Educational Equality: Mitigating Linguistic Discrimination in Second Language Teaching

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Introduction

In the 1980s linguist Tove Skutnabb-Kangas coined the term linguicism to describe linguistic discrimination. Her definition characterizes linguistic discrimination as "ideologies and structures which are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and non-material) between groups which are defined on the basis of language" (1988, 13). This paper intends to examine issues of linguistic discrimination that are specific to the field of teaching English as a second or foreign language (TESL/TEFL). This paper has been divided into three main topics. The first section will discuss linguistic discrimination, the issue of standard language ideology, and how the TESL/TEFL profession can reinforce linguicism. Thereafter, the affective factors of linguistic discrimination will be outlined to see the ways in which students' academic performance is affected. Finally, two methods that have been shown to mitigate linguistic discrimination within the education system will be brought forth.

What is linguistic discrimination?

Linguicism, or linguistic discrimination, works similarly to other forms of discrimination such as racism, ethnicism or sexism, and promotes and maintains inequalities between groups. In the case of linguicism, Skutnabb-Kangas (1988, 10) defines it as "the domination of one language at the expense of others". A concept intertwined with that of linguistic discrimination is the notion of standard language ideology, defined by Lippi-Green (1994, 166) as "a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogeneous spoken language which is imposed from above, and which takes as its model the written language. The most salient feature is the goal of suppression of variation of all kinds". The issue of standard language ideology and linguistic discrimination is discussed by Rojas et al. (2016, 137) as they argue that "...to emphasize standard language is to mislead and promote the idea of a single

homogenous language, giving no recognition or importance to other speech communities that share the same language, although not the idealized version". Because such prestige is placed on a standard, idealized form of a language, it "promotes a global perception of an idealized native speaker" that learners are expected to strive towards (Rojas et al. 2016, 137). The controversy of standard language ideology and its implications when teaching English will be illustrated in greater depth in the following sections.

As an ideology, linguistic discrimination can work either consciously or subconsciously. Conscious linguistic discrimination is overt, and could take the form of a teacher explicitly banning the use of a student's mother tongue under the false belief that exclusive use of the target language will produce better results (Phillipson 1988, 341). Linguistic discrimination that is unconscious may not be recognized as discrimination by those who unintentionally reinforce it. An example of unconscious linguistic discrimination is the unquestioned assumption that English is always the best language for education, rather than a local language (Phillipson 1988, 341).

Institutional linguicism within English language teaching

The reason that linguistic discrimination has had a profound impact on teaching is due to the fact that is part of a larger systemic issue, known as institutional linguicism. When educational resources and efforts are all placed into the learning of a majority language, such as English, the educational system as a whole reflects institutional linguicism (Skutnabb-Kangas 1988, 16). Historically, the profession of teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language (TESL/TEFL) has widely ignored how it reinforces standard language ideology that in turn promotes linguistic discrimination (Phillipson 1988, 348). Phillipson (1988, 351) argues that "the spread of English shows clearly that the 'development' of this language has been structurally related to and contingent upon the underdevelopment of others". Furthermore, it can be argued that the professional ideology of English language teaching is rooted in a power structure of linguistic imperialism brought about by a history of colonialism in which native English speaking countries have kept non-native English speaking countries in a position of subordination (Hilgendorf 2018).

To understand the impact of institutional linguicism and how it has made a lasting legacy on English teaching philosophies can be illustrated using a report made by the Commonwealth Conference on the Teaching of English as a Second Language in 1959. The report outlined the following tenets, which were established with the intent to "guide professional efforts" of language

teachers: "English is best taught monolingually, the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker…if other languages are used much, standards of English will drop" (Phillipson 1988, 349).

Phillipson describes the effects of these tenets as according "priority to English, to the exclusion of all other languages" (1988, 350). Studies in second language acquisition and TESL/TEFL have since evolved to prove these beliefs as myths and fallacies (such as the monolingual fallacy, and the native-speaker fallacy). What they depict however is a history of English linguistic hegemony that continues to permeate itself into institutions, and reinforce unquestioned assumptions regarding the teaching of English. What can be ascertained is that linguistic discrimination is part of a complex, far reaching system of discrimination that maintains inequality and promotes a language hierarchy that privileges (Standard) English.

How does linguistic discrimination affect academic performance?

Jim Cummins (1988, 137) found that "power and status relations between minority and majority groups exert a major influence on school performance". He goes on to say that linguistic minority groups who tend to struggle in school are disempowered educationally by interactions with the linguistically dominant group, whether it be educators or peers (Cummins 1988, 138). Furthermore, he argues that minority groups are "'empowered' or 'disabled' as a direct result of their interactions…in school" (1988, 138). The extent to which students are empowered or disabled depends on the kinds of practices and patterns that take place in the school. Some of the factors that disable students academically will be discussed below.

Throughout the research process for this paper, less information was yielded than anticipated in terms of measuring how linguistic discrimination impacts academic performance in the context of second language learning. This indicates that there is great potential for more studies to be done that explore the connection between linguistic discrimination and academic performance. Despite this apparent deficit, more research exists on general affective matters that influence academic performance of second language learners. Using these factors, as well as a study that did investigate the impact of linguistic discrimination in an English as a Foreign Language program, this section intends to discuss how linguistic discrimination can influence affective learning factors that in turn influences academic performance.

Affective factors are defined as emotional factors that influence learning in either a positive or negative way (British Council, n.d.). Negative affective factors will have a detrimental impact on a student's ability to learn a language, and will also affect a student's attitude towards a language.

Skutnabb-Kangas (1988, 29) identified three general affective factors that are key to success in learning a second language: low anxiety, high motivation, and high self-confidence.

To illustrate these three affective factors, they will be applied to a sample qualitative study that gathered data from classroom observations in an EFL program in Colombia. Observers visited five different English language courses, with a total of 21 classrooms being observed each in two hour segments (Rojas et al. 2016, 140). Their goal was to identify the presence of linguistic discrimination in an EFL program, and in what ways the discrimination manifests itself. Their findings show that students with lower proficiency in English who have experienced linguistic discrimination in their classroom are particularly vulnerable to affective issues of anxiety, motivation and self-confidence that impact academic performance (Rojas et al. 2016, 138).

Anxiety

Low student anxiety is the first affective factor highlighted by Skutnabb-Kangas (1988) that is necessary to facilitate language learning. In this context it is important to differentiate that the kind of anxiety being discussed is considered a specific anxiety associated with language learning, rather than "trait anxiety" which refers more so to an individual's personal disposition (Horwitz 2001, 112).

High anxiety can cause students to fear making errors in the classroom, which can lead to self-limiting their degree of participation. During classroom observations, Rojas et al. (2016, 141) found that pronunciation was a significant point of anxiety for students. Lower proficiency students were very cautious and sometimes restricted the extent to which they participated when reading aloud or speaking due to the fear of making mistakes, or sounding "non-native" (Rojas et al. 2016, 141).

The anxiety these students face when it comes to pronunciation is a direct consequence of standard language idealization (Rojas et al. 2016, 141). It is suggested that "attempting to teach Standard English may promote discrimination in the classroom based on the tendency to prefer native-like accents over non-native accents, which can greatly affect learners' performance" (Rojas et al. 2016, 142). Expecting ESL/EFL students to adopt a "native speaker" accent is a fallacy that not only promotes standard language ideology but also ignores the fact that "an individual who learns the English language in an EFL [or ESL] context will always be influenced by his or her mother tongue and culture" (Rojas et al. 2016, 142).

Motivation

High motivation is considered by Skutnabb-Kangas (1988) as the second factor that promotes language learning. Motivation itself includes a variety of elements such as: "the value students attach to a task; how much students expect to succeed; whether they believe they have what it takes to succeed; and what they perceive to be responsible for their success or failure at the task" (Vandergrift 2005, 70). Motivation is seen as a fluid factor that evolves based on the types of internal and external influences that a learner faces (Vandergrift 2005, 71).

One way in which motivation can be affected is through linguistic segregation which is defined as "an intentional attitude of linguistic exclusion inside the classroom…[where] students created an unequal distribution among themselves based on their linguistic proficiency" (Rojas et al. 2016, 144). Linguistic segregation in this form can be seen as an act of linguistic discrimination. This issue is aggravated if a teacher always allows students to form their own groups instead of strategically assigning groups that ensure a mix in levels of proficiency and skills. When this is the case, Rojas et al. (2016, 145) found that student-made groups segregated themselves linguistically between lower proficiency and higher proficiency. This is detrimental in particular to lower proficiency students who lose valuable opportunity to benefit from communicating with students of higher linguistic ability. Furthermore, these divisions based on proficiency cause decreased motivation in lower proficiency students who "are not active participants in classroom activities due to their language level" as participation was often dominated by those of higher proficiency (Rojas et al. 2016, 145). When motivation decreases learners avoid risk-taking and take preference to working alone which affects the degree to which they are active participants in the language classroom thus impacting their chance to learn (Rojas et al. 2016, 145).

Self-confidence

High self-confidence is the third factor identified by Skutnabb-Kangas (1988) that will promote a learner's ability to learn an L2. Having self-confidence is a critical element for a learner, as it increases the likelihood of risk-taking, and often means a learner is less willing to give up when challenged (Ni 2012, 1509). Furthermore, successful language learning takes place in classrooms where learners do not feel threatened, and where positive attitudes are promoted (Ni 2012, 1509). When these variables are not in place, the language learning environment can lead to a lowered sense of self-confidence.

During classroom observations, Rojas et al. (2016, 144) observed that the academic performance of students can be highly affected when faced with judgement by classmates. Their observations found that high proficiency students who were closer to a "native speaker" ideal were more likely to mock

and judge the way lower proficiency students communicate, particularly when it came to grammatical mistakes, and pronunciation (Rojas et al. 2016, 144). This has a major impact on students' feelings of self-confidence and how they view their level of proficiency. This can lead to "negative peer comparison" wherein students compare their linguistic level to others, leading to "a low self-concept based on their linguistic proficiency" (Rojas et al. 2016, 144-145). An environment where open linguistic discrimination is found whether it be between students, or educators and students, is not conducive to language learning.

Selected methods proven to mitigate linguistic discrimination

This section provides a selective overview of two methods found to mitigate linguistic discrimination and is a list that is nowhere near exhaustive when it comes to potential approaches that can be taken to deter linguistic discrimination. The two methods chosen in this section were selected based on practicality, as well as positive evidence that supports them as viable options to deter linguistic discrimination. These methods were chosen on the basis of research that supported their ability to create *systemic* change to how second language acquisition is viewed, and subsequently how English is taught. The first method to be discussed is the promotion of Anti-Racist Education within teacher training programs. The second method is a classroom based method that applies the concept of plurilingual pedagogy to teaching strategies and activities.

Anti-racist education

Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire coined the concept "conscientization", also known as "critical consciousness" or "consciousness raising" (Cummins and Skutnabb-Kangas 1988, 4). Freire's theory of conscientization can be defined as "the action or process of making others aware of political and social conditions, especially as a precursor to challenging inequalities of treatment or opportunity" (Oxford Dictionary, n.d.). Freire's term forms the basis of anti-racist education and its objectives. Many forms of multicultural education focus on "merely celebrating differences or assuming a priori that all people are equal," which creates an illusion of equality that still maintains "existing power relations that the people on the margins are expected to assimilate to" (Kubota 2004, 36-37). Anti-racist education is seen as an action-based approach to education that actively challenges systems of oppression.

Anti-racist education requires educators to examine broader societal power structures that go beyond the educational system, to realize the ways in which these power structures have historically

and presently created imbalances between linguistically dominant and linguistically marginalized groups (Cummins and Skutnabb-Kangas 1988, 2). Cummins believes that minority students are marginalized in school in the very same ways that their communities are marginalized by the dominant society; however, reversing these patterns of oppression and discrimination within the school will promote minority students' educational success (1988, 138).

A study of a teacher training program examined the development of Critical Language Awareness (CLA) in educators who identified as white, and speakers of standardized English. The study examined the contributions of the teachers in online discussion forums in order to identify "themes and tensions" in their understanding of Critical Language Awareness (Godley, Reaser and Moore 2015, 41). The study concluded that the participants had a strong appreciation and understanding of issues such as dialect diversity and code-switching, and were highly interested in including "critical" elements of language variation such as "how systems of privilege are reinforced through language ideologies" (Godley, Reaser and Moore 2015, 41). However, the point of tension identified in the study was the reluctance of many teachers to acknowledge their own white privilege, as well as their discomfort in teaching about power structures (Godley, Reaser and Moore 2015, 41). Furthermore, "only some [teachers] used this critical understanding of SE [Standard English] to call for teaching students to challenge and change existing linguistic prejudices and systems of power" (Godley, Reaser and Moore 2015, 51).

Following this study, some implications this holds for training teachers about anti-racist education can be drawn. The study identified that the teachers felt they knew how to make their students aware of linguistic discrimination, but not how to teach them practical strategies to combat linguistic discrimination (Godley, Reaser and Moore 2015, 51). Thus, more emphasis should be placed in future training programs on substantive strategies that students and teachers alike can utilise. Furthermore, it suggests that acknowledging personal privileges related to race and language is an uncomfortable paradigm shift for educators, as it requires them to face many assumptions they've held that have previously gone unquestioned. Acknowledging systems of privilege is essential, but should be understood as something that takes time and critical self-reflection.

Within the context of TESL/TEFL, anti-racist education requires a shift away from an Anglo-conformity orientation. An example of Anglo-conformity would be an educator's belief that the use of two languages at home "confuses" bilingual children, and would result in advising parents to avoid L1 use and emphasize the use of English only in the home (Cummins 1988, 136). Cummins notes that educators do not normally intend to discriminate, but their interactions with minority students are

"mediated by a system of unquestioned assumptions that reflect the values and priorities of the dominant...culture" such as an unquestioned belief that assumes English to be the best language for education (1988, 132). Anti-racist education seeks to make educators aware of their own unquestioned assumptions and biases, to see them as "manifestations of institutionalized racism/ ethnicism/ classicism/ linguicism in society (and in the schools that reflect the broader society)" (Cummins and Skutnabb-Kangas 1988, 3).

A way in which anti-racist education can be applied to an English language classroom is through teaching standard language through a critical lens. This approach encourages English language learners to "learn the standard language critically, to use it to critique its complicity with domination and subordination, and to subvert the normative linguistic code" (Kubota 2004, 46). In support of this method, Canagaraja states that "whereas the uncritical use of English leads to accommodation or domination, and avoidance of English leads to marginalization or ghettoization, critical negotiation leads to [students'] empowerment" (as cited in Kubota 2004, 46). The action of critically scrutinizing standard language ideology allows learners and educators to actively question and challenge the linguistic hegemony of English, rather than allowing the teaching of standard language to reproduce ideologies that perpetuate systems of language inequality.

Plurilingual pedagogy

Theories of second language pedagogy have changed immensely over the last few decades. New approaches to language acquisition are moving away from theories of multilingualism, towards the concept of plurilingualism and plurilingual pedagogy (Piccardo 2013, 600). Within a multilingual pedagogic approach, languages are kept "distinct both at the societal level and at the individual level [and] tend to stress the separate, advanced mastery of each language a person speaks" (Piccardo 2013, 601). Conversely, the Council of Europe (2001) defines plurilingualism as being based on the fact that languages "interrelate and interconnect particularly, but not exclusively, at the level of the individual" (as cited in Piccardo 2013, 601). Plurilingualism promotes "minimizing barriers between languages" rather than maintaining them as multilingualism does (Piccardo 2013, 604).

A plurilingual pedagogy will see learning as something that happens when information can be associated to pre-existing information the learner has (notably, their L1) (Piccardo 2013, 603). In this sense, when teaching an L2 the mother tongue(s) of students are not excluded and the acquisition of a new language is seen as a modification of one's global language competence (Piccardo 2013, 603). Furthermore, plurilingualism has been seen as a way to increase "higher cognitive flexibility; linguistic,

cultural, and conceptual transfer; and enhanced capacity for abstract, divergent, and creative thinking" within learners (Piccardo 2013, 602).

One way in which to explore plurilingualism is through a sociocultural perspective. Lantolf (2011) views this perspective of language acquisition as a phenomenon "that occurs in the social sphere and is intrinsically linked to interaction and mediation between individuals, each possessing his or her own complex cultural system and all living within linguistically, culturally, and sociologically defined configurations" (as cited in Piccardo 2013, 603). Thus, plurilingual pedagogy is one way in which linguistic discrimination can be mitigated as it promotes the coexistence of languages rather than reinforcing an unequal division between them. Piccardo (2013, 602) has marked this change in educational philosophy as "a substantial paradigm shift" wherein the "conceptualization moves beyond language hierarchies and social connotations".

An example of a program that implemented plurilingual pedagogy exists in France. Known as *Comparons nos langues* ("let's compare our languages"), the project works with immigrant children who are learning French as a Second Language (FSL). Essentially, teachers incorporate the native languages of the learners during lessons in order to enhance the acquisition of the target language. Learners partake in constant metalinguistic reflection "by referring to their personal language(s) of origin and by comparing its grammatical and lexical features with those of the target language" (Piccardo 2013, 608). The L1 of a learner is used to facilitate the acquisition of the L2, rather than it being viewed as detrimental to the learning process.

In this educational context the traditional hierarchy structure and subsequent division of power that exists between minority languages and a majority language is leveled. As previously defined, linguistic discrimination is the domination of one language at the expense of another which in turn maintains inequities between groups. Plurilingual pedagogy can be seen as a way to empower minority students where their knowledge of their L1 is seen positively, and is actively acknowledged and valued within the classroom. Furthermore, plurilingual pedagogy can elevate positive affective factors that are necessary for successful language acquisition. When learners have the chance to "share their competences" it enhances "a sense of self-efficacy" that can lead to heightened self-confidence and motivation in the learning environment (Piccardo 2013, 608).

Conclusion

This paper has examined the ways in which linguistic discrimination is part of a broader system of oppression that perpetuates an unequal division of power and resources on the basis of language. It

also discussed the ways in which the profession of TESL/TEFL has promoted the linguistic hegemony of English, and has been complicit in the dissemination of standard language ideology which contributes (intentionally or not) to linguistic discrimination.

What can be concluded is that linguistic discrimination will negatively impact learners' academic performance. This was shown through the ways in which linguistic discrimination correlates with an increase in negative affective factors related to anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence. This paper did highlight however the fact that there is an opportunity for more research to be conducted that investigates the impact of linguistic discrimination on L2 learners. More commonly, research in second language acquisition has explored general factors that affect academic performance, without considering the systemic issue of oppression and discrimination that exists in educational settings. In order to combat linguistic discrimination, the methods of anti-racist education and plurilingual pedagogy can be incorporated into teacher training programs as well as professional development workshops for English language teachers. Both methods were chosen on the basis of their ability to evoke *systemic* change when it comes to mitigating linguistic discrimination. Both methods recognize the influence of societal power structures that are reproduced in educational contexts. What can be determined is that although TESL/TEFL contexts are places in which traditional language ideology and discrimination are maintained, they also hold the potential to be places in which these issues are challenged.

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