

Embodied Whiteness and Pathologization in EFL

J. P. B. Gerald

City University of New York

This essay seeks to examine the ways in which pathologization and the centering of whiteness are intertwined in the English Language Teaching (ELT) industry writ large, with a particular focus on the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) subfield in Japan. The author connects the hierarchization inherent to whiteness with the ways that the English teaching field creates and perpetuates oppression, with guidance as to how readers can help combat these inextricable issues.

本論は、日本の英語教育(ELT)、ことにその副分野である外国語としての英語教育(EFL)における、病的傾向と白人中心主義が相互補完的に関連している理由を明らかにすることを目的としている。更に、英語教育分野における、白人を頂点とするヒエラルキーと永続する抑圧的構造の関係性を示し、この分離不可避な問題と戦う方策を提示したい。

Keywords: anti-Blackness; Japan; native speakers; raciolinguistics; white saviors

The central argument of this essay is tied to the concept of *pathologization*, and as such it is important that it is clear how this term is being employed. In her book, *The Pedagogy of Pathologization*, Annamma (2018) chronicles the educational experiences of several dis/abled girls of color in the United States, demonstrating that the construction of their schooling is designed to categorize them as inherently abhorrent and deficient. The argument featured here is that the way we conceive of, define, and teach English requires that those who are said to be in need of the language be classified as inherently disordered, and that that disorder is based upon their distance from what we consider to be whiteness, a word I do not capitalize so as to limit its power and criticize its placement as a default standard.

<https://doi.org/10.37546/JALTJ44.2-2>

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

In this essay, I use a technical term (*pathologization*) associated with medical diagnosis of abnormality or disorder. As will become clear throughout the essay, whiteness operates on deficit-based ideologies (Delpit, 1995), where people in minoritized groups are seen as inherently lacking due to their membership in said groups. To give an exceptionally brief history, what we understand as whiteness only emerged in a form recognizable to us in approximately the 16th century and was gradually built and codified throughout the West alongside, and in conjunction with, chattel slavery, capitalism, settler colonialism, and the seemingly endless process of global colonization (Painter, 2011). These many axes of oppression and their connection to language teaching will be explored later in this article, particularly colonization, and the ways in which power and domination factor into our field.

In this essay, I will examine the manner in which whiteness has been constructed in Japan. This will be followed by a brief examination of the way that the EFL industry has built off of these conceptualizations in Japan, with a section on the inextricable link between native-speakerism and whiteness. After this, the argument will be made for how whiteness, as a concept and an ideology, depends upon pathologization for its perpetuation, and the article will then connect said concepts to EFL, and to Japan. I conclude with an analysis of how the embodiment of whiteness and the inherent pathologization of this ideal cause harm to both teachers and learners of English, in Japan and across the world, and offer a few possible paths forward to challenge such ideologies.

Positionality and Terminology

I began my career as an EFL teacher in Daegu, South Korea, in 2008. I have spent most of the intervening years working in adult education in the United States, though of late, having concluded my doctoral studies, I have turned my lens back onto the broader field of English Language Teaching, with a particular focus on the way that whiteness is centered in our industry, and how this is tied to the maintenance of power. As a Black and neurodivergent scholar who nevertheless possesses the privilege of maleness, standardized English, a U.S. passport, and other markers of class status, I have always been conditionally included in the ELT power structure; that is, my proximity to the ideal English language teacher depends on my context. My first book was just published (Gerald, 2022) and it discusses the way that the ideologies and hierarchies within our field are inherently stigmatizing for anyone not included within the image of whiteness. My aim in this article is to take

my ongoing work on this pattern of pathologization and infuse it with the specifics of Japan-based scholarship. After all, although whiteness may appear to have but one definition, each context has constructed it somewhat differently, and its impact on teaching in general, and language teaching in particular, depends on the time and place.

A brief word is necessary regarding the terminology used in this work. As a scholar who aims to trouble accepted definitions of oppressive concepts, I tried to make clear throughout that I do not accept ‘nativeness’ and other related ideas at face value, hence the inverted commas that surround terms like this and others in this essay. Unfortunately, unless the reader would be eager to read an article where every third word was framed accordingly, I will use inverted commas for other words that I might dispute for the sake of readability. For example, at various points I may refer to ‘EFL’ (English as a Foreign Language) and ‘ELT’ (English Language Teaching). If I had my druthers, I might refer to what we think of as ELT and EFL differently, along with a few other terms included in this piece, but so that we understand what aspect of the discipline I am describing, some of my terminology may fall a bit short of my preference. With that said, if you are interested in an extensive discussion of the field’s acronyms and terminology, I provide an in-depth analysis of these issues elsewhere (Gerald, 2022). Now, we turn to perhaps the most important of the terms around which this article centers.

The Construction of Whiteness in Japan

When this article refers to *whiteness*, it is not referring to *white people*, or people with light-colored skin. Whiteness is not exclusively tied to skin color, and this work is more concerned with the ideology and the epistemology behind the concept than the people that might come to mind when one sees the term. The metaphors used across the literature are endless (Leonardo, 2016), and one that remains particularly salient is the comparison of whiteness to property (Harris, 1993), or something that its adherents must defend from intruders at all costs. Though skin tone is undoubtedly a factor in its conceptualization, whiteness is much more about determining who deserves to be protected by state power in white-dominant countries (Roediger, 2006), and despite its amorphous nature, has indeed been inscribed into the law in several places (Painter, 2011). Ultimately, then, whiteness is best understood as an organizing principle through which certain people, and certain practices, are classified as ideal and given disproportionate power, an unattainable standard that few can truly match, leading to a ceaseless competition with few outright victors.

Because of the global nature of colonialism and linguistic imperialism, English has traveled on the back of whiteness to attain a measured dominance even in countries where white people are rare (Phillipson, 1992, 2008). Accordingly, in a place like Japan, whiteness occupies a unique and powerful position, and it is worth considering how it is specifically understood in this context. Russell (2017) makes the important point that, for many in Japan, whiteness is subsumed under a “generic foreignness” (p. 5), as a distance from the Japanese norm. Whiteness is marked as different from the standard but is often not classified as its own racial category; yet white English-speaking celebrities are used in aspirational advertisements, even if their race is never mentioned. Japan’s own concept of race is certainly different from how people living in the West might conceive it, but whiteness is nonetheless associated with high-class, cosmopolitan, well-educated individuals from powerful countries (Miladinović, 2020). By contrast, although Blackness has also found its way to Japan, it is usually limited to a superficial interpretation of United States hip-hop culture, fashion, and languaging (Russell, 2012); it is pervasive but not deep. Whiteness is rarely explicitly referred to but retains its power all the same.

Koshino (2019) points out that this idealization of whiteness in Japan is hardly novel, a result of its historical experience with Western powers. She writes,

Japan’s inability to conduct serious political negotiations with Western powers, in tandem with its early experience of whiteness during the Perry Expedition, shaped the Japanese education system, national identity, and its status within the international community for decades to come. (p. 53)

This sort of implicit idealization, the positioning of whiteness at the top of a hierarchy without naming it explicitly, cannot help but seep into the linguistic ideologies that inform the country’s English education policies.

EFL, Japan, and ‘Native Speaker’ Saviorism

The discourse around ‘native speakers’ is not new. Both those who are classified as such and those who are excluded from the classification have been drawing attention to the way that ‘native speakers’ have been centered in the ELT field for several decades now, since at least Paikeday’s 1985 essay, *May I Kill the Native Speaker?* Holliday (2006) brought us the “native-speakerism” phrase, stating plainly that the supposed ‘native speakers’ has

been constructed and positioned as the ideal for English users. It has since been documented how proximity to the idea of nativeness has influenced recruitment and hiring for EFL teachers (e.g., Mahboob & Golden, 2013; Ruecker & Ives, 2015), and, more recently, how this influences selection of conference plenary speakers across the field (Kiczkowiak & Lowe, 2021). Despite this argument being several decades old by this point, very little has changed, and it is worth considering why that might be.

Jenks and Lee's (2019) formulation of *native speaker saviorism* helps explain the grip that nativeness retains on the teaching of English. They explained as follows:

Merely critiquing native speakerist ideology is to miss the point. This is not only because the very status of the [']native speaker['] in TESOL hinges on the ['] native speaker's['] "responsibility" to save the cultural Other, but also because, as we argue, the purported "responsibility" to save the cultural Other has hitherto outweighed critiques leveled toward the ['] native speaker['] in the name of native speakerism. (Jenks & Lee, 2019, p. 4)

In other words, we scholars can continue to point out the problems with 'native speakers' being centered in our field, but without a deeper consideration of what it is about 'nativeness' that is prized, we will continue to flail about in our attempts to shift power. Houghton and Rivers (2013), for one, have noted these issues and how they pertain to the landscape of Japan. Indeed, the 'native speaker' is not just a linguistic model to be mimicked, but a person imbued with an innate surplus value toward which the Other can only hope to strive. By ascribing to the ideology of 'nativeness', one agrees that one cannot transform oneself into the 'native speaker,' no matter how long and hard one tries, and because of this definitionally insurmountable gap, the field continues to depend on the grace of the supposedly benevolent, expatriate 'native speaker,' who must be enticed to lower themselves to spending time living in, but not necessarily becoming a part of, cultures that are presented as deficient, or pathologized.

In Japan, then, the position of the 'native speaker' as savior leads to a clear hierarchization of status and power. For example, when Rivers and Ross (2013) conducted a survey among Japanese students about ideal teachers, they found a "100% preference that the non-Japanese EFL teacher be a 'native speaker' of English" (p. 333). Their experiment continued and manipulated certain characteristics of the ideal teacher, through which they

appeared to find that, more than race, gender, or other demographic details, 'native speaker' status was the most important for their participants. One might conclude that race is not an important factor so long as the ostensibly objective category of nativeness is sought. Yet the reason understanding 'native speakers' in their roles as saviors is important is so that one can understand why, even if not every 'native speaker' or expatriate teacher is white, and even if not every white person is a 'native speaker,' the raciolinguistic ideologies that have helped to hold nativeness in its central position do not map neatly onto external appearance, and the hierarchization inherent to whiteness is much more a question of power.

With all of this said, though, I cannot ignore the fact that even the 'native speakers' are not immune from the precarity of the field. As I wrote elsewhere, "The field is more difficult for the racialized, but the conditions and career stability for even white 'native' teachers are far from secure, and this precarity is absolutely by design, despite what the field would prefer us to believe" (Gerald, 2022, p. 70). Writing about instructors in Canada, Breshears (2019) explained the situation as follows:

Low wages, a high reliance on part-time employment, uncertainty about ongoing work, threats of funding cuts, lack of adequate benefits, lack of administrative support, and excessive unpaid work were just a few of the employment concerns voiced in the studies. These conditions converged in the daily lives of teachers to create more or less bearable working situations. (p. 31).

The status of 'native' is only an illusory protection, even as it confers contingent benefits on a subset of those who qualify for them. That is, native speakerism hurts 'native speakers' too.

'Native Speaker' Saviorism and Whiteness

For those who are unfamiliar with the concept, the raciolinguistic ideologies under which we all live and operate position racialized languages of English as inherently flawed because of their deficiencies in the eyes and ears of the oft-unmentioned *white perceiving subject* (see Flores & Rosa, 2015; Flores, 2019). We can continue to claim that in analyzing the practices of 'ELT'—and 'EFL' in particular—we are speaking only of language, but to do so is to ignore the way that conceptualizations of language and languages are tied to their *racialization* (Omi & Winant, 2014), a context-

dependent process of racial categorization. This is all to say that, even in a place where the physical presence of white people is rare, such as Japan, a perceived distance from the ideal of both language and race nevertheless uplifts some and positions others as inferior.

Due to the aforementioned past and present nature of linguistic imperialism, colonial languages, and English especially, each retain power even where they are not used by the majority—which is to say, English and English speakers are *majoritized*. Because of its connection to whiteness via the ideological stubbornness of our field, the imported ‘native speaker’ is positioned as a powerful cultural force, regardless of his or her level of qualification. Accordingly, when, as mentioned, institutions seek someone who can successfully perform the *aesthetic labor* (Ramjattan, 2015) of looking and sounding like the ideal English languager, they are, intentionally or otherwise, excluding those who cannot represent whiteness effectively.

It is important to reiterate here that those who are positioned as closer to whiteness do not necessarily have to be, or identify, as white; there is much to be said about the ways in which different axes of oppression and power intersect with race, including but not limited to class, gender, and ability. For the purposes of this article, though, it is worthwhile to understand that when speaking of ‘native speaker’ saviorism, there is no functional difference between this phenomenon and the sort of white saviorism Straubhaar (2015) describes while analyzing earlier stages of his own teaching career:

My pride in my own work at this moment is palpable—I had spent around six months writing this curriculum, and to see locals leaf through it and “get it”...was quite validating. The flawed assumptions underlying my white saviour status had been legitimated—I had been brought in because of my curricular “expertise” (which consisted of several short trainings on a particular facilitation method), and the acceptance of my work based in those shallow credentials was validated by the work’s acceptance. (p. 391)

Suffice it to say that we stand little chance at defeating native-speakerism, ‘native speaker’ saviorism, and the dominance of ‘nativeness’ as a credential if we do not understand that is in fact whiteness that is being prized, and if we do not understand that whiteness exists to create subordinate categories that can be effectively pathologized as in need of correction.

Whiteness and Pathologization

As mentioned above, whiteness was developed alongside many other axes of oppression, including colonization. It is this particular practice on which this next section focuses, because, though now dominant colonial languages were absolutely factors in the development of enslavement and capitalism, the way that language was imposed on the victims of settler colonialism and colonization was central to the effort. Around the world, there were accounts of the ways that the people whose land was taken were positioned as less adult and less capable than their invaders. As Mills and Lefrancois (2018) wrote:

A key effect of constructing colonized peoples through the metaphor of childhood is to justify governance of the “natives”... Moreover, assimilated colonized people in Africa—those who behaved less “native” and acquired the mannerisms of their colonizers—were seen as less childlike. (p. 511)

Colonized peoples' supposed inability to communicate served as additional justification for their being conquered, or worse. Those who did manage to adopt both the language and the customs of the newly-dominant settlers positioned themselves as more civilized, and even as formal colonization waned in the middle of the previous century, the highest levels of education always included the colonial languages against which the locals were consistently assessed, and compared to which local languages were always said to be inferior. With whiteness thus idealized, any reason for which someone could be classified as outside of its ever-shifting boundaries could lead them to be implicitly diagnosed as disordered, or pathologized. Whiteness requires an Other for its members to seek to surpass by whatever means may be necessary. If the Other is not just different but is instead disordered, almost preternaturally abhorrent, then not only should everyone seek inclusion within whiteness, they must also take great pains to distance themselves from any perception that they are themselves part of the pathologized group. As such, despite the existence of skin-lightening creams and other such products, individuals cannot successfully alter their phenotype. English acquisition is one avenue through which millions of people are implicitly promised a path into whiteness.

Embodied Whiteness and EFL in Japan

For decades now, and through deliberate action rather than happenstance, representatives of the Global North have been taught that it is their

duty and responsibility to spread the gospel of whiteness-through-English around the globe, to countries where the locals have little hope at physically appearing to be white but can nonetheless make an attempt to communicate in an acceptable fashion. Japan is not among the list of countries officially colonized by white-dominant nation-states, but in our current age, the West no longer requires official possession of land to impose its cultural will on others. People who have the option but little obligation to possess any credential beyond the whiteness that they embody are nonetheless positioned as linguistically superior to the locals in their classrooms (Wang & Lin, 2013). Even though some recruitment programs (e.g., English Program in Korea (EPIK) in South Korea) offer a slight financial bonus to those with teaching experience, the difference is negligible, and can be easily surpassed through any extra work an individual might acquire (Wang & Lin, 2013). Institutions in Japan construct clear binaries between teachers classified as 'native' and 'non' (Lawrence, 2020), yet our academic discourse has long situated this firmly in linguistic terms without an equal consideration to the way that the past and present of whiteness influences this hierarchization. Without whiteness, perfectly competent individuals would not be seen as linguistically deficient, and the sort of unserious pedagogues that populate far too many EFL classrooms would rightfully not be employed without undergoing complex, legitimate training that avoids stigmatizing other varieties of English. Without the constant process of pathologization, and of classifying the less powerful as deficient and disordered, whiteness would not be able to sustain itself.

I do not imply that all white English teachers are causing harm, nor that racialized English teachers are incapable of the same. Indeed, little of this is about individual cruelty but rather a superstructure that arranges groups along a ladder they are told they must fight to ascend. The past and present of EFL in Japan has classified Japanese students as lacking in comparison to the educators who are imported to both convey and embody a stigmatizing epistemology to them, and though some counterexamples are cited here, and can be seen across this special issue, not enough attention has been given to the hold that whiteness has on the field. Language teaching is about far more than the vocabulary and grammar on which students are assessed, and the people who are given undue power in our discipline have always shaped who is considered an exemplary English user. Unfortunately, it is challenging to wrest power from those who have attained it for themselves, but there are genuine ways forward for EFL, in Japan and otherwise, as, for better or worse, people are going to continue to want to learn English.

Conclusion: Paths Forward

The most straightforward and yet most difficult remedy is to convince every school administrator, every hiring company, every recruiter to dispense with proximity to whiteness as a credential. That means any mention of ‘nativeness’, any forms of accent reduction, or anything that stigmatizes English varieties should be removed from hiring and promotion processes in EFL contexts. As I wrote elsewhere (Gerald, 2020), the financial justification for preferential and discriminatory hiring practices forms a loop that is hard to escape, with administrators blaming their hiring on the preferences of their clients, and students expressing dismay over racialized teachers due to the assumption that they are less capable. Sadly, the system is constructed in such a way that idealizing the embodiment of whiteness is, in fact, a “rational” decision for a profit-seeking institution to make. Consequently, I hope that someone with both the power and the willingness to make such a wholesale change is willing to do the work necessary to help us escape this cycle.

The question, then, is what *JALT Journal* readers can do in the Japanese context to work against these issues. For those who work in a classroom and who identify as white, they can work to provide examples of English varieties both visual and aural, placing them on equal footing with the standardized languaging that most materials prize. There are plenty of online corpora featuring Englishes from communities all around the world, and video clips with captions are freely available as well (International Dialects of English Archive, n.d.). Additionally, language teachers should ensure that captions are used for *all* speakers so as not to stigmatize those with less familiar accents or languaging, and to increase accessibility.

When assessing students’ English, even if educators are hamstrung by rigid, standardized exams that students are forced to take, they should use whatever freedom they have to contextualize the language required on the tests as merely one of many English varieties, and far from the “best” version. Most importantly, teachers should engage in more critical activities. For example, the talk-to-text feature on mobile phones often struggles to accurately capture English speech that is not standardized, with languagers with other accents having to pay for accurate software (Fearn & Turner, 2021). Language teachers should demonstrate that, despite the fact that *they* can understand their students very clearly, their phones, programmed to understand standardized English, nonetheless fall short. They should then use this as a means of introducing the aforementioned concept of the white perceiving subject. Essentially, teachers can place specific emphasis on the fact that this is a flaw in the listener and not the students, and use this understanding to help guide pedagogy.

As for researchers, professors, and other academics, dig deeply into the epistemology around which you have structured your scholarship. What names and faces have you always centered, and what ideologies, implicit or otherwise, do you need to dismantle? The next time you are set to begin a project, are there different thinkers upon whom you can call and cite? What assumptions have you made about Japanese English speakers, and Japanese English? Can you reframe tendencies in Japanese English as useful variation rather than flaws? Can you spend time finding and celebrating the creativity in Japanese English? What does Japanese English have that standardized English lacks?

These questions are deliberately open-ended and meant as paths to pursue rather than endpoints. I am not comfortable providing a mere checklist, as I believe that even well-intentioned educators, over-burdened in many ways, are likely to reach for a quick solution if available, as I explain in detail elsewhere (Gerald, 2022). There are no shortcuts to moving away from pathologization, and it will be a long and challenging process to reverse. I hope that in reading this, educators can take something valuable away from my analysis and my suggestions, and that, at some point in the future, whiteness will no longer be a credential for teachers of English.

J. P. B. Gerald works in adult education and professional development for a national nonprofit. He lives on unceded Munsee Lenape territory—better known as Queens, NY, USA—with his dog, wife, and toddler.

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