

Theoretical Analysis, Classroom Practice, Opinion Essays

Worth the Risk: Towards Decentring Whiteness in English Language Teaching

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Abstract

The field of English language teaching (ELT) has long centred whiteness without acknowledging as much. Practitioners accept the field's racial disparities under the guise of the search for profit, yet hegemonic whiteness controls our institutions, our curricula, and our pedagogy unless we, as members of this field, consciously seek to counteract its influence. White ELT professionals are incentivized to maintain the racial status quo and many exhibit fierce resistance when efforts are made to discuss white supremacy in English teaching. In this article, I demonstrate how ELT frames whiteness as both a prize and a goal, explain the deleterious impact whiteness has on racialized students and teachers, argue for the necessity of decentring whiteness, and provide suggestions for ways we can push our field towards a future where whiteness no longer reigns supreme.

Introduction

For better or worse, a surgical transformation into the possession of white skin does not exist, despite the persistence of lightening creams and other forms of cosmetic physical alteration. Yet whiteness is more than the possession of light-coloured skin. No, whiteness, like all racial categories, is a construct of power (Kendi, 2019), power often gained through ill-gotten means, and those classified as white are the gatekeepers of membership to a club that maintains its identity through the hoarding of property (Harris, 1993). Consequently, though certain European groups have managed to transition from racialized to less so over the course of several generations due to the expanding population of those with even less power in North America (Roediger, 2006), an individual cannot transform themselves from non-white to white. The promise we ELT professionals make to the racialized is that individuals can save themselves from the oppression otherwise visited upon them—an ideal that, itself, helps reify racial hierarchies by confining all racism to individual actors (DiAngelo, 2010)—and one of the ways a person is told that they can be saved from the precarity and pain endemic to powerlessness is to attain facility in the English language, ideally without an “accent” or manner of speech that marks them as notably deficient to the white listener (Flores & Rosa, 2017). In other words, what we ELT professionals are truly promising to students, even without understanding that we are doing so, is the chance to get closer to whiteness. Whiteness, however, is an ideology that depends upon exclusion, so this promise is doomed to be broken, and no racialized speaker of English can truly become white, nor will they be seen as white, even if credentialed as language teachers (Ramjattan, 2019). Unless and until the field of English language teaching (ELT), also referred to as teaching English as an additional language (TEAL), teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), or teaching English as a second language (TESL), undergoes profound changes, the best that students can hope for is to pantomime a reasonable facsimile of whiteness without full equity. In this essay, I plan to demonstrate how ELT frames whiteness as

both a prize and a goal, argue for the necessity of decentring whiteness, and provide suggestions for ways we can push our field towards a future where whiteness is no longer supreme.

Author Positionality

I am a Black¹ doctoral student and adult educator with a decade of experience in ELT. I started my career by receiving a position I had not earned, teaching English to South Korean high school students by virtue of my status as a “native” speaker of the language (but really the possession of a passport and citizenship from the United States), undergoing a similarly challenging, liminal experience to those documented by Charles (2019). Like many, I was attracted to the promise of the relaxing “exotic” experience promoted on the internet, and I decamped to East Asia with a grand total of five days’ experience creating lesson plans. Nevertheless, I was actually one of the more committed teachers in my cohort, as the job was, for most I encountered, either a stepping stone to other careers or a nonstop party divorced from professional accountability. I do not place all of the blame for this atmosphere on the teachers who, like me, accepted the baubles placed in front of them, and I will return to the mechanics of international recruitment in a later section, but I include this part of my past to ground this argument in the reality that I am not immune to benefiting from the centring of whiteness in ELT, even though I am not white. Indeed, I received the offer despite my racialized status because of my “elite” university pedigree, evidence of the illusion that one can achieve an educational escape from racialization.

In the years since my return to New York, I have often felt out of place in our field, and I have spent much of my time confronting a curious mix of silence, ignorance, and defensiveness on the topic of race in ELT, despite the fact that many of these students will inevitably experience racism due to their presence in the United States or Canada. In my current doctoral program, I have thus focused my empirical research and theoretical analysis on race, and have come to understand that, although there are a handful of ELT professionals and researchers concerned with race, there is significantly less work done unpacking whiteness and how it has always served as the central driving force behind ELT. Consequently, it has become my goal to write and speak explicitly about whiteness in ELT, as I believe this critical lens is frequently absent from discussions where it would be beneficial.

I should note that I am working and studying in the United States, and that this journal, of course, is a Canadian publication. I chose to write for a primarily Canadian audience for two interrelated reasons, namely the fact that, as Gulliver and Thurrell (2016) found, Canada has a reputation for being more committed to multiculturalism than my own country while simultaneously remaining in deep denial of its own historical and present-day racism. That is, I believe Canadian ELT professionals need to hear this argument, but I also expect they may be more receptive to it, and I hope that they prove me right.

¹ The capitalisation of “Black” and decapitalization of “white” is a deliberate political choice. “White” is capitalised in some of the quoted literature and has thus not been altered there.

Part 1: The Centring of Whiteness

Ulterior Motives

We live in a world controlled by “free-market” ideologues chiefly concerned with profit and the accumulation of capital by any means necessary (Harvey, 2007). This statement is true of most forms of commerce, not just language education, but to pretend that our field is immune to the economic forces under which we all live is unwise. Indeed, among other examples, the subfields of “accent reduction” and “business English” would not have much salience without a strong economic impetus. Regarding the former, Sewell (2016) wrote, “The commercial products of accent commodification play on the ambition and insecurity of the upwardly-mobile.... The noticeability of accent, and the insecurities it provides, make it a particularly marketable commodity” (p. 29).

Some who support unfettered capitalism would like us to believe it is not based upon racial categorization—i.e., that the only colour it would admit to caring about is green—but this system depends upon the exploitation of those with less power, and the creation of race as we know it today is a construct of power differentials built to justify continued imperialism. Kendi (2019) referred to racism and capitalism as “conjoined twins,” writing that upon their mutual codification in the 16th century, “these newborns looked up with tender eyes to their ancient siblings of sexism, imperialism, ethnocentrism, and homophobia” (p. 156). One cannot successfully argue against the white supremacy in ELT without arguing against the profit motive in the field, and this necessarily requires arguing against our adherence to capitalism. Consequently, when Phillipson (2008) wrote of the *linguistic imperialism* endemic to our field, we should be careful to remember that this reifies white supremacy and vice versa, a loop we have long struggled to escape as we have attempted to separately dismantle these hopelessly intertwined systems of oppression and domination. He explained,

English contributes to the imperial production of subjectivities, through communicative networks, creating a synergy that integrates structural and ideological elements in the new world ‘order.’ The key networks are identifiable, and their language policies can be empirically verified. This ‘order’ is upheld through English at the global level, and through other languages in hierarchical structures. This symbolic violence is invariably contested but is widely, uncritically internalized. (p. 36)

We attempt to justify our pernicious practices in the name of profit, claiming a form of neutral amorality, encapsulated in Phillipson’s (2008) above-mentioned “order,” whereas white supremacy, a system of flagrant immorality, covertly works hand in hand with our rapacious pursuit of revenue and finds itself silently justified. To uncritically support capitalistic goals in our field is to help white supremacy remain in control, yet the idea that ELT promotes these destructive values is discomfiting for many, and understandably so. It is worth examining that discomfort in more detail.

Resistance

Since most American and Canadian ELT professionals are white, much of this resistance can be categorized as what DiAngelo (2011) has termed *white fragility*, in which the slightest amount of “racial stress” feels unbearable, leading to a range of “defensive moves” (p. 54), e.g., anger and dismissiveness. It is important to note that these “defensive moves” do not necessarily follow direct accusations of racism but rather any explicit discussion of whiteness or race.

Consequently, vital analysis of the racial disparities in ELT is avoided due to white fragility, and the concerns of the racialized are thereby invalidated. An observer unfamiliar with these concepts may view this evasive behaviour as neutral or harmless, but DiAngelo and Matias (2013) referred to this inability to hear the voices of the racialized as a form of neurosis, writing, “White neurosis is not benign, while it may appear so to well-intentioned Whites” (p. 12).

Indeed, that false perception of harmlessness is one of the main reasons why it remains challenging for the field to counteract its white supremacy—an ideology few would consider benign—and thus to reconcile its power over our profession with our belief in the virtue of our work is an exceptionally large pill to swallow.

Much of the argument being presented in this article concerns the disparity between the perceived neutrality, or even altruism, of ELT professionals, and the actual impact of the system they both inhabit and control. Earlier this year, I theorized about this internal conflict with the concept of the *altruistic shield* (2020), which I defined as “a psychological mechanism used by educators that allows us to outright deny or otherwise defend ourselves from anticipated or in-the-moment accusations of racism because of what we consider to be the altruistic nature of our work” (p. 22). In its worst manifestations, white ELT professionals can fall victim to the *white saviour complex* (Straubhaar, 2015), seeking to “save” their inherently deficient racialized students. Many ELT professionals, though occasionally made aware of our field’s white supremacy, cling to the perceived social good of our work to avoid considering the way our field centres and values whiteness above all else, even to the point that we are willing to begrudgingly accept forms of discrimination (e.g., *linguistic imperialism*, *native speakerism*, et al.) so long as race itself is not the focus of the discussion. I wish that articles and books highlighting the centrality of racism among our field’s issues did not need to be written, but the confluence of our understandable desire to believe in the goodness of our work and our inability to honestly grapple with race have allowed whiteness to remain centred in our field, and so the work will have to continue. To be clear, this is not just a problem because of its inherent immorality, though that is problem enough. No, the silent framing of whiteness as a goal both inescapable and unattainable is a problem because it is genuinely harmful to our racialized colleagues and students.

Part 2: The Impact of Centred Whiteness

The Impact on Racialized Teachers

One of the central contentions of this article is the idea that, due to the resistance outlined in the previous section, any manner of alternative justification for racial disparities within the field will be sought rather than directly considering white supremacy. One of the ways this “anything but racism” mindset maintains power is through the claim some educational institutions make that

customers—be they students or their parents—prefer a certain type of teacher, and so if that certain type of teacher happens to be white, so be it. As Canadian scholar Ramjattan (2015) explained, “In ELT, race and language are also components in the aesthetic labour of teachers: to look good is to be white, while to sound right entails speaking an inner circle variety of English” (p. 694). Accordingly, if international recruitment websites promise native speakers a fun and exotic experience and do not ask for professional qualifications, even using stock photos of young white people for promotional purposes (Ruecker & Ives, 2015), then the resultant population of expatriate English teachers—who are, for similarly discriminatory reasons, never considered *immigrants* or *migrants* (Yeung, 2016)—will match what the market demands. The implication is that the market is neutral and unfeeling, and free from our very human bigotry. Yet, as Sung (2011) explained, the racism is evident just beneath the surface. As he wrote of an experience at his workplace, “I recall a complaint made by a parent to the clerk in 2009 that her child was being taught by a teacher of Indian descent. The teacher, who was born and raised in the UK, was a native speaker of English, yet was perceived to be someone who speaks ‘with an accent’ because of her appearance” (p. 27). Similarly, Faez (2012) found that racialized teachers at a Canadian school were hardly even classified as native speakers, even if they were born in the country.

The Möbius strip of whiteness feeds upon itself, with clients believing that teachers who look (and sound) a certain way will be better teachers, schools hiring based upon what they consider a neutral economic condition, and racialized teachers suffering accordingly. The examples cited above range from East Asia to Canada, contexts with very different laws pertaining to explicit racial discrimination, yet the practices remain similar even in the latter country, where *de jure* segregation is illegal. Our field is thus inhospitable to those who do not fit the idealized image, and this racial hierarchy is maintained by what we categorize as purely economic reasoning. Even if one does not buy the argument that capitalism is inherently racist, the pursuit thereof has led to gross disadvantages for racialized ELT professionals. And if that disadvantage feels unavoidable for some reading this article, let us consider the following example of how this state of affairs ultimately harms our predominantly racialized students.

The Impact on Racialized Students

A system in which racialized teachers are marginalized and unsupported is a system in which white teachers and administrators are centred and prioritized, and this can have deleterious results. Schalge and Soga (2008) sought to understand the absenteeism at a community language school, a phenomenon that is hardly uncommon, and they found that, although the teachers and administrators ascribed the low rate of retention to logistical issues (one teacher described the absent students as, “[people who] can’t come because they are breast-feeding, or something” (p. 156)), the students themselves expressed dissatisfaction with the slow speed of the classes, unclear expectations, and disorganization: “Because we’re still on page 86, 87, we jumped to page 196” (p. 157). The study does not centre on race, though the students are all from racialized groups, and in the version of ELT that has long been dominant, these students are destined to be consistently underestimated and thus mistreated.

It may seem subtle, but this dismissal of racialized voices is nothing short of what Bourdieu (2005) has termed *symbolic violence*. The linguistic marginalisation of students of

colour serves only to reify our extant status quo, and, like the administrators in Schalge and Soga's (2008) study, when addressed, we deflect and distract, raising our altruistic shield to avoid addressing the racial disparities in our field. As Matias (2013) explained, "Since the teaching force, curricula, policies, and teacher education pipeline are White-dominant, the context for repressed forms of violence is maintained. If disrupted, White performative recurrences of anger, avoidance, guilt, dismissal, and repression stifle race knowledge" (p. 188). Any educator, ELT or otherwise, not actively disrupting the status quo of whiteness is contributing to the perpetuation of symbolic violence, and claims of neutrality, supported by a focus on economic concerns or not, are insufficient excuses for a failure to engage with white supremacy. With all this said, however, and with these many criticisms levied against the field and its practitioners, my argument would be incomplete without an attempt to point us towards a future where whiteness is no longer positioned as an unattainable goal for both students and teachers.

Part 3: The Work of Decentring Whiteness

The following is a series of suggestions for decentring whiteness in ELT. First, I offer some broader structural changes and policy recommendations that will take considerable time and effort to implement but are perhaps more impactful because of their possible reach, and then propose individual changes that every ELT professional can and should make.

Structural Changes

Journals. Among the several hundred journals in ELT, very few are consistently and explicitly concerned with race. I am not referring to journals about language and culture—a frequent obfuscation for frank racial discussion (Lee, 2015)—but language and race. Many of the articles cited above appear in journals of different disciplines, but there should be a designated place where scholarship focused on this intersection can be found, whether it is through the creation of new journals or special full issues of extant publications. There should be a scholarly nucleus around which this conversation orbits and from which both new conceptualizations and empirical research can be sourced. Part of what holds this discussion on the margins is that it is spread so thinly that its potential power is thereby reduced.

Conferences. The organizers of conferences are occasionally amenable to changing their programs and planning (as we have all seen in 2020). Potential presenters, including readers of this article, should not agree to sit on all-white panels unless the whiteness is a topic of analysis. Indeed, conference-goers should refuse to attend these panels, or attend them and challenge their construction. If the vast majority of the keynote speakers are also white, ELT professionals, including the people reading this article, should contact those with the power to make changes to this plan and not give their (or their school's) money to centred and unquestioned whiteness, especially in conferences explicitly focused on language education. In fact, we are likely to come across advertisements for conferences with themes related to "culture" or even "social justice" without a direct mention of race. As critical consumers of scholarship, we must push the organizers to change the public face of this industry or little evolution will occur.

Program Curricula. As Picower (2009) has noted, white teachers enter the profession with an extremely low level of racial literacy, and some might thus recommend that ELT education programs concentrate their curricula more explicitly on frameworks such as Critical Race Theory, which descended from legal studies to inform the work of scholars such as Bell (1995) and Ladson-Billings (1998), and teaches that racism is both constant and pervasive, among other central tenets. Yet, valuable though CRT and similar lenses are, I would argue that without an explicit incentive to draw attention towards the field's unspoken whiteness, the darkness of ELT will continue to evade the sunlight. Thus, I contend that whiteness and Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) need to be a part of the curriculum for programs that educate the majority-white ELT professional corps in North America, in addition to the inclusion of CRT and related frameworks. In my doctoral research, I am conducting interviews with white ELT professionals who have developed a critical scholarly lens through which they understand, use, and work against their whiteness, to document both how they developed their critical literacy and how programs might instill this ideological shift in future educators, but this work should not be necessary, and every white ELT professional must be conversant with and critical of the whiteness in our field if we have any hope of dismantling white supremacy.

Individual Study

Racial identity. There is a growing body of research on white racial identity, though, unfortunately, much less on its connection to ELT. As an individual with the choice to consume varied scholarship to inform one's development, though, there is no reason to limit oneself to this narrow intersection. Articles like Ullucci's (2012), in which the author analyzes the racial autobiographies of incoming white educators, can provide suggestions for white ELT professionals as to how to consider their own racial identities, and/or how to help develop these skills among white colleagues and students. Crowley (2016) conceptualized different versions of white racial knowledge, a useful model for consumers to use for self-reflection and self-analysis. A targeted dive into white teacher racial identity research, and particularly the work of Helms (1990), is necessary for the decentring of whiteness; understanding the full scope of the problem through one's own identity will increase salience and help us address these issues effectively.

Race and language scholarship. Although the intersection of race and language education is an under-explored topic, the literature thereof is not non-existent. Some of the most celebrated articles have already been cited above, including the work of Flores and Rosa (2015 & 2017) in defining and developing the concept of *raciolinguistic ideologies*, turning the focus away from the supposed deficiencies of racialized people and towards the *white listener*. Some of the best scholarship on race and language has originated from British Columbia itself, as Kubota has spent decades advancing the cause of race in ELT and Applied Linguistics (Kubota, 2002; Kubota & Lin, 2006; Kubota, 2019), including the observation that knowledge itself, especially within language-related fields, contains racial hierarchies. More needs to be developed and published, but what exists should be sought and consumed.

Interdisciplinary literature. Since the race and language literature is not as vast as that of other aspects of the field, and since, as mentioned, there is not a prominent nucleus for its ongoing propagation, people in the ELT field should seek out interdisciplinary literature for its application to their pedagogy, some of which has been cited above. Whether it is work that

analyzes the power structures in language even if not explicitly centred on race (Canagarajah, 1999; Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Phillipson, 2008;), or influential scholarship on race, oppression, and education that can be applied to language if given a slight push (Freire, 1970 & 2000; Kendi, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Paris, 2012), if an ELT professional consciously seeks to find a sturdier base for their critical literacy, the kindling for the internal fire exists. And, above all, any scholar hoping to write publically on language studies needs to be certain their citations include a considerable amount of contributions from scholars of colour, or else the work of white authors will remain supreme.

Conclusion

This work will not be easy or short, and it will most likely not be smooth. For reasons discussed above, outright resistance may occur, with anger and fear used as discursive buffers. ELT professionals who are not eager to learn how to decentre whiteness are unlikely to take the steps needed to make these changes, and accordingly, the work will have to come from those of us who are committed to this praxis. We must be prepared for and accepting of a long, slow, iterative battle, and it may often not feel worth the effort. And, it must be asked: Is it? Are the potential pitfalls of challenging whiteness worth the risk of doing so?

I would say, for the sake of our colleagues of colour, our racialized students, and our own morality, we cannot afford the risk of not doing so. We must bring whiteness into the light and drag it out from behind the scenes where it has long pulled the strings, with a firm grasp upon our field of ELT. We cannot centre the destruction and violence endemic to whiteness and show love to racialized students at the same time. It is our purpose as professionals to push our practice forward. We must fulfill our promise to the people we have long claimed to serve but never truly shown the care and affection they have always deserved. I hope that my plea will find its way to sympathetic eyes and ears in the nation to my north, and I choose to be optimistic about our field and the people within it.

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