Race in the Field of SLA: Theories, Problems, and Implications

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Abstract
Though the past couple of decades have seen increased scholarship in the sociolinguistic and sociocultural perspectives of second language acquisition (SLA), the topic of race in general is still commonly avoided in educational research. Reasons for this are often identified as related to the negative stigma attached to the word "race", as it is inextricably tied to *racism*; the concept of *race* itself is also removed from the more salient, affective aspects of culture encompassed by the term *ethnicity*. Deciding how to approach race in research studies is also problematic – qualitative *emic* research is often considered less rigorous and generalizable, whereas an overly theoretical *etic* perspective fails to convey the complex social dynamics that race relations entail. Some scholars advocate for a complete abandonment of race as a category for fear of perpetuating divisive discourse. However, ignoring such a clear issue in the field of SLA could also be counter-productive to understanding the diverse body of students and teachers that comprise it. Individual, race-based perspectives can only be understood by documenting and disseminating the unique and diverse voices of learners and educators. This article reviews some relevant literature, which include qualitative studies as well as informal and often personal observations that recount the experiences of both English learners (ELs) and teachers. Practical takeaways for all educational settings, domestic and abroad, are contextualized within a theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS), and other relevant theory.

Introduction
The past couple of decades have seen a major shift in focus to sociolinguistic and applied linguistic research. This has led to what is sometimes called a "social turn" (Block, 2003, as cited in Faez, 2012) from what had previously been a more methodological and theoretical cognitive approach. Scholars, worried that individual language-learning experiences were not satisfactorily being acknowledged with an etic, perhaps overly analytical and generalized methodology, have begun looking at emic perspectives to further examine more difficult to categorically define personal constructs such as gender, race, ethnicity, and "other factors that contribute to the construction of individual identity" (Faez, 2012, p. 124).

Though the past couple of decades have seen increased scholarship in these areas, Kubota and Lin (2009) warn that the topic of race in general "has not yet earned significant visibility in second language scholarship, unlike other related fields such as sociology, anthropology, education, and composition studies" (see Amin, 1997; Ibrahim, 2000; Willet, 1996; as cited in Kubota & Lin, 2009, p. 1). Reasons for this possible lack of research are often identified as

related to the negative stigma attached to the word "race", as it is inextricably tied to racism, an area that most fear treading (Kubota & Lin, 2006, 2009). Though an emic approach to race is not without its issues – are narrative and counter-storytelling approaches analytical and objective enough (Kubota & Lin, 2006)? Does the topic itself downplay issues of class and poverty (Kubota & Lin, 2009)? – we can only truly understand the race-based perspectives of both students and teachers in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) by having their unique voices represented in educational literature.

The Problem of "Race"

Before looking at how race can and has impacted teachers and learners of a second language, current thought on the subject – which has proven itself inherently problematic – needs to be understood. Scholarly attentions have recently been concentrated on unequal power relations in society and the importance of taking a critical approach to pedagogy and discourse analysis (most famously by Bonny Norton in her book "Identity in Language Learning", 2000-2013), and the vital topic of identity formation is certainly connected to race (Faez, 2012). The clearest and most glaring issue with this controversial topic, however, is that race is essentially an ever-evolving construct formed by social discourse and not a biologically significant nor strict category; race has even been said to reflect the notion of an "imagined community" in that it only exists in human minds (Anderson, 1983, as cited in Kubota & Lin, 2009, p.3). In fact, 99.9% of human genes are shared by all (Kubota & Lin, 2009), so innate characteristic differences among racial groups are not in any way quantifiable or significant. To avoid the minefield of race and attempt to look more at the crux of the matter – which are differences in culture that conflict with each other in societal interactions between members of different communities – the term *ethnicity* frequently replaces the term *race* as a "politically correct code word" (Miles & Brown, 2003, as cited in Kubota & Lin, 2009, p. 3) that also looks at sociocultural characteristics.

While such an approach can potentially circumvent controversy and accusations of racist discourse, it also introduces the difficult-to-define concept of culture: what elements of culture will be analyzed in a study, and how is culture defined in the context of that work? Is ascribing cultural characteristics to an identifiable group or speech community racist by nature? Is exploring culture equivalent to exploring race, or does the construct of race still need to be analyzed? Furthermore, does discussing race in and of itself lead to increased division among us, or does it lend itself to a greater mutual understanding and a building of solidarity among those who belong to the same ethnic group (Kubota & Lin, 2009)? Some scholars advocate for a complete abandonment of race as a category in any field for fear of perpetuating divisive discourse and argue that officially identifying it as a category legitimizes race as a reality rather than simply a discursive construct (Kubota & Lin, 2009). However, ignoring such a clear issue in the field of SLA (no matter how shaky its factual foundations) could also be counter-productive to understanding the diverse body of students and teachers that comprise it, and, more specifically, to the spheres of English as a Second / Foreign Language (ESL / EFL). The very *idea* of race, while it may not have a firm biological basis, greatly influences the teaching and learning experiences of all individuals in any educational discipline regardless – the general populace cares little for the semantics surrounding this heavily-laden term.

Theory and Terminology

For the purposes of this brief research synthesis, I will be looking at qualitative studies as well as informal and often personal observations recounted by researchers in their works that contextualize the experiences of both language learners and teachers under various prevailing theories. The most prominent of these is Critical Race Theory (CRT), which takes a magnifying

glass to society in order to analyze how race, legal practices, and negotiations of power interact (Kubota & Lin, 2009). Another prevalent perspective comes from Critical White Studies (CWS), which asserts whiteness to be an "invisible and unmarked norm against which all Others are racially and culturally defined, marked, and made inferior" (Kubota & Lin, 2009, p. 10). This view is especially blatant in case studies that looked at the domestic and international markets for English Language Teachers (ELTs); foreign advertisements consistently equated Native-speaker status with whiteness (Ruecker, 2011; Faez, 2012) and domestic schools privileged hiring white Native English Speakers (NESs) over Non-Native English Speakers (NNESs) (Motha, 2006; Kubota & Lin, 2006) despite skill level, background, or teaching experience, a phenomenon which will be more closely explored later. While language may seem an entity quite separate from race, "…linguistic and racial hierarchies are intertwined, with accents associated with white speakers assigned a higher degree of prestige than those generally connected to racial minorities" (Lindemann, 2003, as cited in Motha, 2006, p. 76). Language and race are not only enmeshed, then, but often equated.

Ligget (2014) identified three major aspects of CRT that would prove most significant to our understanding of the relationship between language and race for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). While this article does not focus on practical or pedagogical applications of theory, it is worthwhile to frame abstract concepts in a more useful way. "The first aspect is to explore the notion of linguicism as an ordinary, permanent fixture in society.... This would entail examining how ELs routinely encounter discrimination based on language proficiency and accent in their school community and beyond" (Ligget, 2014, p. 118) (*Linguicism* refers to discrimination based on language rather than by race). Specific, real-world instances will later attest to the verity of this statement. The fact that linguicism is described both as "ordinary" and "permanent" in modern society is quite sobering, yet it does seem unlikely that such discrimination will ever fully disappear.

Ligget then identified colonialism as the second major aspect to consider and advised including teacher-training curricula on this topic in relation to language and education policy to help remedy the problem. To explain further, a postcolonial approach argues that binary oppositions were paramount in colonial discourse, and we have not yet shaken that notion of the Self and the Other; unfortunately, the Other is commonly positioned as incompetent or deficient to the Self (Motha, 2006; Faez, 2012). Agency, which I will here define as a person's ability to act upon will or make decisions which impact their life – often described as an ability to move, and literally "position" oneself socially (Norton, 2013) and described by positioning theory (Harré et al., 2009) – can be viewed as hindered by lingering colonial attitudes that lead to discrimination. Members of a community who are so positioned as inferior may not even be afforded the right to engage in conversation with those on a higher level of the social hierarchy, nor are they able to re-position themselves within that hierarchy (Faez, 2012; Harré et al., 2009). Mackie (2003) identified disturbingly ubiquitous postcolonial ideals in her personal recounting of her experiences as an ESOL teacher in a Canadian school, as did Motha (2006) in her qualitative study of four first-year ESOL teachers in U.S. public schools, both of which will be examined more closely in in the next section of this article. In addition, the idea of *fixity* states that there is a strong, over-arching social investment in making sure that social categories remain "fixed", or unchanging; it is described as a "major discursive strategy" (Bhaba, 1994, as cited in Motha, 2006, p. 84) in that it is entirely dependent on discourse. Chipping away at these discursive structures can lead to an evening of the playing field, but it is not an easy task; an example will later be included of an ESOL teacher attempting to do exactly this.

Ligget's third and final major aspect regarding CRT's influence on TESOL was to advocate for narrative and storytelling within the classroom to "convey experiences of oppression" (Ligget, 2014, p. 118). "In this way, these individual accounts add the necessary contextual contours that Ladson-Billings (1998) points to as necessary components to deconstructing positivist perspectives" (p. 118). Doing so, in other words, may decrease researcher bias and its intrinsic influence on their observations, which post-positivists acknowledge must exist. Remember that Kubota and Lin (2009) did question the use of narratives and counter-narratives as possibly too subjective and lacking in analytical rigor; however, an opposing approach over-simplifies and generalizes the experiences of many into an etic perspective that fails to acknowledge the individual.

Before continuing with an analysis of specific qualitative cases and observations, I will quickly outline the most commonly cited forms of racism, which are behaviors and practices that disadvantage the chosen Other, influenced by the socially-constructed discourse about the race to which the Other belongs (whether merely perceived or in actuality) – what happens every day, in every part of society and in every social relation and community, is *institutional* or *structural* racism (Kubota & Lin, 2009). Meanwhile, *epistemological* racism is the undercurrent above which ontological categories – such as academic discourse, philosophy, knowledge, and practice – reside (Kubota & Lin, 2009). This concept is based upon the fact that influential names in the social sciences are almost exclusively Caucasian males, so all common epistemologies inherently and unconsciously privilege "the European modernist white civilization" (Scheurich, 1997, as cited in Kubota & Lin, 2009, p. 6).

Race and English Learners (ELs)

> *Dear English Second Language Instructor,*
> *Can you explain why most Asian male and female students at [] are cold and distant towards Caucasian students? For example, they tend to congregate amongst themselves and they don't say hello and communicate in any way to other students. [...] I was wondering if you would tell them to start acting like the ambassadors from their respective countries and treat [] students with some courtesy and respect. (Mackie, 2003, p. 33).*

The above quote is an excerpt from a letter included in Ardiss Mackie's article "Race and Desire: Toward Critical Literacies for ESL" (2003), and it was left for the ESL teachers at the school at which she worked in 2001 by a *Concerned Student*. I decided to begin this second half of this article with this quote because it clearly represents what Mackie called a "misconstruction" of identity (p. 33). Looking back at CWS, the idea of whiteness being the standard is incredibly clear here; the Asian students were the Other, and their behavior (which was over-generalized by the Concerned Student) was also discussed in a negative light, with no acknowledgement from the writer that there may be differences in expressing politeness in other cultures.

Mackie (2003) also identified the "continued postcolonial identification of ESL teachers as 'saviors' and 'correctors' and of ESL students as 'barbaric' and 'misbehaving' students" (p. 33). Why were the ELs themselves not consulted about this matter? Were they that low on the social hierarchy? This all makes evident the fact that racist attitudes – whether intentionally or unintentionally exhibited – are both inextricably linked to cultural practice (*ethnicity*) as well as entirely capable of influencing the learning environment inhabited by ELs. While this is not an example of concerted *institutional* racism, the student's skewed perspective fits with the

concept of *epistemological* racism; the letter's author likely based their notions of politeness and acceptable social interactions on the naturally acquired and pervasive viewpoints discussed, read, and disseminated in society, including in academic institutions.

Much more pronounced examples of overt marginalization, discrimination, and harassment were described in Suhanthie Motha's article "Decolonizing ESOL: Negotiating Linguistic Power in U.S. Public School Classrooms" (2006). After her observations, interviews, and exploration into the experiences of four new ESOL teachers in four U.S. public schools, she summarized three major findings present within each school, which she deemed "colonial manifestations" (p. 77); the previously stated inextricable tie between race and language is evident in these "manifestations", as race itself never seems to stand alone in the field of SLA. The first one she identified was that English was considered supreme over other languages, and there was clear favor for subtractive English. Of course, by displacing mother tongues, the students' ethnicities were also devalued, leading to a perhaps unintentional (though still real) sense of negativity toward those who possessed those ethnicities, which included their perceived races, spoken languages, and cultural behaviors.

The second "manifestation" she identified as present within all four schools was "an investment in keeping Self and Other dichotomous and separate, with Self superior to Other, reflected in a construction of the school categories of ESOL as Other, inferior, and deficit and of non-ESOL as the unmarked standard" (Motha, 2006, p. 78). ELs, then, were positioned against their desire as inferior to non-ELs due to the still-existing postcolonial desire for *fixity* of strict hierarchical categories. It is this finding under which many of the disturbing observations Motha recorded can be framed. One of the interviewed teachers, Alexandra, shared that mainstream students would pause at the doorway of the ESOL classroom and yell "You can't speak English" and "play with the light switch at the door" about once a week (p. 82). ESOL students were ashamed and tried to hide their status. Rather than their bi/multilingualism being seen as an admirable trait, it was in all cases viewed as deficient. Though the students needed ESOL support, "the social stigma of receiving ESOL services was so great that it superseded their language learning needs" (p. 83) – perhaps *linguicism*, rather than *racism*, would be a better descriptor of such an oppressive stigma.

A critical discourse analysis in any context is necessary to fully understand prevailing sentiments within that specific sphere. On a superficial level at each of the four schools, the predominant discourse was pro-diversity. Motha (2006) claims this was all "lip service" while, in actuality, staff were "surreptitiously coercing assimilation" (p. 78). Per her claims, however, assimilation and rejection of the Other were not surreptitious at all. A fellow mainstream teacher, Mr. Mecclesfield, is directly quoted as having said "[ESOL students] don't even belong [in the United States] anyway" (p. 88), as well as having stated that ESOL students should just be placed in separate classes and not mainstreamed in any sense; this was a clear opinion in support of *segregation*, a much more extreme stance than the already rejected one of *assimilation*, which at least assumes that ESOL students could become a part of the school culture (at the expense, of course, of erasing and reconstructing their individual identities to suit the marked norm). Many other teachers expressed a similar reluctance to work with ESOL students and did not even consider ELs eligible for the gifted and talented (GT) program at one of the teacher's – Margaret's – school. Alexandra was shockingly not approached or told about International Night, as it never occurred to the staff to actually include the ESOL students in the event: "And they were like, what can *they* tutor? I was like, they can tutor ESOL and they can tutor their native language" (Motha, 2006, p. 92, *Alexandra's account*).

I mentioned before that chipping away at the notion of fixity is not an easy task, though many of Alexandra's actions – one of which included encouraging a student who complained about a lack of Hispanic representation in the school newspaper to write a letter to the editor – were clearly intended to narrow the gap between the rigid categories present within her school of NES/NNES and ESOL/non-ESOL. Students internalized (a process described by Vygotsky, 1978) the utterances of others and feelings of shame, which therefore perpetuated unequal social divisions. Some students who had exited ESOL even began taunting their former peers out of desperation to distance themselves from that negatively-ascribed identity – though they would always be ascribed another, as they were still NNESs (Motha, 2006). "The students were lured by what Foucault (1979) has described *disciplinary power*, which works to attract individuals to certain identities and desires, in this case the identity of a non-ESOL student" (Motha, 2006, p. 83).

Improved professional development and revised (and culturally aware) teacher training curricula could lead to increased movements in a similar direction among all instructors and staff, not only those within ESOL such as Alexandra. An atmosphere of rejection and negativity is not conducive to learning, and – if the environment outside of school is no different – there will never be a deletion of the many boundaries between speech communities, races, nationalities, and ethnicities that are so prevalent in countries around the world.

Race and Second-language Instructors

When analyzing any construct within the field of education, it is necessary to look at its impact from the perspective of both the students and the teachers. As shown in the previous section, race in a postcolonial society has created a fundamental and binary divide between the Self and Other that students struggle to overcome as both NNESs and as members of frequently marginalized ESOL classes. The status of NES vs. NNES, however, is one that seems to have the greatest impact on teacher-candidates in the field of SLA, from international EFL teachers to domestic ESOL and university-level courses (Kubota & Lin, 2006; Motha, 2006; Ruecker, 2011; Faez, 2012). As Ruecker (2011) observed in his analyses of international advertisements for EFL teachers, NES status was sometimes explicitly connected to race. One in particular, from China, proclaimed "white native English speakers only!" (p. 410). While Americans, as well as populations of other English-speaking countries, are incredibly diverse, with NESs from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, epistemological racism has still seemed to lead to an overwhelming international preference for the Caucasian English speaker.

CRT is concerned not only with how race and power intersect in society but also with how law interacts with such practice (Kubota & Lin, 2009). As Ruecker (2011) pointed out, in foreign schools (some of which even require a photograph with the application), "the status of being a native speaker of English, narrowly defined by country of origin, has been codified into law and subsequently has been used to exclude NNES teachers (and even non-White NES teachers) regardless of their English teaching ability" (pp. 410-411). Though no similar laws exist in the U.S., as they would surely be labeled unconstitutional, the reality often proves quite different. Kubota and Lin (2006) identified the case of Ryuko, who was a Japanese woman who attended graduate school in North America (both Canada and the U.S.). Though she felt she was treated equitably as a student, when she was placed into a position of authority in the field of SLA, her reception seemed to shift:

> *Once, I gave a presentation to my colleagues about my thoughts on the need to include issues of politics and ideologies in second and foreign language teaching and teacher education. I mentioned something to the effect that we*

should address issues of race and ethnicity more. A couple of years later, in a reappointment review, I was criticized as being racist in my presentation. (…) I struggle with the double perceptions of me by others: a petite, sweet-looking Asian woman to immediate colleagues ("kiddo," as one colleague used to call me, and a scholar with a firm voice, respected yet invisible in publication. (p. 472).

Even at the highest level of education, Ryuko was unable to completely overcome racism spurred by stereotypical attitudes about her nationality; those around her expected her to perform the imagined role of a "typical" Asian woman.

More prevalent than the type of story above, however (in which Ryuko was still able to attain a job and find success within the field of SLA) seem to be stories of NNESs who struggle to find employment despite achieving a high level of education and English proficiency. As Ruecker (2011) stated, since native-speaker status has globally been assigned such value, "it is not surprising to hear prominent scholars such as Canagarajah (1999) explain how MATESOL programs may be preparing NNES students for a lifetime of unemployment" (p. 411). Such a phenomenon can happen in any country; while Canagarajah, (1999) as explained by Ruecker (2011), cited the case of a Korean MATESOL graduate who claimed Korean schools did not hire NNESTs because of a greater focus on a native-like accent and country of origin rather than educational qualifications, Motha (2006) also shared her observation that the K-12 school districts visible within her study displayed a clear preference for hiring NESTs, "reinforcing NESs' professional legitimacy and perceived ownership over English" (p. 78).

Arguably the most complex of such power notions, however (when viewed through the lens of CRT), is the plight of 1.5-generation teacher candidates. Faez (2012) conducted a year-long case study of 25 diverse teacher candidates in Canada, though he decided to then focus his attention on six generation 1.5 immigrants; four were described as "of color" and two were white. None of the four were technically native speakers. Though they had all achieved native-like proficiency, Caucasian NNESs in the study were more confidently able to claim nativeness due to their whiteness. Mary, one of the participants, stated "When I wanted to teach abroad, I had to say I was a native-English-speaker (…) I think I can pass as a native-English-speaker. I am relatively proficient in English, and I am white" (Faez, 2012, p. 131). This is quite a powerful proclamation, and one that should give international hiring managers pause; they are routinely privileging race at the potential expense of expertise, and race is not at all an indicator of NES status. Furthermore, how important is the idea of being completely "native" when all of the fully qualified teacher candidates in this study possessed a different L1? Their educational backgrounds and training should have carried greater weight than the notion of natively speaking a language but never having studied it in detail – let alone how to teach it.

The non-white NNESs in the study, however, faced greater uncertainty over whether their claims of nativeness would be challenged or not (Faez, 2012). Mr. Torrez, who was more comfortable with English than his L1, still said that he would be accepted as a native speaker by his employer because he did not look like one. Peter, originally from China, also expressed his fear of not being accepted as an authoritative figure within his role as an instructor: "(…) I know I will have a harder time asserting my role as teacher in the classroom in the eyes of those who think a good teacher is a native-English-speaker" (p. 133).

Conclusion

At the core of the issue of race and racism is the inherent truth that racially based constructs and ideologies are sometimes false. As has been shown, students suffer from flawed and biased perspectives rooted in colonial ideology and an historically and predominantly white epistemology, and practitioners suffer from the increasingly globalized push for NES – and often white – instructors in the field of TESOL. Prevailing discourse and attitudes lead immediately to behavior and practice, which means that every person involved in the teaching and receiving of language instruction is essentially performing a role that has been pre-decided by a discursively constructed social hierarchy that innately privileges one group in a dichotomy over another. These roles, however, are prejudiced and stereotyped, and lead to nothing but widening divides between ethnic groups in our increasingly diverse society.

I would like to close with a quote from Mackie (2003), who shared a cautionary tale of her own attempt to perform an expected role – in this case, how she thought a Japanese woman should behave (as she was living there as a foreign teacher):

> *I had based my attempts on a faulty premise, that is, that there is 'the Japanese woman,',*
> *that she is silent, passive, demure. Whether ridiculed or admired, my race, not me, came before anything else about me. My raced position was not something I could ignore. (…) I am suggesting that identity categories are sometimes false constructs (…) and that location or situation is a crucial part of how we see and how we are seen. (p. 32).*

At some point in the future, we will have hopefully moved away from our reliance on identity categories that attempt to lump unique individuals into over-arching and over-simplified – and therefore often harmful – constructs.

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