity of hiring procedures in various venues and the subtlety of age discrimination in internal institutional practice. This is compounded in many places by restrictions intrinsic to being an expatriate “outsider” staff member, such as yearly contracts without job security, and the near total absence of adequate networking to expose manifestations of discrimination in the profession.

The Iron Ceiling

Moreover, mandatory age maximum limits of 55 to 60 in Saudi Arabia and along the Gulf, and of 60 in Thailand and a string of other countries badly in need of experienced TESOLers impose an absolute barrier to the more seasoned teachers in our ranks looking for a new post in dynamic markets—a form of arbitrary “institutionalized ageism” (Gillen and Klassen, 2000). Experience has shown that applications from older teachers over the mandatory age limit are normally discarded upon receipt, though there are always exceptions.²

Voices from the Field

Ageism would appear to be especially rampant in certain fast expanding EFL markets on the Pacific Rim—part of attitudes in the broader society and accepted practices in recruitment and staffing. Based on observations in South Korea, Robert Dickey (1998) of KoTESOL comments:

My own personal perspective is that ageism and sexism in employment practices is rampant in Korea. Particularly in the language institutes that are catering to the (perceived) whims of the customer/student (and their parents!!!). At a university I worked at previously, the Dean was upset because someone he hired based on a photo and telephone conversation turned out to be not only 45 (which the Dean was aware of) but a bit greyer, and much, much heavier, than anticipated. This instructor's life was made pretty miserable, and furthermore, at the time for contract renewal, he was told in no uncertain terms that "his health" was the reason they couldn't rehire him. The argument I always hear from the employers is the "level of energy" needed to teach. This argument isn't reserved for those teaching children's classes.

Such impressions (and allusions to alleged "energy levels" or "state of health"), recently reconfirmed (Dickey, 2002), are undoubtedly but the tip of an iceberg, one that is growing as the profession expands and ages. Evidence is varied, though largely anecdotal. For example, a brief discussion of ageism on TESLJB-L listserv in late November 2002 yielded some interesting insights. In commenting on Japan, D. T. remarked that "you are out of the running for a full-time position at around 45 or 50 and in some cases 35 or over in general, Japanese universities don't really want foreign teachers to hang out too long, learn the ropes of the political in-fighting, and perhaps stick their noses into a system that does quite well without them" (TESLJB-L listserv, "discriminatory hiring practices," November 22, 2002). Another ESL teacher observed that numerous language education openings at tertiary level in Japan "actively advertise for younger applicants. There may be many reasons for this, thus we can not assume that ageism is totally to blame." The poster went on to note that employment activists in Japan have stressed that foreign teachers there are discriminated against "not only through ageist employment practices" but "through a lack of security in long-term commitment on the part of the employer" (T., TESLJB-L listserv, "discriminatory hiring practices," November 22, 2002). A British TESOLer noted: "I applied for a summer job in England (not Korea or Japan)—good old England. Where I hail from. Response—I quote, "Let me assure you that we do not practise age discrimination but, given your wide experience, we wondered how old you were." I coyly admitted to being in the mid sixties and she . . . never contacted me again" (G.V., TESLJB-L

listserv, “discriminatory hiring practices,” November 23, 2002). We need to put such inside observations on more solid footing, gathering empirical data from within TESOL and elsewhere in the relevant national job market. In Japan, for example, a recent poll by the Tokyo-based Unemployed Workers Union found that “almost 60 percent of surveyed unemployed workers say they've experienced age discrimination while looking for a job” (*Mainichi Shimbun*, 2001).

Discriminatory Attitudes and Practices in the Corporate Workplace

Educational institutions and their employment practices are of course part of the broader market economy. One problem in TESOL as elsewhere is what Maher terms “ageism by euphemism”: “I've consulted on thousands of hires. Even in private, those doing the hiring never say “We only consider young candidates.” Rather it's simply “We need employees to be energetic and vigorous,” or “up on all the latest trends” or “able to relate to our customer demographic.”³ The language conceals the underlying bias. Yet observers such as Steinhauser (1998) stress that these exclusionary practices are actually counterproductive: “Such flawed corporate cultures are based on misguided assumptions. Today's older adults tend to be enthusiastic, fit, stable and confident in their skills—exactly the type of employees companies say they are seeking.” Indeed, in a survey conducted by the National Council on Aging (1999), “employers described their older employees as high on dimensions of reliability, dependability, conscientiousness, loyalty, and stability” (McCann and Giles, 2000, pp. 169-170). Nonetheless, these practices persist and may be worsening. Writing about ageism in *Information Technology in the United States*, Joss (2001) notes: “One day you may look around the conference room to find you're the oldest person in the room. Everyone, including your boss, is younger than you. If the prospect of finding yourself the oldest kid on the block makes you wonder if your career may be in jeopardy due to your age, you're not alone.” Negative bias regarding the performance of older employees runs deep: in a recent survey in the business world, 773 CEOs responded that “peak productivity” of workers was on average “around age 43” (Munk, 1999; see also Simon, 1996). When forced to “downsize” in the 1990s, the BBC laid off older staff workers and encouraged others to opt for early retirement (Plattman and Tinker, 1998). Diverse studies have shown that older job applicants in industry and business are repeatedly perceived by management as “more difficult to train, harder to place in jobs, more resistant to change, less suitable for promotion, and expected to have lower job performances” (Avolio and Barrett, 1987).

Toward a Profile of Aging in TESOL

One primary category of ESL Professional is the “nomadic TESOLer”: a professional who has taught ESL over the years, moving from one institution and country to another, pursuing a career more horizontally than vertically, and who finds at 50 or 55 that further doors are suddenly slamming shut. He or she doesn't want to continue at the same institution, there are plenty of electronic job offerings, especially for “native speakers”; but their career may seem at an unexpected impasse, blocked from moving on, no matter how competent and experienced. A compounding factor is that such “wandering teachers,” like many others with substantial experience in EFL, often lack the Ph.D, forcing them to compete in the largest and most fluid segment of the EFL market, language instructors. A second growing category are professionals with many years of teaching experience in ESL or other subjects at secondary or tertiary level in the U.S., Britain or Australia, perhaps in a non-tenurable position or as “contingent” part-time teachers with no job security, who have decided at mid-life to reinvent themselves, to “put their boots on” and seek an EFL post abroad. A third category are expatriate teachers who reach mandatory retirement age and are denied any extension by the ministry. A fourth group in this typology, also likely growing, are older teachers in their native countries who have “retooled,” deciding to go into the expanding field of English teaching after an extended career in some other sphere. They can find themselves confronted with insurmountable age barriers in trying to land a job at schools and colleges in their own country, where even the age of 35 may be an official cut-off for new staff.⁴ Commenting on hiring patterns in Korea, H. C. noted: “most Koreans (regardless of what area of work they do) applying for entrance level jobs (assuming their highest level of education is a bachelor's degree) have to be no older than in their late 20s” (TESLJB-L listserv, “discrimination in hiring,” November 21, 2002).

Meanwhile, at the management end, the younger directors of studies or departmental chairpersons don't want competitors with more experience around—and may perceive a new colleague with 20 or 25 years in the classroom as a potential threat to their authority. They may also prefer to have frequent turnover in their staff from abroad, what is termed the “fluid bottom,” so that few expatriate teachers can “settle in” longer-term and gain influence in the department. Among prevalent false conceptions such older professionals have to grapple with is the myth that older teachers don't know (and can't adopt or adapt to) the new tricks of the trade, like “communicative” syllabi, computer-assisted instruction, role-plays and games—the stereotypy of “inflexibility.” That can be made worse by the cliché of “lack of vigor” that Dickey mentions above,⁵ and the typical response older experienced teachers may receive that they are “overqualified” for the position(s) advertised.

Racism and Sexism as Compounding Factors

The situation for female TESOLers as they grow older is worsened by a mixture of sexism and ageism that still persists in many locales, along with its multiple connections with homophobia (Encel and Studencki, 1997; Harrison, 2002) and ethnicity. A posting from an African-American teacher working in East Asia provides insight into his experiences and local attitudes toward race, as does a recent thread on the ESL Café General Job Discussion Forum.⁶ Reports from women in TESOL working in Korea, both foreign and Korean nationals, have pointed out the strong presence of what they regard as sexist and patriarchal attitudes among their male Korean counterparts, which often go unchallenged. As S. C. notes: “Sexism here is absolutely a nightmare. I have had one man pound his fist on the table at me in front of other men because he didn’t like my suggestion that there needs to be equality for women. . . . There is no question that gender is a critical issue in hiring and in keeping one’s job as a woman” (TESLJB-L listserv, November 23, 2002). Another anonymous electronic posting also comments on this problem in Korea:

. . . racism and ageism is not limited to Asia by any means . . . but some of the worst occurrences are in the private schools (hagwons) of Korea and Taiwan. . . . why do you think they always ask for a photo along with your credentials? . . . It sure ain’t to check your dental records . . . Besides skin color, the prospective employers want to check your age. They prefer YOUNG blonde blue-eyed teachers. . . . I have been a victim of this kind of age discrimination myself . . . it does not matter how much qualification, experience a person has. . . . youth and good looks take precedence (Racism, Ageism in TESOL, 2001).

Writing in an ironic vein, T. C. observes: “Korean Schools (and Japanese schools) often prefer not to hire women or Blacks. This is a peculiar cultural affectation. However, if Westerners want to be consistent—they would respect another culture’s choices and not try to impose their Eurocentric values. The Koreans are simply exercising their ‘freedom of choice’” (TESLJB-L listserv, “discriminatory hiring practices,” November 21, 2002). How much such overlapping of discrimination of various types is prevalent in our field is something we need to examine in terms of concrete settings and examples, the specific stories of individuals, “employment biographies,” generating the basis of a kind of empirical “ethnography of aging” in TEFL’s global economy.

Cross-Cultural and Comparative Aging Research

As our profession spreads, we need to better understand the “ecology” of ageism, learning from the growing body of research on culture-specific attitudes toward aging. Park and Kim (1992) and Sung (1995) shed light on ageist attitudes in Korea, while Giles et al. (2002) and Harwood et al. (1996) examine changing patterns in Asia and on the Pacific Rim.⁷ Illuminating is Levy's (1999) study on how older adults in Japan maintain a positive self-image in the face of apparently very strong ageist attitudes in Japanese society (see also Koyano, 1989; Tobin, 1987). Chang, Chang and Shen (1984) investigate differences in attitudes towards aging in the United States and Taiwan, and Lee (1986) notes that Chinese Americans, in line with their subculture of filial piety, generally hold less ageist attitudes than European Americans. Masako (1997) has examined intergenerational relationships in immigrant communities among Chinese, Japanese and Korean Americans. Despite ancient traditions of filial piety and its psychological influence in Chinese society (Ho, 1996; Sung, 1998; Yue and Ng, 1999), reports suggest a new ageist bias on the rise in urban China, directed against older Chinese who are less able or willing to adapt to the new “market economy and its challenges.”⁸ Research indicates that we should be prepared to find ageism in distinctive forms across East Asia and in multicultural immigrant settings such as Hawaii, and that these patterns may impact on the EFL teaching profession in complex ways.

Concrete Steps for Action

In the ethos of the recent Second World Assembly on Aging,⁹ TEFL professional associations need to build a sustained transnational struggle against ageism and its impact in the TESOL workplace. Its abuses have to be addressed in departments, dean's offices, conference panels, commercial language schools, job emporia and, where possible, at ministerial level. As sociologist, Sheldon Steinhauser, (1999) argues, for the business world, it is imperative to “recognize age bias and discrimination as the pervasive, escalating issue it is.” We should carry that insight into our own discipline and take concerted action.

Fact-finding: Creating a Better Picture of What is Happening

First, it is necessary to assemble a better empirical picture of age structure and age diversity in TESOL, by country and educational sector, seeking to uncover data on what often are quite subtle exclusionary practices in recruitment and contract renewal. Some ads openly specify age limits,¹⁰ but most do not. A primary task for IATEFL and TESOL, Inc. affiliates is to spur discussion, get some graduate students to gather and analyze input from the job front, encouraging a few targeted surveys, oral “job

histories,” developing several M.A. theses. Given the unique cultural politics of English as an international language (Pennycook, 1994, 1998), the distinctive political economy of EFL as an international discipline (Templer, 2002) is a topic more EFL degree programs should be addressing, both in teaching and research.

Creating a Caucus or Forum

Second, at the very least, teachers with tales to recount need a professional structure to turn to. One paradigm that is generating considerable current interest is the Caucus on Part-time Employment Concerns (COPTC) in TESOL, Inc., its ranks growing as more and more part-time and "adjunct" teachers are hired to shoulder an ever-larger segment of instruction and testing in ESL and other fields. The problems of job equity for those professionals, often underpaid and overburdened, is reflected in the recent "Adjunct Labor Resolution" adopted by the U.S. Conference on College Composition and Communication, and is central on the agenda of the Coalition on the Academic Work Force, representing 25 academic associations. Perhaps a global site could be created, or a body analogous to the Aging and Ageism Caucus in the National Women's Studies Association in the United States, a relevant model from which we can learn.¹¹ This could serve to galvanize transnational debate and spark advocacy initiatives, a few convention panels, an online forum, even some kind of pressure group. Only recently has IATEFL GISIG (Global Issues Special Interest Group) begun to address the issue of ageism. Significantly, the General Job Discussion Forum of the online ESL Café recently carried a number of postings on "age discrimination," prompted by a question from an older teacher whether she should embark on an M.A. degree in TEFL (Age Discrimination, 2003). Strategy and tactics can also be adapted from the senior rights movement in the United States (Powell, et al. 1996), including the Gray Panthers and other action groups. As a first step, a body in the profession could call for banning age specification in ads on all TEFL job boards, and publicize documented cases of perceived age discrimination (and discrimination based on other "differences," including religion), particularly in Asia, the Gulf countries and on the Pacific Rim. Of course, it is always hard to conclusively "prove" ageist workplace discrimination, which is often masked (McCann and Giles, 2002, p. 179), but our internal professional standards for what constitutes solid evidence need not be those of the courtroom.

Age Diversity as a Goal: Improving Intergenerational Communication

Third, such structures could encourage advocacy around the ideal of a "quality age diverse workforce" in TESOL. We need materials to help colleagues identify myths and stereotypes about age in the workplace and aid them in examining their own

attitudes. This can be combined with “age diversity workshops” to raise consciousness among staff (and students) about intergenerational issues (Ng, et al. 1998; Noor Al-Deen, 1997; Williams and Nussbaum, 2001). Schools and universities can learn how to organize an “audit” to assess the workplace “culture” and better determine how employees feel about older workers and how those feelings manifest themselves in the workplace. Schools can experiment with “focus groups” with older employees, sharing their experiences with and opinions of the workplace culture with younger staff members (Steinhauser, 1998; 1999). If this can be done in a range of settings in the world of business, it's all the more imperative in education. Braithwaite (2002) provides relevant insight on how to reduce negative stereotypes of old age, outlining a “ten-point plan for ageism reduction” (pp. 331-332), including “heightening sensitivity to the stereotyping of older people,” “seeking out opportunities for intergenerational cooperation,” and “having greater commitment to recognizing and responding to diversity in dealings with older people.”

Accenting Pertinent Paradigms in Legislation

Fourth, administrators and authorities in our locales of practice need to be made aware of paradigms in relevant legislation:¹² such as the 1967 Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA) in the United States, which protects most federal, state and private employees 40 and older from discrimination in recruitment, hiring, training, promotion, pay, benefits, firing, retirement and other employment practices (McCann and Giles, 2002, pp. 177-179). In the United Kingdom, the Department for Education and Employment launched a media campaign against age discrimination at work in February 2000, designed to reinforce and popularize a voluntary new Code of Practice on Age Diversity in Employment. The campaign's slogan: “Age prejudice—you're old enough to know better.” A useful text for stimulating dialogue on age discrimination is the discussion paper of the Australian Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC, 2000), created to spur debate in the context of the 1999 International Year of Older Persons. Commenting on job equity litigation in the U.S., Steinhauser (1998) observes a trend of the times: “In each of the past four fiscal years, age discrimination comprised about 20 percent of all discrimination charges filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), following only race, sex and, more recently, disability.” The biggest recent class action suit on age discrimination before the EEOC is that against “ageism in Hollywood,” brought by 28 senior TV and film studio writers, alleging rampant “graylisting” and other abuses in the entertainment industry, especially directed toward older women (Maio, 2001).

Working to End Mandatory Retirement and Arbitrary Age Cut-Off Points in Hiring

Fifth, we should build advocacy around the evident benefits of dismantling age ceilings for teaching staff, especially in the case of critically needed experts from abroad. Here the U.S. experience is germane, a possible model for appropriation: the mandatory retirement age of 70 for federal workers was revoked in 1979 and eliminated for college teachers in 1993. In Australia, the Equal Opportunity Act in South Australia (1994) and Victoria (1995) also ban compulsory retirement for most workers (HREOC 2000). In countries like Thailand, a reasonable goal is “utility with maximum flexibility”: seasoned teachers with their unique expertise can contribute enormously in the classroom, while serving as mentors for younger staff members, or as facilitators in training modules and weekend seminars for English teachers in the schools. Why not persuade legislators to exempt them from national labor law maximum age regulations or amend such laws to create more flexibility in hiring senior TESOLers and renewing their contracts? It is not a utopian demand. At some universities in North America and Europe, there are faculty members well into their 70s on staff as “emeritus professors,” still lecturing and among the most productive scholars in their field. Various institutions also have the category of “recall professor” for a retired colleague who returns to teaching, or what is termed “mentoring”: “recruiting back our retirees as consultants, because we find we can't do without them” (Baltzell, 2000).¹³ “Within thirty years, the over-65s will make up a quarter of the population. Every business enterprise, from an international aluminum producer to a university, has to adjust to these facts. That adjustment will be confused by a cocktail of myths (like the one about 65 being the natural retirement age)” (Baltzell, 2000). Moreover, employees’ fears that keeping on older staff blocks the hiring of younger professionals is largely a myth: many economists predict future shortages of younger workers with advanced job skills in a number of fields (Steinhauser, 1998).

An inventive paradigm is the flexible practice in the People’s Republic of China: institutions, both public and private, are actively recruiting expatriate TESOLers even into their mid-70s, including retirees who have decided to “unretire.” That openness in the People’s Republic of China to older ex-pat experts is, of course, a manifestation of a different culture of age respect, nourished in part by widespread Confucian traditions across the region (Ho, 1996; Hwang, 1999; Yum, 1988). The gist of personal commentary on ageism in January 2003 on the Job Discussion Forum of ESL Cafe suggests that the PRC is by far the most open of countries toward hiring older ESL professionals (Age Discrimination, 2003). The Peace Corps has of course long known the benefit of this worldwide, as has the organization Global Volunteers, boasting an EFL teacher in the field at 89.

Toward Critical Pedagogies of Ageism: Our Work in the Classroom

Ageism should also be on the engaged agenda in theme-based EFL curricula and classes committed to confronting social issues. This is intrinsic to a critical pedagogy that looks to a more inclusive “society for all ages,” sensitive to an ethics of difference, “unlearning the myths that bind us” (Christensen, 2000, pp. 39 ff.). Coupland contends that “a programme of ‘language awareness’ on aging and ageism is arguably an appropriate future project for applied linguistics. . . . it is striking how linguistically unaware contemporary western societies, and particularly European societies, are of ageist . . . processes in text and talk” (1997, p. 44). TESOLers can tap this growing body of work on the sociolinguistics of aging, ageism and their discourses¹⁴ as an introduction to a theme in research that seeks to “deconstruct the semiotic processes that socially constitute old age” (Coupland & Coupland, 2001, p. 468).¹⁵ We need to treat “society’s systematic undervaluing of and disenfranchising of old people—the elderly as a minority group—values . . . reproduced through language and communication” (Coupland, 1997, p. 35) as a new focus in our teaching. Global Issues SIGs and TESOLers for Social Responsibility should incorporate such concerns into their agendas. Useful are Couper and Pratt (1997), Dodson and Hause (1996), and numerous resources on negative age imaging and how to confront this, accessible online via the website of the National Academy for Teaching and Learning about Aging (NATLA).¹⁶

Adultism and the Oppression of Youth

Ageism against kids, youth and Generation X (see Williams and Coupland, 1998) can also be explored, generating dialogue with students about their own lives and age-group. How do societies construct age and its boundaries more generally (Schönert 2000)? How do groups impose stereotyped identities on others and marginalize them through discourse, part of the dynamics of “othering” (Coupland, 1999, pp. 4 ff.)? Here is a natural starting point—an empowering focus for encouraging students to respond openly about the age-based restrictions they know so well. Most adolescents are painfully aware of the workings of power and its manipulations in their everyday lives: one challenging platform is the website of ASFAR (Americans for a Society Free from Age Restrictions), which offers a Declaration of Principles, several pamphlets, and their journal, *Youth Truth*.¹⁷ Another site rich with materials and links is The Freechild Project.¹⁸

Bias in Language, Text, and Imagery

In our own domain of language and communication, Nuessel (1991), Coupland (1999) and others have examined ageist discourse, a focus for sensitizing students to the semantics of “patronizing speech” or “elderspeak,” investigated by Giles et al. (1998) in a cross-cultural frame. Fascinating for students to discuss and analyze are visual representations of aging and the body-as-symbol in magazine texts and ads (Coupland and Coupland 1997) and the ways “contemporary body-culture discourses in the mass media encode an ageist, anti-elderly ideology” (Coupland, 1997, p. 42). “The imagery of decrement, frailty, and incompetence is still generally acceptable as an icon of late life in the UK, even in travel brochures, insurance pamphlets and televisions ads” (Coupland, 1999, p. 11). The portrayal of elderly persons on American TV is another potential topic for classroom units or projects (Davis and Davis, 1985). More than any other age group, older adults are likely to appear in North American television and film in a stereotyped way, emphasizing their physical and mental ineffectiveness. Studies show that U.S. television portrays less than two percent of its characters as elderly, and these mostly in minor roles, reflecting the subtle forms of segregation of the elderly from mainstream society in Western cultures (Zebrowitz and Montepare, 2000), while minority elderly persons remain almost invisible (Cassata and Irvin, 1997).¹⁹

Denying the Face of the Future

One of the unique features of ageism is that age, unlike race and sex, represents a category “in which most people from the in-group (the young) will eventually (if they are fortunate) become a member of the out-group (older persons). Thus, it seems strange that young people would be biased toward a group they will eventually belong to. Where does this negative affect originate?” (Nelson, 2000a, p. x). Some existential psychologists, working in “terror management theory,”²⁰ suggest that age prejudice is grounded on a deep fear of our own mortality, our own inevitable aging in a hostile and terrifying universe where death is the only certainty—and that we seek culturally based defense mechanisms to dissociate from the elderly (both physically and mentally), who are a living reminder of our own ultimate fate (Becker, 1973). “As reminders of death, they are likely to arouse a host of . . . terror management defenses, largely directed at derogating, avoiding, and psychologically distancing from the elderly” (Greenberg, p. 41). Our EFL classrooms can attempt to broach this highly sensitive topic of the dread of death and personal annihilation, aiding students in demystifying old age. They can be challenged to confront and cope with fears about the elderly and their own aging processes, learning to view the elderly “as individuals instead of in a general or generic and hurtful way” (Schimmel and Mertens, 2002, p. 45).

We can experiment in creating a “curriculum of empathy” that puts students inside the lives of others (Christensen, 2000, pp. 5-6), promoting “social imagination” (pp. 134-137), the ability to empathize with those with whom they may seem to have little in common.²¹ As Simone de Beauvoir urged: “Let us recognize ourselves in this old man or in that old woman. It must be done if we are to take upon ourselves the entirety of our human state” (de Beauvoir, 1972, p. 5).²²

Conclusion

TESOL is now the most international of all professions in second language teaching, and must grapple more decisively with the manifestations of ageism its practitioners are exposed to in many corners of the globe. As EFL specialists, we frequently work at a complex cultural interface between several worlds. This offers us a unique site to develop comparative materials geared to illuminating biases in the cultures we teach and teach in, a springboard for students to reflect on their own beliefs. We need to stimulate students and colleagues to reexamine age-related prejudice and discrimination-its reality in the profession and as a topical theme in our classrooms, relevant to students’ lives. This can be incorporated within a critical applied linguistics that explores how age is interconnected with race, ethnicity, gender,²³ sexual identity, social class and disability in specific local situations. The goal should be teaching that empowers students, within an engaged pedagogy of TEFL²⁴ oriented to more equitable and just social worlds, “as part of an ethical and political vision of change” (Pennycook, 2001, pp. 161-162; see also Martin, 2001; Hafernik et al., 2002).²⁵

Notes

1. Typical negative phrases in ageist language, which are beginning to appear in age discrimination lawsuits in the United States, see McCann and Giles (2002).
2. As for example the experience of a retired American EFL teacher W. J.-E., Afro-American/Native-American, aged 67, described in a posting Sept. 28, 2001 on the Job Information Journal Asia/General of ESL Café, “Ageism and Racism in Asia,” retrieved March 30, 2003 from <http://www.eslcafe.com/jobinfo/asia/sefer.cgi?display:1001677183-18022.txt> He claims to have received 15 offers from East Asia in 48 hours, though his Ph.D. and extensive experience as a school administrator probably helped.

3. In a recent survey by Mahe's consultancy firm, two virtually identical highly qualified resumes were submitted to each of a client company's 30 plus offices around the country. "In one set, the job applicant's experience showed him to be about 36. In the second set, the applicant appeared to be about 54. All but two of the resumes for the 36-year-old generated calls for interviews. NONE of the resumes for the 54-year-old did. Not a single one" (see New Study). An analogous experiment, matching pairs of applicants similar in appearance, demeanor and (fabricated) qualifications, but different in age (32 vs. 57 years old) is detailed in Bendick, Brown, and Wall (1999), with intriguing findings. We need such "mystery shopping" experiments in TEFL job emporia.
4. As in national law at public universities in Bulgaria.
5. Though we all know that some teachers are rigid and inflexible at 29-why essentialize? This guideline of sensitivity to real people and their actual abilities, their "social" rather than chronological age, is central to the reasoning in ASFAR and The Freechild Project, see below.
6. See the posting dated March 12, 2002 on the Job Information Journal Asia, General (<http://www.eslcafe.com>), entitled "Comparative Black Experience (Japan/Taiwan/China)," retrieved March 28, 2003 from <http://www.eslcafe.com/jobinfo/asia/sefer.cgi?display:1015953487-28328.txt>. And the many postings in the thread "Racism in Asia?????????" on the ESL Café General Job Discussion Forum, retrieved March 29, 2003 from <http://www.eslcafe.com/forums/job/viewtopic.php?t=511&postdays=0&postorder=asc&start=0> We need far more detailed input from expatriate ESL teachers from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds.
7. A transnational project informed by comparative gerontological perspectives is "Intergenerational Communication around the Pacific Rim," <http://people.ku.edu/~harwood/pacrimhp.htm>, which has generated a number of papers on cross-cultural attitudes toward filial piety and related dimensions. Giles and McCann (2000) note that "recent theoretically-grounded, cross-cultural work around the Pacific Rim has shown, somewhat surprisingly, that the reported intergenerational communication climates of young people in East Asian contexts are more unfavorable than their Western counterparts."
8. BBC World Service special report, June 28, 2002.
9. Madrid, April 8-12, 2002. The final "Political Declaration" and "Plan of Action," which also briefly address ageism, are available online: <http://www.un.org/aging/coverage>. For a general introduction to ageism, see Bytheway, 1995; Nelson, 2002a; Palmore, 1990; "Age Discrimination" online; Novak (1997) provides a gerontological look at aging in Canada. Nelson (2002b) is an insightful textbook on the psychology of prejudice, see especially Chap. 7, "Ageism" and Chap. 8, "Racism."

10. As in a June 2002 ad on the <http://www.ajarn.com> Thailand ESL job board, specifying age 25-50. As Coupland observes: "Anti-discrimination legislation may outlaw the specification of preferred age in job advertisements, but texts of the form: 'Wanted: enthusiastic young person . . . ' are commonplace in the UK" (2001, p. 476).
11. See their URL: <http://www.nwsa.org/aging.htm>, retrieved February 15, 2003.
12. Whether this is foisting Anglo-American notions of social justice or "political correctness"—a form of "value imperialism," Eurocentric "globalization" and homogenization—on the societies and institutions in which we work is of course a crucial issue open to debate, see "Resistance, Appropriation and Third Spaces" (Pennycook, 2001, pp. 68-73). Some will view this as neo-imperial, imposing elements of BANA (British/North American/Australian) legal standards on other cultures.
13. Baltzell's trenchant remarks, from the perspective of an ALCOA Australia CEO, dispel many myths about older workers and suggest creative ways for fostering "age diversity" in a company. See also his section "90 and still working."
14. See Coupland (1999), Coupland & Coupland (1997, 1999, 2001) and bibliography there. The CLC that Nikolas Coupland heads at Cardiff University is one of the few linguistic centers encouraging systematic research on language, aging and ageism.
15. They continue: "The social practice perspective we are proposing is essentially a critical analysis of the classificatory work done through language and discourse to construct our routine cognitive orientations—our definitions, evaluations and presuppositions—about aging and old people" (ibid.).
16. It contains an "Ageism in Literature Analysis Form," guidelines for "Analyzing Literature for Ageism," Kettering (2002) (<http://www.cps.unt.edu/natla>). Hollywood blockbusters that target transnational youth audiences are especially fascinating to explore for ageist imaging. See also the useful site: Aging Internet Information Note, <http://www.aoa.gov/NAIC/Notes/intro.html>. A handy introduction to ageist "language" is the one-page Australian handout "Don't Call me Granny" issued in conjunction with the UN International Year of Older Persons 1999, <http://www.iyop.nsw.gov.au/textonly.granny2.html>.
17. URL: <http://www.asfar.org>. ASFAR also operates an online bookstore; its materials are highly provocative as a point of departure for critical discussion of the rights of children and teens.
18. See their URL: <http://www.freechild.org>. The site has much material on adultism and how to reduce it, encouraging youth activism, youth rights. See also Cohen (1980) and Ludd (1995). On the broader question of EFL and the disabled, see three recent articles on physically challenged teachers and learners in *IATEFL Issues*, esp. Kaye (2001) and the new discussion board "Teaching English to

Disabled Students” at ESL Café Discussion Center, <http://www.eslcafe.com/discussion/dz2/>, retrieved March 28, 2003.

19. For a bibliography of the imaging of aging in the North American media, see Nuessel (1992).
20. For a brief online introduction to TMT, see http://www.geocities.com/zone_omega/terrormanagement.htm, retrieved March 1, 2003.
21. Christensen utilizes the technique of the interior written monologue in her classes, the “imagined thoughts of a character in history, literature or life at a specific point in time” (p. 134).
22. A classic “on-the-road” fictional portrait of a courageous worker in his seventies who escapes from a rest home in California is Albert Maltz’s *The Journey of Simon McKeever* (1949), an excellent text for exploring growing old in America and one man’s quest for dignity in old age.
23. See review by Abrams (2001) of Paoletti; cf. also Sunderland (1994).
24. In East Asia and the Pacific, note the new *Journal of Engaged Pedagogy*, (2002) established by EFL teachers in Japan, oriented to theories of the African-American feminist pedagogue Bell Hooks, URL: <http://engagedpedagogy.org>.
25. See Pennycook, “The Politics of Difference” (2001, pp. 141-63). The author mentions age only once in passing (p. 153), but it is clear that his conception of the scope of a critical applied linguistics can be amplified by the inclusion of the multiple intersections of age with other “embodied differences” that matter—“gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability” (p. 163).

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