

Problematizing Depictions of ELT and its Professionals in the Media

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Abstract

English language teaching (ELT) has become a distinct area of education in its own right, establishing itself as a viable field of employment and career path, one which continues to attract attention and interest. Notwithstanding these developments, ELT and its practitioners are often depicted in the media in a somewhat unflattering and stereotypical manner. ELT is often represented as lower-rung teaching position inhabited by unqualified but well-intentioned native-speakers, who are often lost, misguided and forlorn.

What has become clear through the growing literature on this topic (McMorrow, 2005) is the influence of such images can have on the general population, as well as the self-image and identity of teachers who may choose to enter this field.

This paper shall present a variety of representations of those who have chosen a career in ELT in a number of media: print, movies, and television. It highlights the possible impact such media images have on the public's perception of English teachers, the career they have chosen, and on teachers' professional identities. This is followed by a discussion of how the effect of these images can be countered through effective and rigorous teacher education and professionalization.

1. EDUCATION AND TEACHING IN THE MEDIA

The field of Education and its depiction in fictional works the media is of growing interest to scholars, especially those concerned with post-modernism and post-structuralism. There is concern that these fictional depictions impact on the public's impressions of teachers and the field of teaching. While they may be stereotypes and exaggerations, they often reinforce the popular beliefs of those outside the field about teachers and teaching at both the conscious and unconscious levels.

Recent works such as *Images of Schoolteachers in Twentieth-Century America: Paragons, Polarities, Complexities* (Joseph & Burnaford, 1994), *Imaging Education: The Media and Schools in America* (Maeroff, 1998), *Hollywood Goes to High School: Cinema, Schools, and American Culture* (Bulman, 1994), *The Hollywood Curriculum: Teachers in the Movies* (Dalton, 1994), and *Education in Popular Culture: Telling Tales on Teachers and Learners* (Fisher, Harris, & Jarvis 2008) all examine these fictional depictions, analysing the stereotypical ‘kind/loving/dedicated’ or ‘mean/sadistic/cruel’ teacher images so often portrayed in TV shows and films. These writers note the way female teachers are represented, and a great deal of time is spent on those teaching Physical Education, a feature of the paper ‘Butches, Bullies and Buffoons: Images of Physical Education Teachers in the Movies’ (McCullick, Belcher, Hardin, B., & Hardin, M., 2003).

None of these works, however, deal with the sub-category of language teachers, such as those teaching English as a second or foreign language, even though they are becoming a regular feature of media depictions. In an English language teaching (ELT) journal published by TESOL (the major association of English language teachers in the USA), a paper entitled ‘English language teaching in the movies’ (McMorrow, 2005) does focus on some of these depictions. Using his article as a starting point, I will broaden the discussion on these depictions raised in McMorrow’s original paper by including print and TV images of teachers, and go beyond his original article to provide some reasons for these depictions and recommendations for measures to address these problems.

However, this current paper will also narrow the focus by examining the depictions of *native speaker* teachers. It is the native speaker teacher – especially those without training or qualifications and those in the area of EFL (English as a Foreign Language – in general, the teaching of English to non-native speakers in non-native speaker countries) rather than ESL

(English as a second Language – in general, the teaching of English to non-native speakers in native speaker countries) – who receive the greatest criticism by the media.

This paper will first provide some background as to the origins of this tendency towards the stereotyping of native speaker teachers of English in the media, followed by some detailed examples of these depictions in practice. This paper will conclude with some suggestions as to ways in which these ELT and those within it may change in a more positive direction.

2. THE ENGLISH NATIVE SPEAKER AS VAGABOND

Cresswell-Turner (2004) writes of the “slavery of ELT,” and in his work he describes some English teachers as lost souls, wandering the EFL world in search of steady work and income. This depiction is indicative of Zygmunt Bauman’s idea of the life-journey characterizations, in particular the image of the vagabond (1998). According to Bauman, the vagabond is the antithesis of the pilgrim, an individual travelling through life without goals or dreams, disassociated from value or respect. As noted above, Cresswell-Turner depicts the English language teachers with whom he has had contact as being “slaves” or “bums” who have been “so thoroughly defeated that they don’t even realise what has happened to them.” He describes some as “...scruffy figures, utterly out of synch with the modern world, any style or sex-appeal they once possessed squeezed out of them by years of drudgery, exploitation and poverty.” Not only are they dire individuals, but they even pose dangers either to themselves (through suicide due to career and life disillusionment) or to others outside of the UK. He quotes an (anonymous) TEFL expert who describes those in English teaching as “a sad lot” and “poisonous” along with a statement by “James Stevenson, a London-based career counsellor and consultant psychologist: “I find it very distressing that foreigners wanting to learn English are exposed to the sort of people working in the teaching organisations.”

2004 also saw the *The Guardian Weekly*'s 'Learning English' section discuss this issue but with a great deal less cynicism. The piece, entitled 'McJob status hard to break' (Ford, 2004), focused on moves by the European Works Council to guarantee higher salary levels for those employed in EFL in Europe. The article cites Amanda Holmbrook, an EFL teacher with a private company in Greece, who claims that EFL teachers are paid badly having "something to do with being considered a "McJob." Graduates can take a four-week course then bum around Europe for a year, pretending to teach. They don't take the job very seriously so consequently no one takes them very seriously, and we all get tarred with the same brush." A somewhat similar article – 'McEnglish for the masses' (McNeil, 2004) – appeared in *The Japan Times* and concentrated on the dropping wages for and slipping standards of ELT in Japan. He states that "While cheaper and more plentiful than ever, much of the English taught here [Japan] is about as nutritious as a bag of salty fries, say those involved. Lessons have morphed into sleek, bite-sized delivery systems staffed by teachers who are being transformed into the pedagogic equivalent of burger flippers. Not surprisingly, the teachers are heading for the door in droves."

Thornbury (2001) explores this concern in his opinion piece entitled 'The Unbearable Lightness of EFL.' He notes how the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* supplies an example of the phrasal verb 'to end up' with the example "after working her way around the world, she ended up teaching English as a foreign language" suggesting it is something one does as a mark of finality, unfortunately 'ending up' in that position. He states that the examples he provides in his article "reflect fairly accurately the public perception of TEFL – at least in Britain: that it is a low status, even disreputable thing to do." He goes on to state "This may be due in part to its [TEFL's] association with easily-acquired vocational (*sic*) work of dubious legality, as evidenced in backpacking guides: 'Teaching English is one of the easiest ways of getting a job in France'" (*France: The Rough Guide*, p.58) and 'It is

possible to make a living in a city teaching English: scan the noticeboards of universities where schools advertise for English teachers, no questions asked (*Brazil: The Rough Guide* 1994, p.13).” Similar guidelines can be found in the Lonely Planet guides for many parts of Asia, in particular Japan, where English teaching is offered up as a suggestion for employment along with modeling and bar work.

Some paint the native speaker teacher in even more sinister terms. Winzenberg (1997) writes about the moral limbo adopted by vagabond-ish native speaker teachers. He states that the “Hordes of male American college grads have heeded the call and set up camp in East Asia over the past decade...drawn by quixotic visions of spiritual enlightenment in a wise, hospitable Asia [or] by the more recent allure of striking it rich in the new land of opportunity” (Winzenburg, 1997). His concern is with the sexual liaisons these young men experience with Asian women, and the breaking down of sexual and interracial traditions and taboos throughout the region which “usually begins as an innocent tête-à-tête with a student at the English-language school” leading to the teacher “picking up strangers every chance he gets” (Winzenburg, 1997). Here we have the English native speaker teacher as sexual vagabond, exploiting (and, as Winzenberg makes clear in his article, being exploited *by*) the women of Asia. His article seems to suggest that a major part of the desire of ‘striking it rich’ by such individuals involves conquering the female population. Although he claims that the power of these liaisons remains solely in the hands of the western males, it is these individuals who are represented in a harsher light than their partners, partners who actually make more sense of the cross-cultural game in which they are engaging.

3. MEDIA DEPICTIONS

This section of this paper will now broaden McMorrow’s original analysis of how native speaker teachers of English are depicted in fiction across different media types, including print, film, and TV.

3.1 Print

These views of ELT and its teachers can be increasingly glimpsed in popular culture. One example which contains the ‘vagabond’ resonance of both Cresswell-Turner and Winzenberg’s article is the comic strip, *Charisma Man* (Garscadden, 2003). Set in Japan in the late 1990s, it depicts a young native speaker loser from Canada who has found employment in the English teaching field in Japan who. When not ‘teaching’ (using the loosest sense of the word), spends his time drinking, partying and chasing the local female population. He cannot find decent work in his home country of Canada, but locates plentiful employment opportunities in the EFL world, where his background and skills are not only in demand but are highly valued. However, like the vagabond, his position is still tenuous, and he is depicted constantly on the edge of poverty and attempting to maintain a foothold in Japan by going through the onerous process of attempting to renew his working visa at the Immigration office. His nightmares are represented by endless, mind-numbing conversation classes and the thought of eking out an existence in *eikaiwa* hell well into his later years. For some in ELT, even for those with a solid background in the field complete with training, experience, qualifications and comfortable employment, this is the vagabond existence they fear, of which Bauman writes as being “the tourist’s nightmare” (Bauman, 1998) because this may not simply be the world they lived earlier in their careers, but what they worry they might somehow return to given the shifting fortunes of people in this field.

Tony Parsons’s novel *One for My Baby* (2002) features a more *Charisma Man*-like figure in the central character of Alfie Budd. As the central character of this book, Budd is a man uncertain of his direction in life, teaching EFL casually in Hong Kong until his partner suddenly dies, and in despair returns to England. At a loss, he finds himself literally stumbling back into ELT after accepting a flyer for a fly-by-night language school while meandering along Oxford Street in a dream-like state. He takes to his new teaching with

mixed feelings, but deadens his melancholy by embarking on a string of affairs with his foreign students. Things right themselves for him eventually, and the novel concludes in Hong Kong where he has both found his true love (this time not one of his students) and returned to his true love of writing, leaving the morass and mess of his life as an English teacher behind, his work in the latter field symptomatic of his earlier unease and sense of confusion.

In another novel, Ruth Rendell's *The Tree of Hands* (1986), which features a character who also reflects the character of Alfie Budd. The individual admits to another "I'm older...and I've lost any ambition of my own. I'd be content to take any routine job I could get. There's a course going teaching English to foreign students. I could get in on that. I've got a degree. I'd be quite content for you to go on with your high-flying and be a humble teacher myself." This is once again a routine job, a job for the lost, the unambitious, something to do out of desperation.

3.2 Film & TV

Film and TV depictions of those involved in ELT are often no less severe. ELT is often represented as a field that anyone with native speaker ability and personality can step into, evidenced in Robin Williams's depiction of broadcaster Adrian Cronauer in Levinson's movie *Good Morning Vietnam* (1987). Like *Charisma Man*, Williams (as Cronauer) character steps into an English class in Saigon to get close to a woman he is chasing. His character has no teaching background whatsoever, but can win a class over through personality and charm, once again suggesting that English teaching can be mastered if someone has the right personality rather than a background of training and the achievement of qualifications in their field.

Another film, Solondz's *Happiness* (1998), has a spiritually lost and naive central character as an ESL teacher. Like the Adrian Cronauer character, Joy Johnson, enters her New York City class inexperienced and unschooled. We see her abandon her job in telephone sales and then find a position teaching English to 'refugees.' She appears to have gotten the job because the regular teachers are on strike, and the school is being staffed by strike breakers, of which Joy is one. However, unlike Robin Williams's character, she finds herself flustered in the classroom and the object of mockery of her students, unable to keep control of her adult class who demand the return of their striking teacher. The only student to support her in the class, Vlad, becomes the object of her desires, which leads to a brief but intense relationship between the two of them that ends badly as Vlad – who is married – begins to take advantage of her by stealing Joy's possessions and demanding cash from her. Disillusioned by only a handful of days of teaching, Joy then decides to resign, saying now has more sympathy for the striking teachers than the refugees. Once more, the English language teacher is seen as not only being unskilled and incompetent but ethically challenged due to their willingness to engage in affairs with students.

A more positive but still naively idealistic version of the ESL teacher is presented in Menéndez's movie *Stand and Deliver* (1988). In the film Edward James Olmos plays the role of real life 'super-teacher' Jaime Escalante who transitioned from private sector employee to public school teacher. At his inner and disadvantaged Los Angeles school he dramatically elevated the mathematics scores of students through his passion, commitment and extraordinary teaching skill. As a 'super-teacher' however, he is shown in the film not just only committing himself fully to his day job as a mathematics teacher but also as a volunteer ESL teacher. The short scene in the film portrays him conducting a 'drill and kill' exercise with what can only be guessed to be immigrant students. This work on top of his stressful day job leads him to leave the classroom and collapse from a heart attack in the stairwell.

This illustration is not offered as an example of ESL teaching as being a stressful occupation – it is clearly the impact of the stressful conditions under which he has put himself. What is naïve is the reinforced image that ‘anyone can teach English.’ His mathematics background gave him the insight and skill to be able to teach mathematics, but there is no allusion to the character having any training in English language teaching – his credentials again seem to be his commitment apart from successfully having gone through the process himself (as a proficient second language speaker). In many respects this is a positive portrayal of a committed teacher, but it once more speaks to the belief that little training is necessary to play the part of an English language teacher.

This concept is repeated in a first season episode of the hit American TV comedy *My Name is Earl* (2005). Earl Hickey is a reformed ne’er-do-well and criminal with barely a junior high school education. After winning a lottery but then suffering a serious injury, he experiences a revelation about karma during his recovery. He decides to make amends for all the misdeeds he has committed earlier in his life and compiles a list of the things he needs to correct, each episode focusing on making one of these things right.

The episode in question is entitled “Teacher Earl” and involves him correcting his earlier misdeed of making fun of people with accents. In order to do this, he consults a friend who suggests to Earl that if he wants “to make up for laughing at people who can’t speak your language. Teach them your language.” His response to this is simply “I can do that.” This leads to Earl stating “Some people might be surprised to see me wearing a fancy jacket, with leather elbows and teaching a class. But how hard can it be to teach foreigners to speak American?” Although played for comedy, there is still the attitude that any person willing to teach can teach. Unlike Jaime Escalante, Earl is extremely uneducated and for those familiar with the program obviously unsuited to teaching. However, he is able to teach ESL, once more projecting this as an easy-entry job that does not even require intelligence.

An episode of the American TV crime series *Cold Case* (2003) featured a villain named Roy Minard, a university art history professor who has fallen from grace after a student with whom he was having an affair was murdered, and the suspicion for the murder fell on him. The employment this self-confessed “ruined man” who has “fallen from grace” finds himself in after his dismissal from the university is teaching evening ESL. As the episode progress, we discover he treats this position in great loathing, describing the group he teaches as a “pathetic class” containing students with “a third-world education”. Not only do we get *his* insights about the position, but we also learn what the detectives investigating his case think of the job. They see it as a clear demotion from his previous position, with one of the pair stating that his new role is a “Step or two down”. Unhappy with the life Ray Minard has found himself in, the former professor now language teacher recruits a student in his ESL class to carry out a murder reminiscent of the in which his former student (and love interest) died. By arranging such a murder, Minard hopes media attention given to it will shift suspicion away from him, validate his claimed innocence of the earlier murder, and allow him to re-enter his previous world of high academia. When the detectives eventually discover his (initially successful) scheme, Minard simply explains to the police “I had to regain my station.” The message here is clear: the life as an ESL teacher is worth committing murder to escape from.

In short, the popular image of ELT and its teachers is often one marked by convenience, opportunism and inexperience, and of people who take this employment route out of desperation and insecurity. The characters who are often portrayed in ELT in the print, TV and film, are in this field because of something they *lack* rather than something they *possess*, and in searching for what they *lack* they are often seen as desperate and needy. These negative images of the field are undoubtedly the product of a view of ELT as a second-

class occupation, and in turn may contribute to (or perpetuate) unhelpful conceptions of ELT and its practitioners.

In some regards, these negative depictions fuel individuals' concepts of what they can and cannot do in regards to ELT. These images allow people to believe that *any* native speaker of English can become a teacher of English and contribute to the ongoing belief this is an area of employment open to anyone. Internet forums for Japan are peppered with messages from users asking how they can find teaching work, often from teenagers whose dream is to come to Japan, and "how easy is it to get a job?" This cycle of belief is not served well by the images in print and on the screen.

4. ADDRESSING THE ISSUE

Many fields of employment are open to criticism in the media: the corrupt policeman, the shady lawyer, the effeminate male hairdresser. Gender, ethnic, and racial biases can be seen in stereotypical depictions in the media. However, English language teaching (ELT) appears to have no overall positive representations in the media. Why is this the case for ELT?

In popular discourse theory, it has been established that if the media is a reflection of our lives, it can also help to shape and reinforce our perceptions of our world as well. These depictions of teachers may be a result of situations that already exist, but through the lens of the media they are then magnified to a greater degree. But why is ELT thought in such negative terms? Why is it an occupation of last resort? While it does have structural problems (short-term employment, uncertainty), it also offers great satisfaction and purpose to those who teach it. However, the ease with which an individual can become an English language teacher, and the field's relative acceptance of almost any native speaker in that role of English teacher, especially for temporary, 'quick buck' work in institutions in countries where English is considered a foreign language, colors many people's opinion of those in

ELT. As such, the relative ease in obtaining ELT work for the native speaker in the EFL world undoubtedly plays a part in these depictions.

There are a variety of factors that contribute to these negative images of ELT and those who work within it. The common denominator among the factors is that barriers to entry into mainstream ELT employment are low for native speakers of English. The historical power of ‘The Center’ countries have, through their hegemonic influence, placed the native speaker of English in the principal role in ELT, especially through methodologies that have insisted on communicative approaches. There has also been the acceptance of ‘the native speaker fallacy’ by many involved in the hiring of ELT and those who seek education in English, i.e. the students. Another consideration must include the ease of entry into the world of ELT – that almost any native speaker can don the mantle of teacher by dint of native speaker status. An additional factor is the relatively low lack of standards demanded by many employers (e.g. language schools) of the individuals they hire to work in their schools.

5. POSSIBILITIES FOR CHANGE

How can this current situation for ELT and those within it change? It seems perceptions will not alter until standards are set for native speakers before they can legitimately be recognized as teachers of English. This would involve rigorous training in order to be awarded qualifications in the field of ELT. Yet such programs to offer such training exist in abundance. The weak link is that employers in the EFL world often do not hesitate to hire native speakers based primarily on the base that they *are* native speakers. Until standards for employment in ELT are raised, the images that we see of English language teachers will continue to be somewhat negative and distorted as the depictions described beforehand indicate. As teachers we owe it to ourselves to insist on tighter restrictions and expectations of professionalism to enter the field. As a result, the negative image of this profession and those it may slowly improve.

However, in a field that has relied for so long on the untrained, casual teacher, and has created vast numbers of schools that could not survive without an influx of such people, the market pressure of demand and supply will make these changes difficult. It is, therefore, in the interests of professional teachers' bodies to continue to solidify the field by asserting the place of standards even in the face of these pressures. For the field and those involved in it to gain respect and dignity, this is an extremely important step. Perhaps then the images of English Language Teachers in the world of EFL may hopefully change.

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