

Centering Users of English: Antiracist Approaches to ELT

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Since the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, many of us have witnessed the ugly realities of racism in multiple forms in the media – from anti-Asian



racism in Western nations to anti-Black police violence in the United States and racial disparities in the access to healthcare or online learning. English language teachers who regularly use current topics for classroom discussion may have invited students to raise their awareness of racial inequities. However, racism

has existed long before the present pandemic, reproducing racial prejudices and racial hierarchies of power.

In the United States, for instance, anti-Black racism stems from a long-lasting legacy of slavery, whereas anti-Asian racism dates back to the late 19th century when Asian immigrants were vilified as a threat to the dominant White settlers. In English-dominant settler colonial societies, racial tensions and disparities clearly exist, and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) groups are positioned as subordinate to White people. In contrast, South Korea and other non-English-dominant countries do not appear to suffer from such racial problems. But is that the case?

In reality, English language teaching (ELT) creates a space in which White superiority and discrimination against people of color continue to be reproduced. In recent years, many scholars in applied linguistics and language education have pointed out that native speakerism in ELT – a belief that native speakers of English are ideal English language teachers – is closely linked to Whiteness, positioning White L1 English speakers at the top of the raciolinguistic hierarchy. This belief influences the mindset of local people, including policymakers, administrators, teachers, parents, and students, and perpetuates the superiority of Whiteness. Conversely, L1 English teachers

from Black or other racialized heritages tend to receive adverse views and treatments.

In today's globalized society, English language education is actively promoted based on the belief that proficiency in English promises economic prosperity for individuals and nation states. Students are encouraged to manipulate English grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation just like L1 English speakers do. Educators have been making efforts to advance pedagogical and technological innovations to boost learners' proficiency as measured by standardized tests. However, what often gets lost in this endeavor is the fundamental question: "For what purpose do we use English?"

Most students of English pursue learning in order to communicate with English users in many parts of the world. If this is indeed their communicative goal, is developing linguistic knowledge and skills sufficient? Will learners be able to communicate effectively with all types of English speakers once they acquire an advanced level of English skills? I would answer these questions in the negative.

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Learning English, or any language, typically motivates learners to acquire skills to use a set of standardized linguistic codes. However, using these codes constitutes only one part of communication. The ultimate goal of learning a language is to communicate with diverse others. As a global lingua franca, English is used by people from diverse backgrounds with regard to race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, age, ability, and so on. Our

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students will communicate with not only White native speakers but also these diverse users of English. They must cultivate not only linguistic skills but also dispositions for communicating with diverse people in a respectful manner.

Some teachers may argue that such dispositions are part of general interpersonal skills and should be developed outside of English classrooms. However, as I mentioned earlier, ELT reproduces ideology that positions White native speakers as superior and racialized people as inferior via teaching materials, classroom instruction, and teacher hiring practices.

Nonetheless, there is hope. The ideological nature of ELT implies that constructing a counter discourse to challenge the dominant ideology is possible. Teachers can take initiative to contest the harmful ideologies that undermine the legitimacy of racialized users of English and nonnative English speakers. It is important to raise learners’ critical awareness of raciolinguistic power hierarchies that actually affect them during global communication in English.

Specifically, Korean learners’ attempt to emulate White native speakers of English leads to contradictory outcomes. That is, no matter how they try to become closer to White native speakers of English, they can never acquire Whiteness. Being Asian speakers of English is a disadvantaged social

positioning even with native-like proficiency. This is clearly demonstrated by raciolinguistic discrimination against Asian Americans or Asian Canadians in North America or in other English-dominant countries, as coronavirus anti-Asian racism has painfully demonstrated.

Antiracist and anti-oppressive pedagogies liberate learners and other stakeholders from harmful ideologies that marginalize them and contradict the ultimate aim of learning English for global communication. It is necessary



for all of us to stay critical and explore an alternative vision for human equity through English language education.

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