

FORUM

A Disability Critical Race Theory Solidarity Approach to Transform Pedagogy and Classroom Culture in TESOL

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Abstract

Until very recently, ability and whiteness as relational systems have been uninterrogated by TESOL research, policy, practice, and teacher education. Consequently, monolingual teachers often use students' proximity to whiteness and nondisabled status as a metric for ascertaining their ability or belonging in certain language learning spaces. Similarly, English language teachers' uncritical and unsupported engagement with policy and professional learning around race and whiteness contributes to the unwarranted subjection of multilingual students to the special education referral process. In this contribution, we aim to analyze the nuances of ableism and racism in the field of TESOL, and offer TESOL educators practical examples to dismantle it. Drawing from the critical intersectional framework of DisCrit, this contribution presents two DisCrit solidarity-oriented practical examples for the language classroom: cultural reciprocity and translanguaging. We argue that these support TESOL educators in understanding the relationship between whiteness and ability, as well as valuing the importance of multilingualism in school settings.

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INTRODUCTION

In October 2019, my mixed-race, multilingual son and I (Author 1) moved to Southern England from Bologna, Italy. Although he had attended the equivalent of kindergarten in Italy, I hoped to place him in the same level when we moved because he would be immersed in an English-only schooling environment. Upon enrollment, the head-teacher informed me that they would place him directly in the next level (Year 1) because of his age, rather than his acquired language and academic skills. By January, my son's teacher asked me to stay after the busy dismissal time to discuss an urgent matter. She explained that, based on his reading and writing in English, my son had a "problem" with syntax. She quickly added that "his problem" might be caused by a speech-language impairment. She asked me to consent to an evaluation by the school's speech-language therapist. The day of the appointment, the speech-language therapist took time to listen to me as I shared my son's linguistic, racial, and cultural background. I used my social and cultural capital to show academic resources on ableism in English language teaching practices. At the end of the conversation, the therapist decided it was pointless for him to be tested, and requested bilingual support in Italian and English from the local "Ethnic Minority Academic Success" service.

In a large urban middle school in the Northeastern U.S., Omar [pseudonym], a Somali-American seventh grader labeled as an English learner, was walking in the hallway unsupervised during class time. His hands, curled into fists, were thrust into the pockets of his blue jeans while his shoulders hunched forward, twisting his body into a tight question mark. The hallway's walls were lined with metal lockers which had been hastily opened and shut by students rushing to class between periods. As he passed each row, Omar's hand shot out of his pocket to loudly slam any locker left open. A white ESOL teacher threw open the door to her classroom and, upon seeing Omar walking away, furrowed her brow and called out, "Excuse me! Where are you supposed to be?" As Omar turned to look at her, she continued, coldly, "Omar, I asked you a question." He turned on his heel and threw his backside into the wall of lockers, looking toward his feet. The teacher shrugged, "Alright, I'm calling the office." Omar slammed the open locker next to him and stormed down the hallway. The teacher turned to me and said, "Ugh, he runs the halls like that all the time. Something is wrong with 'those' boys."

These vignettes tell personal stories of the global manifestation of whiteness and ableism in English language teaching contexts. In both stories, English language teachers pathologize their students' needs

and identities rather than evaluating how their praxis creates barriers for their students' learning, emotional health, and belonging. In the first vignette, a very young multilingual student is labeled as disabled by his monolingual teacher upon arrival to an English-only learning environment. Because of his racial identity and migratory status, typical language-learning phenomena are constructed as signs of a disability by his white, monolingual teacher. In the second vignette, an ESOL teacher engages in discursive positioning (Collins, 2011) to construct an adolescent student who needs support in emotional regulation and communication as one of "those' boys" based on his race, migratory status, and behavior. In this context, the teacher positions Omar and other Somali-American boys as pathologically deficient in their emotions and behavior.

TESOL has yet to engage and explicitly trouble the ways race and ability are co-constructed in classrooms where English is taught—especially by white, monolingual educators to multilingual students of color—thereby contributing to the relational systems of ability and whiteness. As Leonardo and Broderick (2011) argue,

In terms of race, the category, White, cannot exist without its denigrated other, such as Black or people of color generally; in terms of ability, constructs such as smartness only function by disparaging in both discursive and material ways their complement, those deemed to be uneducable and disposable. (p. 2208)

In practice, teachers often use students' proximity to whiteness and nondisabled status as a metric for ascertaining their ability or belonging in certain language learning spaces. For example, predominantly white and/or monolingual educators' and therapists' misunderstandings and biases related to language function for students with disabilities have resulted in the exclusion of students with disabilities from linguistically affirming education spaces and related service experiences (Cioè-Peña, 2020; Lim, O'Reilly, Sigafos, O'Reilly, Sigafos, Ledbetter-Cho, & Lancioni, 2018). Likewise, English language teachers' uncritical and unsupported engagement with policy and professional learning around race and whiteness contributes to the unwarranted subjection of multilingual students to the special education referral process (Migliarini & Stinson, 2020), insufficient provision of disability- and/or language-related services (Kangas, 2017; Stinson, 2018), and the disproportionate representation through under- and over-identification of multilingual children in special education (Artiles, 2013; Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higarreda, 2005).

As white language educators, our lane of scholarship, critique, and activism focuses on schooling contexts where the majority of educators are white, monolingual, and monocultural (NCES, 2020).

Furthermore, we are not in the position to analyze the approach of multilingual and/or teachers of color toward multilingual students because teachers of color have historically faced racism and discrimination themselves within monocultural education systems (Kholi, forthcoming; Love, 2019). Rather, the purpose of this essay is not to criticize white monolingual teachers' practices, but to highlight their powerful role in enacting social change (Giroux, 2021) through language teaching. We do so by analyzing the nuances of ableism and racism in TESOL, and offering praxical examples (i.e., rooted in praxis, and implying the coupling of critical thinking, reflection and feeling before the educational practice; Migliarini, Stinson & Hernández-Saca, in press) to dismantle it. The Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) solidarity framework challenges the deficiency lens through which students at the intersections of race, language, and dis/ability are constantly perceived and, therefore, has the potential to create more authentic solidarity with multiply marginalized students (Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013). DisCrit stems from the intellectual tradition of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Bell, 1976) and Disability Studies (DS) (Connor, 2008). In this contribution, we rely on all seven tenets of DisCrit¹, to present two DisCrit solidarity-oriented praxical examples for the language classroom: cultural reciprocity and translanguaging classroom praxis. Both support TESOL educators in understanding the relationship between whiteness and ability, as well as valuing the importance of multilingualism in school. We conclude by emphasizing the necessity of cross-fertilizing the field of TESOL with DisCrit solidarity. Through this, teachers can give up pedagogical "control" and reduce the possibilities of constructing multilingual students as a "threat" to the classroom order (Annamma & Morrison, 2018; Spratt & Florian, 2015).

DISCRIT SOLIDARITY THROUGH CULTURAL RECIPROCITY

The vignettes in the introduction show that teachers often do not grasp the mutually constitutive relationship between race and disability—and, therefore, whiteness and ability. It is important to train them through an approach that shifts and expands the imagination of

¹ The seven tenets of DisCrit are as follows: 1. DisCrit focuses on ways that racism and ableism circulate interdependently; 2. DisCrit values multidimensional identities; 3. DisCrit emphasizes social constructions of race and ability; 4. DisCrit privileges the voices of marginalized populations; 5. DisCrit considers legal and historical aspects of dis/ability and race; 6. DisCrit recognizes whiteness and ability as property; DisCrit requires activism (Annamma et al., 2013).

classroom praxis through a solidarity framework (Migliarini & Annamma, 2019). DisCrit solidarity guides us in asking how our understanding of power relations in the classroom must “be transformed so that they are not steeped in color-evasion and silent on interlocking systems of oppression” (p. 2). The framework also offers the opportunity to interrogate the ways ableism and linguicism reproduce inequities for students with disabilities. In this section, we examine the possibilities of cultural reciprocity through the DisCrit solidarity framework.

In the first vignette, the teacher did not develop a meaningful relationship with my (Author 1) family, nor learn about my son’s past educational and linguistic experiences. She quickly assumed that, as a Black, multilingual child, my son had disability-related language deficits. She would have benefitted from training in how to reflect on her practices and question her assumptions. Cultural reciprocity is a compelling practice in English language teaching, especially when building relationships with students, families, and communities (Kalyanpur and Harry; 2012). These authors highlight five key features that help build such collaboration:

1. It goes beyond awareness of difference to self-awareness;
2. It aims for subtle levels of awareness of differences, that is, the recognition of embedded values and beliefs underpinning people’s actions, and the awareness that these beliefs, assumed as universal, are in fact specific to one’s culture;
3. It has a universal applicability;
4. It avoids stereotyping;
5. It ensures that both parents and professionals are empowered (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012, p. 19).

Cultural reciprocity supports reflexivity and awareness of the self and others while developing a non-judgmental acceptance of different perspectives (Harry, 1992). Applied as praxis in TESOL, cultural reciprocity helps understanding multilingual students and families as truth-holders without dismissing their opinions. Through cultural reciprocity, teachers can ask critical questions about their assumptions and cultural values, and about families’ responses to existing classroom practices. Through the internalization of values of reciprocity, collaboration, and respect, cultural reciprocity avoids the trap of stereotypical solutions by investigating each situation as unique. If the teacher in the first vignette had applied cultural reciprocity, she would have requested a meeting with my family to learn about prior learning experiences. She would have asked us to reflect on his initial transition in the school and how he felt about the curriculum. Said differently,

she could have engaged us all in a learning dialogue (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012).

Applying a DisCrit solidarity approach through cultural reciprocity encourages teachers to move beyond monolingual/monocultural education curriculum and systems and legitimizes cultural heritage and the experiences of multilingual and historically marginalized students (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). It removes barriers to significant relations between students and teachers, and teachers and families. Furthermore, it leads to genuine mutual understanding, cooperation, and solidarity, by teaching values that pertain to students' backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). Finally, DisCrit solidarity through cultural reciprocity focuses on the intertwined oppressions that students experience. Instead of considering students through color-evasive perspectives (Annamma, Jackson, & Morrison, 2017), this approach encourages teachers to create a multidimensional analysis that centers the multiply-marginalized, and to think of justice solutions that could reach more students (Wing, 1990).

The teacher in the first vignette argued that the speech and language therapy service was not discriminatory but a service to “help” students despite decades of racial disproportionality research in UK special education (see Coard, 1971). Interestingly, some of my son's classmates, who are white and also considered English learners, were not referred to speech and language support. So, the color-evasive nature of the teacher's narrative is very clear. Finally, DisCrit solidarity through cultural reciprocity could help teachers understand how multilingual students and their families are enabled or disabled in monolingual and monocultural school environments, and equips them to create healthier classroom spaces (Annamma & Morrison, 2018).

DISCRIT SOLIDARITY THROUGH TRANSLANGUAGING CLASSROOM PRAXIS

In this section, we explore how DisCrit solidarity through translanguaging classroom praxis can support educators in challenging and disrupting ableism in the language classroom. We argue that DisCrit solidarity through translanguaging classroom praxis supports teachers in relinquishing their “control” of language use in the classroom, which is often informed by negative assumptions of disabled students' capacity for multilingualism, compliance, communication, and engagement. In this context, “control” refers to how white, monolingual teachers are positioned as the primary source of linguistic knowledge, value, and protocol by monolingual education policies, pedagogies,

and epistemologies which center English and Western cultural knowledge. The vignettes in the introduction show how language teachers—often unintentionally—work to maintain this “control” of language use, access, and identity in the classroom, especially through their constructions of students’ abilities/disabilities. Giving up this control diminishes the possibility of constructing disabled multilingual students as inherently deficient and, therefore, threatens to the English-only classroom order (Menken & Sánchez, 2019).

Translanguaging is defined as a strategic process (García, 2009b), theory of language (Wei, 2018), and as pedagogy (García, 2009a) which conceptualizes the linguistic practices and mental grammar(s) of multilingual people. It is rooted in the historic conflict between English, the imposed dominant language of colonization, and Welsh, the indigenous language endangered by policy and exclusion from formal education spaces in Wales. By the 1980s, children began learning through the concurrent use of Welsh and English in school, with means of representation in one language and means of expression in the other (Lewis, Jones, & Baker, 2012). Translanguaging has been adopted and expanded (theoretically and in application) by linguists and educators globally, such as García (2009a, 2009b) so that its emphasis has shifted from pedagogical (teacher-centered) phenomena to strategic (student-centered) phenomena.

We conceptualize translanguaging as *classroom praxis* to acknowledge the multifaceted conceptualization and application of translanguaging as process, theory, and practice as they relate to ableism in TESOL. Because translanguaging is born from indigenous resistance to oppression and centers students’ linguistic knowledge and practices as assets, translanguaging classroom praxis exemplifies how TESOL educators can disrupt ableism in the language classroom through DisCrit solidarity. Translanguaging classroom praxis shares theoretical origins and conceptual commitments with DisCrit solidarity. Both frameworks draw from indigenous knowledge and movements to, “welcome various actions in the classroom as gifts” —such as language use—and to “respond in ways that cultivate those gifts” (Annamma & Morrison, 2018, p. 77).

Following DisCrit solidarity, translanguaging classroom praxis affirms that all students are competent and strategic language users. According to Otheguy, García, and Reid (2015), translanguaging is “the deployment of a speaker’s full linguistic repertoire without regard for watchful adherence to the socially and politically defined boundaries of named (and usually national and state) languages” (p. 281). Following this definition, translanguaging classroom praxis calls on teachers to presume competence of all students, regardless of disability status or learning needs, for language learning and learning through

language. This challenges teachers' biases related to race, ability, and language which contribute to the misidentification, misunderstanding, and/or invisibilizing of disability in multilingual students due to subjective referral and evaluation processes (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002; Artiles et al., 2005), as well as the exclusion of many multilingual children with disabilities from inclusive bilingual education programs (Cioè-Peña, 2020).

In the second vignette, Omar's teacher does not presume his linguistic or communicative competence. Because she has positioned Omar and other Somali-American boys as "threats" to the classroom order, she attempts to control Omar's language use, access, and behavior to support compliance and conformity. This results in Omar escaping the classroom and expressing his emotions in a way that he knows will be acknowledged. Translanguaging classroom praxis would support this teacher in helping Omar to process and communicate his thoughts, needs, and emotions in a linguistically affirming way. Furthermore, translanguaging classroom praxis would guide Omar's teacher in disrupting her deficit construction of "those' boys," which would position students as competent members of a classroom order rooted in solidarity and linguistic and cultural affirmation.

Furthermore, because it resists "watchful adherence" to what defines a named language (e.g., Kinyarwanda, Spanish), translanguaging classroom praxis holds space for multilingual students who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems and other alternatives to conventional spoken language. Such students are typically marginalized in language classrooms because oral/aural communication is the prioritized means of content representation, engagement, and expression (e.g., Ellwood & Nakane, 2009). Additionally, multilingual students rarely—if ever—have access to languages other than English or simultaneous use of languages through their communication systems or therapeutic treatments (Lim et al., 2018), or psychoeducational assessments (Przymus & Alvarado, 2019). Translanguaging classroom praxis invites educators beyond the language classroom, such as therapists and assistive technology specialists, to imagine multilingual futures through communication access for all children.

CONCLUSION

In this contribution, we highlight the global manifestations of ableism and whiteness in TESOL. We propose praxical examples that are rooted in DisCrit solidarity (Annamma & Morrison, 2018) to disrupt ableism in English language teaching. Contrary to the teacher attitudes in the vignettes, DisCrit solidarity urges teachers must love, care,

and hope for multilingual students and families (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; hooks, 2003; Valenzuela, 2010)—instead of pathologizing them—through reciprocity and promoting learning *through* multilingualism for all.

TESOL educators must acknowledge that multilingual students of color face structural inequities, and that they enter the classroom with hostility and negative emotions toward these inequities (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). Once educators openly recognize this, they hold space for students to use their chosen language(s) to express their emotions and to collaboratively change the system (Meiners, 2007). We conclude that DisCrit solidarity is essential to address ableism and whiteness in the field of TESOL, as it helps teachers to see students' multilingualism, cultural knowledges, and abilities as precious gifts that can be cultivated to construct a healthy, thriving classroom.

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