Special Issue Articles and Reviews

An Introduction to Race and Native-Speakerism in ELT

Ryuko Kubota
University of British Columbia

The recent public reckoning with racisms in North America has elevated the importance of addressing racial and linguistic justice in English language teaching (ELT). Although this topic is not entirely new in ELT, the link between race and language has not been sufficiently addressed in Japan. Research indicates that native speakerness indeed intersects with race and other identities, affecting the conceptualization of who legitimate English speakers are. Raciolinguistic injustices reflect a number of contradictions and ironies, including White Anglophone biases in promoting internationalization, self-marginalization of Japanese learners in desiring White native English speakerness which they can never achieve due to their race; racialized English teachers' complicity with normative ideologies, Japan's failure of social and economic advancement despite its neoliberal promotion of ELT, and a lack of understanding that communication is to bridge human differences. Addressing issues of racial and linguistic justice in ELT will contribute to societal wellbeing and peace.

近年北米で注目を集めている人種差別への認知は、英語教育においても人種的・言語的公正に取り組む重要性を高めている。これは英語教育にとって必ずしも新しいテーマではないものの、日本では人種と言語の関連性が十分に吟味されていない。学術研究によると、母語話者性は明らかに人種や他のアイデンティティと交差しており、正統な英語話者とは誰なのかという定義に影響を与えている。人種言語的な不当性には多くの矛盾や逆説が見られる。それは、国際化推進の根底にある白人英語話者への偏好、白人でない日本人学習者が白人母語話者性を願望することによる自己周縁化、非白人英語教師の規範的イデオロギーへの追従、新自由主義的な英語教育推進と相反する日本の社会的経済的後退、人間の差異を橋渡しするのがコミュニケーションであるという認識の欠如である。英語教育を通して人種的言語的公正と取り組むことによって、社会の福利と平和に寄与できるだろう。

Keywords: antiracism; native speakerness; raciolinguistic ideologies; social justice; Whiteness

https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTJJ44.2-1

JALT Journal, Vol. 44, No. 2, November 2022

The 2020s opened with a rise of protests against anti-Black and anti-Asian racism in the United States, which quickly spread to other parts of the world. These movements inspired many professionals in language education to pay greater attention to racial inequalities involved in teaching and learning. Racial justice in language education is intertwined with linguistic justice, since language users—teachers, learners, and interlocutors—come from diverse racial and linguistic backgrounds, and yet they are positioned unequally in hierarchies of power. For instance, in our everyday discourse, 'native speakers' and 'non-native speakers' of English are often marked by perceived racial difference. This special issue of *JALT Journal* —"Race and Native-Speakerism in ELT"—responds to these burgeoning calls for racial and linguistic justice in language education.

Attention to justice issues in language education, however, is not entirely new. In the field of English language teaching (ELT), discrimination against non-native English speaker teachers (NNESTs) began to be problematized in the late 1990s as an advocacy movement within the association of TESOL International and as a research topic in applied linguistics (Selvi, 2014). Even before then, sociolinguistic research uncovered diverse varieties of English used in the world—or world Englishes—raising their legitimacy as research foci and laying a foundation for the NNEST movement. A concrete example of the NNEST movement is TESOL International's adoption of the "Position Statement Against Discrimination of Nonnative Speakers of English in the Field of TESOL" in 2006.[1] In the Japanese context, issues of NNEST and the superiority of native-speakerism have long been problematized (e.g., Kubota, 1998; Matsuda, 2003). Nonetheless, some universities and other educational programs in Japan still require the status of 'native speaker' for teaching positions.

Just as linguistic justice has been addressed for quite some time, issues of race, racialization, and racism in ELT have been discussed since the mid-2000s (e.g., Curtis & Romney, 2006; Kubota & Lin, 2006; see also Von Esch et al., 2020). Even as early as the mid-1970s in Japan, Douglas Lummis, an American critic residing in Japan, problematized the Japanese desire for Whiteness by describing the world of *eikaiwa* [English conversation] as racist because of employment discrimination that favored White teachers (Lummis, 1976). More recently, racial inequalities of English language teachers in Japan have been pointed out by several authors (e.g., Kubota & Fujimoto, 2013; Rivers & Ross, 2013; Takahashi, 2013). Outside of Japan, raciolinguistic ideologies and injustices in ELT and language education in general have been explicitly and increasingly problematized through pub-

lications, conference presentations, and social media conversations. More specifically, challenging raciolinguistic ideologies means to recognize how linguistic biases, as seen in native-speakerism and discrimination against non-mainstream language speakers, are closely linked to racial biases (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Nevertheless, critical discussions on racial and linguistic injustices in ELT in Japan are still rare.

Against this backdrop, this special issue exposes concerns that have not occupied the frontstage of professional discussions on ELT in Japan. Moving away from a sole focus on the pragmatic aspects of teaching and learning, this issue explicitly confronts the problems of inequity that professionally affect racially and linguistically minoritized teachers and epistemically influence learners in Japan.

Language and Race in ELT: Examining Contradictions

In addressing race and native-speakerism, it is important to recognize that the experiences of English language teachers and students cannot simply be characterized by either their linguistic background or racial identity; rather, these experiences are shaped by the complex workings of intersectionality or the interplay of multiple identity markers, including gender, ethnicity, class, language, sexuality, ability, and age. Furthermore, intersectional identities shape human experiences in multiple hierarchies of power that are contextually varied and fluid. Thus, although critiquing the perceived superiority of 'native speakers' of English is important, what also needs to be problematized is how native speakerness as a language marker intersects with race and other identities to construct people's mental images of who 'native speakers' are or who speaks correct English. Indeed, it is necessary to question not only language ideology but also raciolinguistic ideology.

When raciolinguistic ideology is considered, it becomes clear that learners' desires to acquire native-like English proficiency or educational policies and initiatives that are based on the standardized language scheme may not be just about language. The desired proficiency in English is entangled with other images of English speakers, including race, class, and nationality. This ideological entanglement creates many ironies, contradictions, and challenges.

The first irony has to do with the rationale for promoting ELT. During the last 30 years or more, Japan has been promoting ELT under the banner of internationalization and later globalization with the belief that English is a global lingua franca. The assumption is that being able to use English allows students to interact with people around the world. In real contexts,

the English used globally is characterized by multiple accents, expressions, and nuances used by speakers from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and nationalities. However, the racial bias behind native-speakerism as well as the ideology of standardized language paradoxically reduce international communication in English to encounters with mostly White English-speaking populations in Anglophone geographical spheres (Kubota, 2021; Kubota & Fujimoto, 2013; Takahashi, 2013). Imagining English to be standardized American or British English and associating it with Whiteness hugely contradict the aspiration for internationalization.

Second, learners' yearning for White 'native speakers' of standardized English can result in self-marginalization especially in Anglophone locations. This is due to the prevalence of anti-Asian racism, in which being Asian in and of itself can become a liability. Furthermore, Asians, even if they are 'native speakers' of English in these contexts, tend to be perceived as speakers with an accent and unqualified to be teachers or perhaps other types of professionals (Kang & Rubin, 2009). Such imposed marginality is greater for Asian women. This implies that even if Japanese learners attained native-like proficiency in English, they might not be treated as equally as White 'native speakers' in Anglophone societies. Put differently, even if Japanese learners prefer to learn English from White 'native speakers' rather than from racialized 'non-native speakers' or even if they desire to speak like White English speakers, they could never become like White speakers. Instead, they are likely to be categorized in the racialized group to which English teachers of color are also assigned within Anglophone societies. Learners' complicity with the normative assumptions about race and language can lead to their self-marginalization.

Third, the above problem of complicity also applies to racialized native or non-native English-speaking teachers. The superiority of Whiteness, native-speakerism, and standardized English sometimes compels them to support it rather than resist it because endorsing this dominant ideology is likely to benefit their professional attainment, if not to the equal extent compared their majoritarian peers. This kind of self-subordination without the direct imposition of power is referred to as *hegemony* (Gramsci, 1971) or *symbolic violence* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), a force that compels oppressed people to take the status quo for granted. The first step toward transforming unequal relations of power is to raise one's critical consciousness of the fact that one is actually being oppressed (Freire, 1998) and to decolonize the colonized mind (Ngugi, 1981). Overall, anti-racism and anti-linguicism should not only be promoted in the interpersonal domain or as an initia-

tive to increase representational diversity in institutions; they should also problematize the epistemological biases that dominate our knowledge and beliefs as reflected in our selection of teaching or research materials (Kubota, 2020).

Fourth, the overall improvement of English skills among younger generations in Japan during the last few decades does not seem to have brought about social and economic advancement for Japanese society. The emphasis on ELT during the last 30 plus years may have raised Japanese students' proficiency in English in general. The promotion of ELT has been influenced by the neoliberal ideology that supports the causal relationship between acquiring skills in English as a global language and obtaining an economic success (Kubota & Takeda, 2021). Yet, it seems that students' linguistic improvement has not enhanced the nation's international competitiveness of economy and technology, nor has it enhanced people's positive attitudes toward linguistic, racial, and ethnic diversity. Instead, xenophobia, hate speech, and discrimination against foreign workers and residents do not seem to have decreased despite the 2016 enactment of the Hate Speech Act (Ando, 2021). This relates to the final point.

Fifth, traditional ways of English language teaching and learning may not always enable learners to communicate successfully with diverse others because human communication involves more than linguistic knowledge and skills. When learning to communicate in English as an additional language is reduced to solely acquiring correct forms of English language, the ethical and dispositional dimensions involved in communication—being willing to understand diverse others and making efforts to convey meanings through mutual accommodation and respect—tends to go astray (Kubota & Takeda, 2021). Given that language learning should be about learning to communicate with other humans across difference, this shortcoming is troubling. As language education specialists, we must reconceptualize what human communication entails by paying closer attention to not only linguistic forms and functions but also our willingness to learn about human diversity in the world, respect for human rights, and a mindset for fostering racial, linguistic, and gender equity and social justice.

Conclusion

Thinking outside the conventional linguistic box is what students and teachers of English in Japan need to seriously consider in order to advance racial and linguistic justice as well as other dimensions of social justice. We should stop reproducing raciolinguistic prejudices and injustices that

feed into either indifference, compliance, or hostility toward certain racial, ethnic, or national groups. On top of the imminent environmental threats to human existence, these injustices further threaten humanity and become a breeding ground for violent conflicts, harming children, women, and other vulnerable people. ELT, as educational engagement for enhancing communication across differences, should contribute to teaching and learning for justice, wellbeing, and peace. The views and experiences uncovered by the articles in this special issue offer steps toward critical understandings and transformative actions.

Notes

1. https://www.tesol.org/docs/pdf/5889.pdf

Ryuko Kubota is a Professor in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at University of British Columbia. Her research interests include antiracism, language ideologies, and justice-oriented pedagogies.

References

Ando, K. (2021, May 31). ヘイトスピーチ解消法５年 露骨なデモ減ったが…やまぬ攻撃「差別を可視化し、実効性ある規制法を” [Five years since the Hate Speech Act: Though street demonstrations have declined, attacks continue – make discrimination visible and make a regulatory law]. *Tokyo Shimbun*. https://www.tokyo-np.co.jp/article/107571

Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Curtis, A., & Romney, M. (Eds.). (2006). *Color, race, and English language teaching: Shades of meaning*. Lawrence Erlbaum.

Flores, N., & Rosa, J. (2015). Undoing appropriateness: Raciolinguistic ideologies and language diversity in education. *Harvard Education Review*, *85*(2), 149–171. https://doi.org/10.17763/0017-8055.85.2.149

Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* Continuum.

Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks* (Q. Hoare & G. N. Smith, Trans.). International Publishers. (Original work published 1948).

Kang, O., & D. L. Rubin. (2009). Reverse linguistic stereotyping: Measuring the effect of listener expectations on speech evaluation. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, *28*(4), 441–456. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X09341950

Kubota, R. (1998). Ideologies of English in Japan. *World Englishes, 17*(3), 295–306. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-971X.00105

Kubota, R. (2020). Confronting epistemological racism, decolonizing scholarly knowledge: Race and gender in applied linguistics. *Applied Linguistics, 41*(5), 712–732. https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amz033

Kubota, R. (2021). Critical engagement with teaching EFL: Toward a trivalent focus on ideology, political economy, and praxis. In O. Z. Barnawi & A. Ahmed (Eds.), *TESOL teacher education in a transnational world: Turning challenges into innovative prospects* (pp. 49–64). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003008668

Kubota, R., & Fujimoto, D. (2013). Racialized native-speakers: Voices of Japanese American English language professionals. In S. A. Houghton & D. J. Rivers (Eds.), *Native-speakerism in Japan: Intergroup dynamics in foreign language education* (pp. 196–206). Multilingual Matters.

Kubota, R., & Lin, A. (2006). Race and TESOL: Introduction to concepts and theories. *TESOL Quarterly, 40*(3), 471–493. https://doi.org/10.2307/40264540

Kubota, R., & Takeda, Y. (2021). Two faces of neoliberal communicative competence: Language-in-education policies in Japan and transnational workers' voices. *TESOL Quarterly, 55*(2), 458–485. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.613

Lummis, D. (1976). イデオロギーとしての英会話[English conversation as ideology]. Shōbunsha.

Matsuda, A. (2003). The ownership of English in Japanese secondary schools. *World Englishes*, *22*(4), 483–496. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-971X.2003.00314.x

Ngugi, wa T. (1981). *Decolonizing the mind: The politics of language in African literature.* Zimbabwe Publishing House.

Rivers, D. J., & Ross, A. S. (2013). Idealized English teachers: The implicit influence of race in Japan. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education, 12*(5), 321–339. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2013.835575

Selvi, A. F. (2014). Myths and misconceptions about the non-native English speakers in TESOL (NNEST) Movement. *TESOL Journal*, *5*(3), 573–611. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.158

Takahashi, K. (2013). *Language learning, gender and desire: Japanese women on the move.* Multilingual Matters.

Von Esch, K. S., Motha, S., & Kubota, R. (2020). Race and language teaching. *Language Teaching*, *53*(4), 391–412. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444820000269