

Critical Race Theory in English Language Education

Eser Ordem¹, Omer Gokhan Ulum² & Mustafa Ahmet Cebeci²

¹Adana Alparslan Turkes Science and Technology University, Turkey

²Mersin University, Mersin, Turkey

Correspondence: Eser Ordem, Adana Alparslan Turkes Science and Technology University, Turkey. E-mail: eserordem@gmail.com

Received: November 3, 2022

Accepted: December 19, 2022

Online Published: December 22, 2022

doi:10.5430/ijhe.v11n6p108

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v11n6p108>

Abstract

Racism is still exercised in various social, political and academic spheres and remains to be deconstructed by constituting new discourses. One of these deconstructive discourses has been critical race theory which can be regarded as a productive realm where the oppressed individuals or communities have found the opportunity to address socio-political issues and take collective action where necessary. This study aims to incorporate critical race theory, critical antiracist pedagogy, radical pedagogy, critical consciousness and critical resistance into ELT, EFL and ESL settings and curricula since whiteness and white supremacy have been the dominant discourses in the west perceiving whiteness as Self and blackness as Other. A civil society organization, The Critical Resistance Organization, shown as an example of collective action, was introduced to emphasize how the black movement could produce meaningful changes in a given society. ELT departments in Turkey can adopt an inclusive educational policy and radical pedagogy by taking the issue of racism into consideration to open room for a more liberal, equal and just society. The normalizing discourses regarding whiteness ought to be criticized and displaced by adopting the tenets of critical race theory.

Keywords: critical race theory, radical pedagogy, second language education, racism, collective action

1. Introduction

Racism remains a contentious issue in societies, discriminating against individuals on a social and cultural level. Although its existence finds a place in a wide range of areas such as legislation, sports, and business, it takes place in education as a hegemonic tool that serves power to have students educated with stereotypes and even manipulated so as not to be different. However, as pluralistic education involves a wide range of different racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups, it ought to be prioritized to avoid educational failure. Grant & Sleeter (2003) state that the major goals of pluralistic or multicultural education are to lessen prejudice and discrimination against oppressed groups, to work toward equal opportunities and social justice for any kind of community, and to influence an equally distributed power among the groups involving diverse cultural members. In other words, students who belong to diverse ethnic and racial communities can receive the knowledge, behaviors, and abilities in education. Nevertheless, they are often forced to obey a hidden curriculum that does not fulfill their needs and values. Pluralistic education needs to be emphasized in order to create an educational environment in which teachers, students, and families can interact democratically and equally. Despite its contemporary advances in baby steps, one can figure out that hegemony of a hidden curriculum functions to sustain the dominance of popular mainstream academic knowledge. Pluralistic education struggles against the obstacles of reforming social justice. To achieve pluralistic education, radical changes have to be performed in the educational philosophy and practice. Teaching methods and textbooks should be replaced and applied by taking civil rights into consideration, which is an inevitable manner to tackle defects of the education system with regard to the critical race theory perspective. While operating the necessary alterations in the concept of education and curriculum, teachers and other cultural and educational workers should be included in favor of racially marginalized groups rather than political and economic power.

Educational scholars standing in and interrogating critical race theory discuss not only the educational status of the issue but also the general injustice of society and civil rights. Therefore, critical race theory can be extended to the boundaries of race and racism problems and passed beyond the languages, accents, ethnicities, religions, and immigration status of marginalized groups. Besides, critical race theory may produce better outcomes if it is implemented in each stage of the educational process from elementary schools to universities. Hence, while scholars

apply critical race theory, it becomes inevitable to avoid the sets of cultural norms, experiences, standards, and beliefs. On the other hand, pluralistic education continues to reflect the power by providing mainstream knowledge rather than transformative knowledge. Although transformative knowledge seems to be a threat to dominant power, it still may not provide a wide range of education for society. Jay (2003) states the fact that forms of pluralistic education taken today are determined as an ideologically safe nature. Even though these practices are valuable to some extent, they require investigation of power affiliations in society and the endurance of racist, classist, and sexist situations. Despite the fact that hegemony is mostly related to economic and ethical-political based systems (Storey, 1998), it emerges in the struggles of political, economic, social, and cultural fields of society as a compelling process of arbitration for both hegemonic and collateral classes. Thus, students belonging to subordinate classes of society acquire the education of values, perspectives, objectives, and cultural norms of the hegemonic class, which leads to sociocultural reproduction by the hidden curriculum.

Critical race theory can be applied to terminate the permanence of institutional racism. Scholars should criticize the content of textbooks and materials to refrain from the superiority in classes. In doing so, the process of educational equality can be initialized in schools. Ladson-Billings (2013) claim that racism is not recognized as a random isolated act by critical race scholars but it seems invisible and normal. According to Parker et al. (1998), CRT emphasizes inequity and suggests alternative perceptions, mindsets and policies by centering the solutions for changes in the hegemony existence with respect to race, and its other intersections with other fields such as ethnics, gender, language, sexual orientation, and social classes. Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw (1993) identify six fundamental themes for critical race theory:

1. Racism is endemic with respect to critical race theory.
2. CRT encourages a skeptical approach toward dominant legal demands of objectivity, equality, and meritocracy.
3. CRT interrogates ahistoricism and persists in a contextual analysis of the law.
4. CRT emphasizes the understanding of the knowledge of marginalized groups that are experienced.
5. CRT is an interdisciplinary concept.
6. CRT operates to eliminate racial oppression.

Teacher education is another key dimension of the education system, and Solorzano (1997) recommends that critical race theory can challenge the “racial stereotyping” in classes for both students and teachers. Likewise, Ladson-Billings (1999, 2005) describes the term “teaching for diversity” by putting an emphasis on critical race theory, and highlighting the strengths of the theory in literature. The diversity of the teachers employed in their education is also significant for the practice and methodology. Critical race theory requires not only curriculum and material changes but also pedagogical changes. Therefore, it is an obligation to explore the teacher educators by gathering analyses. The beliefs, races, classes, and gender of the teachers should be regarded by the teacher educators to eliminate racism in schools, which may secure the education system from inequality and discrimination. Thus, Foster (1998) created the term “Pedagogical Race Theory” as a way to clarify the struggles to dispose of racism within the pedagogical practice. If teachers acquire racially blind education, they can contribute to their students equally by respecting their culture, race, gender, and any forms of distinctions. As a result, critical race theory debates racism and any kind of discrimination of marginalized or subordinated groups in the community with respect to the educational areas and institution by criticizing three aspects which are its relevance to human rights, the existence of the hidden curriculum, and teacher education.

2. Critical Race Theory in Turkey

Racism is a social construct and a contested issue in humanities because of the colonial practices that the western countries exercised for centuries (Kubota, 2021). This deep-rooted problem still exists in social, cultural and educational practices. Anglo-American ideologies insistently try to evade this topic and even come to reject the presence of racism. Racism is constructed on an individual, social, institutional, structural and epistemological level (Kubota, 2021). However, the issue of race is often underrepresented in English language teaching because whiteness or White English is often reinforced in curricula, syllabi and textbooks. Slavery and racism are ignored or made to be forgotten in EFL and ESL settings. This forgetting should be seen as a system. It is vital, for instance, to place the history of slavery outside of the official story of modernity. Black/Ebonic English or the history of Black people, colonialism, slavery and other-racist subjects are often neglected in EFL/ESL curricula or textbooks. Thus, this epistemological racism is still prevalent in English language education. Whiteness as a racist category is

foregrounded and prioritized. Therefore, racism still remains an established category that needs to be deconstructed (Crooks, 2009; Kubota, 2020)

Whiteness in the context of Turkey is constantly emphasized. Turkish students learning English as a new language and pre-service (!) English teachers are often deprived of critical-race based theory and critical pedagogy. Thus, the ideology of race is often ignored or dismissed from the curriculum or syllabus. Thus, the agents of the English language in Turkey hardly have a vested interest in these socio-political issues such as racism, which seems a distant topic for them because of the overwhelming effect of white-centric cultural images and discourses. To support this idea, we can show that some movements such as Black Lives Matter and Critical Resistance in the USA are neglected in the context of Turkey. Westernism, modernity practices and whiteness are the main categories that are taught to the learners and teacher candidates in English education. Turkey, in this sense, is faced with the dilemma of Orientalism or Orientalist discourses imposed by the West or Anglo-American circles. Socio-political issues such as racism are underrepresented in EFL curriculum in Turkey. The tension between the center and the periphery and the distinction between Self and Other are retained in the discourses of English language education in Turkey. Thus, EFL agents (learners, student teachers, teachers or academics) experience a deep chasm and cleavage in their identity, each half of which denies the other and survives in a fragmented manner. This divided identity has to be open to the world under the effect of the West, which hinders the agents from developing new identities or discourses. Although Turkey has adopted the neoliberal policies under the effect of the USA, the issue of racism has been hardly addressed. What is meant by this sentence is that Turkey allies with European Union, the UK and the USA in many spheres such as economy, culture, language, military and politics. However, critical social-political issues are excluded from the curriculum of English language teaching departments and even global English textbooks. We consider this problem a scandal and syndrome. The slavery history of the black people in the USA and the racist policies that they encounter are deliberately made to be forgotten. Kubota (2021: 237-238) also addresses a similar concern in the discipline of ELT:

...racism is not as widely recognized or understood as more familiar topics in ELT, such as communicative language teaching; teaching grammar and vocabulary; motivation; NS/NNS; and global Englishes. The reason perhaps derives from a sense of discomfort attached to the concept of racism. It is often the case that people regard themselves as not racist or they say they do not see color, participating in a discourse of colorblindness or color evasion. Furthermore, for many White people, racism is a disturbing moral offense, and being White alone can evoke emotions of fear and guilt, causing defensiveness or silence.

The problems that Kubota have mentioned are experienced in ELT departments in Turkey because race is hardly considered a pivotal issue that needs to be addressed. Global English textbooks, ELT curricula, normalizing discourses and practices prioritize and foreground whiteness as a central category (Kubota, 2021). Whiteness is shown as Self, while Blackness is designated as Other. This binary relationship is also implicitly or explicitly taught to EFL learners and practitioners. This epistemological racism is constantly reinforced in English language education. Therefore, those learning English as a foreign or second language or those specializing in ELT need to find a way to deconstruct these discourses constituted against the black people. Radical pedagogy can be one of the approaches or methods that can be adopted to take a concrete action and to create social changes.

3. Radical Pedagogy and Racism: An Example of Taking Collective Action

Radical pedagogy aims to prioritize collective action in its Marxist sense (Freire, 1994; Giroux & McLaren, 1986). For them, collective action, as in the example of Critical Resistance Organization established in the USA in 1997, is one of the most important elements to deconstruct racist discourses and to adopt an action-centric policy. The Critical Resistance Organization as an example of collective action intends to close down or dismantle the prison industrial complex rather than improve the conditions in these prisons because the black race (as well as other non-white groups, communities or ethnicities) has been associated with the crime patterning such as drug addiction, burglary, smuggling, trafficking, robbery, abuse and murder. In a way, it is widely acknowledged that the black people are criminalized (<http://criticalresistance.org>). In the thirteenth amendment, the section 1 in the Constitution of the United States was drafted in 1865 to criminalize the black people:

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

This section in the Constitution of the United States has been harshly criticized because the phrase `except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted` has been used a tool to incarcerate the black people in the USA, and the prison industrial complex has been established to imprison more black people. It is widely believed that this section has not ended racism and the state of white supremacy. Rather, it has displaced the

black people from their homes and transformed the blackness into the concept of imprisonment and criminalization (<http://criticalresistance.org>). The Critical Resistance Organization aims to oppose these social injustices, inequalities and racist practices (<http://criticalresistance.org>). They take collective action in various states of the USA such as New York, California and Oregon. They fight imprisonment, resist policing and establish solidarity to support the prisoners (<http://criticalresistance.org>). In addition, they have developed a model to take action. In their collective action, they organize conferences, make campaigns and produce local projects. In this sense, The Critical Resistance Organization presents a very good example of how to take collective action.

Radical pedagogy also supports the idea that collective action should be taken in the field of education (Freire, 1998; Giroux, 1999; McLaren, 1993). Political organizations can be a good example for schools and universities. This example can be applied to ELT departments to adopt inclusive education. They refer to the prison industrial complex as a system `used to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems` (<http://criticalresistance.org>). In addition, they prioritize the concept of abolition which is `a political vision with the goal of eliminating imprisonment, policing, and surveillance and creating lasting alternatives to punishment and imprisonment` (<http://criticalresistance.org>). By doing so, the black people take collective action and negotiate the problem of criminalization with those in power. Their aim is not to improve the prison industrial complex but to end their existence in the USA by `developing practical strategies` (<http://criticalresistance.org>).

4. Towards Inclusive Education in ELT

English language education in Turkey and across the globe can also adopt the examples given above. These social and political organizations can present effective and inspiring models for EFL learners and teachers to gain awareness. Whiteness ideology can be deconstructed, and instead the movements regarding the black people can be included into ELT curriculum and sources so that a more democratic setting can be established to negotiate socio-political issues (Jeyaraj, & Harland, 2014). ELT departments have been formed as an extension of neocolonial and neoliberal policies adopted by Turkey. However, we have been disconnected from this history.

The historical conditions that have led to the emergence of the ELT departments need to be critically analyzed. We need to pursue our interests in searching for the excluded discourses from Turkish history. The exclusionary practices can be deconstructed and displaced through critical and radical pedagogy to augment hopes in education (Giroux, 1997). Instead, a more inclusive education can be endorsed in order to address the excluded categories such as race, ethnicity and gender (Crookes, 2022; Jorge, 2012). ELT departments and other English related programs can benefit from civil society organizations such as The Critical Resistance Organization. Instead of improving the system supporting white supremacy, it is better to replace them with organizations that support diversity, Bakhtian heteroglossia, plurality and tanslanguaging (McLaren, 1993). Thus, radical democratic perspectives can be gained through new discourses and social dialogue. Empowering EFL practitioners and learners through collective action can help them create meaningful changes in their environment.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study aimed to touch upon an important problem, the issue of racism, encountered in the context of Turkey. Critical race theory has been hardly represented and discussed in ELT curriculum and syllabus. We believe that inclusive education should be adopted in ELT departments so that EFL learners and student teachers as well as even academics can be aware of these social and political issues. Biased English language education taking whiteness as a central category and element should be decolonized and deconstructed in order to open space for the inclusion of critical race theory, critical resistance and critical pedagogy. The normalizing discourses regarding whiteness ought to be criticized and displaced by adopting the tenets of critical race theory.

Teachers and teacher educators can take action by participating in antiracist debates and online platforms that help them to gain awareness (Kubota, 2021). Antiracist discourses need to be addressed in teacher education programs which can re-evaluate their curriculum, course contents, and resources (Kubota, 2021). Radical pedagogy emanating from the tenets and principles of Marxist humanism should be adopted in order to endorse collective action. In so doing, the voices of the black people can also be heard in the sphere of ELT departments in Turkey. As Kubota (2021: 245) emphasizes in the following excerpt, awareness of the issues regarding racism should be incorporated into the discipline of English language education in which the agents of this education can take action by using various resources:

Critical antiracist pedagogy is about fostering awareness, knowledge, and attitudes regarding the intricate nature of racial inequities and approaches to challenge them. It requires an understanding of what race is and what forms

racism assumes. It also goes beyond mere respect for racial difference, and instead engages in the complexities of racism and racial politics with critical reflexivity on power, privilege, and complicity. There is no single right way of doing critical antiracist pedagogy because racism manifests in intricate and contextual ways. Thus, teachers and teacher educators must continue to learn and enact critical antiracism with open-mindedness, perseverance, and vigilance.

References

- Crookes, G. (2009). Radical language teaching. In Long, M. H. & Doughty, C. (Eds.), *The handbook of language teaching* (pp. 595–615). New York, NY: Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444315783.ch31>
- Crookes, G. (2010). The practicality and relevance of second language critical pedagogy. *Language teaching*, 43(3), 333-348. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444809990292>
- Crookes, G. V. (2022). Critical language pedagogy. *Language Teaching*, 55(1), 46-63. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444820000609>
- Dixson, A. D., & Rousseau Anderson, C. (2018). Where are we? Critical race theory in education 20 years later. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 93(1), 121-131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2017.1403194>
- Foster, M. (1997). *Black teachers on teaching*. New York: New Press. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-642-60876-6_10
- Freire, P. (1994). *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed* (Trans. R. R. Barr). Bloomsbury: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Teachers as cultural workers: Letters to those who dare teach* (Trans. D. Macedo, D.Koike, & A. Oliveira). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Giroux, H., & McLaren, P. (1986). Teacher education and the politics of engagement: The case for democratic schooling. *Harvard educational review*, 56(3), 213-239. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.56.3.trr1473235232320>
- Giroux, H.A. (1997) *Pedagogy and the Politics of Hope: Theory, Culture, and Schooling*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Giroux, H. A. (1999). Rethinking cultural politics and radical pedagogy in the work of Antonio Gramsci. *Educational theory*, 49(1), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.1999.00001.x>
- Grant, C. A., & Sleeter, C. E. (2013). *Doing multicultural education for achievement and equity*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203831397>
- Jeyaraj, J. J., & Harland, T. (2014). Transforming teaching and learning in ELT through critical pedagogy: An international study. *Journal of transformative education*, 12(4), 343-355. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344614550042>
- Jorge, M. (2012). Critical literacy, foreign language teaching and the education about race relations in Brazil. *The Latin Americanist*, 56(4), 79-90. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1557-203X.2012.01178.x>
- 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 antiracist pedagogy in ELT. *ELT Journal*, 75(3), 237-246. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccab015>
- Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. F. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers college record*, 97(1), 47-68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146819509700104>
- Ladson-Billings, G. (2005). The evolving role of critical race theory in educational scholarship. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 115-119. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341024>
- Ledesma, M. C., & Calderón, D. (2015). Critical race theory in education: A review of past literature and a look to the future. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 21(3), 206-222. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800414557825>
- Matsuda, M. J., Lawrence, C. R., Delgado, R., & Crenshaw, K. W. (1993). Words that wound. *Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment*. Boulder.
- McLaren, P. (1993). Multiculturalism and the postmodern critique: Towards a pedagogy of resistance and transformation. *Cultural studies*, 7(1), 118-146. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502389300490101>

Solorzano, D. G. (1997). Images and words that wound: Critical race theory, racial stereotyping, and teacher education. *Teacher education quarterly*, 24(3), 5-19.

Von Esch, K. S., Motha, S., & Kubota, R. (2020). Race and language teaching. *Language Teaching*, 53(4), 391-421. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444820000269>

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).