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Intersectionality for TESOL Education: Connecting Theory and Justice Pedagogy

This paper focuses on the concept of intersectionality, which has been used to account for multiple forms of identity and inequality. It argues that intersectionality is a powerful theoretical lens that could be used in analyzing language teachers' identities and their various contexts. It is also deeply connected to an orientation and understanding of justice. One significant connection that still needs to be explored in TESOL education is how intersectionality and social justice interact. Thus, the paper examines what specific professional practices educators can develop to support the critical awareness of language teachers in training. It concludes that one of the most important tasks for language teacher educators is to help current and future practitioners not only to understand the theory behind intersectional pedagogy, but to generate their own relevant, critical questions about forms of social and educational injustice in schools and other institutional contexts.

Keywords: intersectionality, anti-racist pedagogy, intersectional justice pedagogy, TESOL teacher education

Originating in the area of law and in the work by Black scholars, *intersectionality* essentially criticized the essentialist model that we could analyze race or gender without acknowledging the experiences of Black women and understanding that the discrimination they experienced was due to both their race and their gender (Crenshaw, 1989). While it is difficult to provide a singular definition of intersectionality, we use it here to explain how "multiple forms of inequality and identity inter-relate in different contexts and over time, for example, the inter-connectedness of race, class, gender, disability, and so on" (Gillborn, 2015) in terms of identity and justice for a pedagogical framework.

Recently, the vibrant scholarship around raciolinguistics (Flores & Rosa, 2015) within English language teaching has posited that understandings around race and language together (rather than one or the other) position language minoritized children in subordinate ways although it must be acknowledged that the terms *intersectional* or *intersectionality* are not used. In fact, even if intersectionality has been drawn on extensively in other disciplines, its research and pedagogical implications for English language teachers are just beginning to emerge (Lawrence & Nagashima, 2020).

By drawing on our perspectives as three second-language teacher educators in different geographic locations of the United States as well as our reading of the applications of intersectionality

in teaching and teacher education (e.g., Annamma & Winn, 2019; Haddix, 2015; Knight, 2002; Kulkarni, Nusbaum, & Boda,[1] 2021; Pugach, Gomez-Najarro, & Matewos, 2019), we propose our perspectives of how it can be used by English language teachers and teacher educators in thinking about identity and justice. In terms of the connections between intersectionality and identity, we have witnessed how various identity aspects impact the professional and personal trajectories of our own students who are training to be language teachers. In one of our classrooms, for instance, a female Muslim TESOL student expressed her surprise that some of her professors assumed she could not work in groups with male classmates. Some of her neighbors and even classmates were surprised that Muslim women could be well educated given their religious and ethnic backgrounds. The point this Muslim TESOL student was making to her professors, neighbors, and classmates was that she was not defined by her wearing a hijab; yet, even well-meaning people saw her through her gender and religion only or primarily and ignored other aspects of her identity. Such anecdotes from our classrooms reveal that TESOL students can benefit from raising their critical awareness of the mosaic of social factors that shape their personal and professional identities and, specifically, raising awareness of the intersectional spaces they inhabit.

Moreover, and possibly more importantly, intersectionality is not only a framework for considering identity but is also deeply connected to an orientation and understanding of justice, or what others have called intersectional justice " as committing to consistently acknowledging and disrupting layered, interlocking inequities in the lives and communities of multiply-marginalized students" (Annamma & Winn, 2019, p. 319) as is the case with many of our English language teacher candidates and our students. In aligning this term with applications to the classroom, in this article, we propose the applications of *intersectional justice pedagogy* in TESOL. Such a pedagogy would encourage language teacher educators and language teachers to engage in questions such as the following: How can we as language teachers and teacher educators consider how we may be creating intersectionally oppressive environments for our learners? How can we teach about stereotypes and how these intersect with race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and other markers? How can we help language teachers analyze pedagogical moments and structural problems intersectionally and thus work to dismantle racism, linguicism, ableism and other kinds of oppression? How can we empower language teachers we work with in TESOL programs to recognize themselves as intersectional beings so they, in turn, can be active advocates for themselves and for their own language learners' intersectional selves?

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate critically how an intersectional framework and pedagogy can be used in TESOL teacher education especially. After providing an overview of intersectionality and how it has been used in education and TESOL, we offer practical insights and implications for TESOL teachers and teacher educators grounded in intersectional justice pedagogy.

Intersectionality: An Overview

The background of intersectionality theory is inherently connected to issues of race and a movement of [KAH(1] anti-racism, which began as early as the 1800s in the U. S. In particular, the efforts by Black women against racial discrimination in different parts of the country across time, such as the National Association of Colored Women's Club in 1896 and Combahee River Collective in 1974 (Jones, 2012), brought a collective action to combat racism that black women experienced. It was Sojourner Truth, an enslaved woman, who in 1851 first posed the question, "Ain't I a Woman?" at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio. This question has become central in feminist discourses in North America and Britain as it challenges essentialist views of gender and other social categories (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). Indeed, intersectionality has come to represent "the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue

when multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts" (p. 76).

Historically, the lens of intersectionality emerged as African-American women's response to the social movements in the 1970s in the U.S. Those movements failed in recognizing the composite identities of African-American women and the complex social problems they experienced. The different groups of activists working on different issues (e.g., anti-racist movement, feminism, women's rights) were all aiming for social equality, and yet they did not thoroughly reflect the African-American female experience; in other words, "African-American women were simultaneously black *and* female *and* workers" (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 3) and their "specific issues remained subordinated within each movement because no social movement by itself would, nor could, address the entirety of discriminations they faced" (p. 3). An intersectional lens has "enabled African-American women to develop a collective identity politics" through which "they cultivated a political black feminist identity at the intersections of racism, sexism, class exploitation, national history, and sexuality" (p. 4).

These efforts have indicated "that major axes of social divisions in a given society at a given time, for example, race, class, gender, sexuality dis/ability, and age operate not as discrete and mutually exclusive entities but build on each other and work together" (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 4). The real-life experiences of African-American women hence became the impetus for the initial conceptualizations of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1990) and subsequent scholarly work that aim to understand and demonstrate how macro systems of dominance and subordination (e.g., patriarchy, racism, etc.) intersect and work together in privileging some identities and experiences while marginalizing others. According to Collins and Bilge (2016), intersectionality or intersectional frameworks are built around the following core ideas:

- *Social inequality* is not due to one single factor. A thorough understanding of social inequality is possible only when we move beyond race-only or class-only singular lenses and rather attempt to understand how intersection of various categories contribute to social inequality.
- Just like there is no pure racism or sexism, there is no single system of power but "intersecting systems of power" (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 27). *Power* relations in any social community can be understood through intersections (e.g., racism and sexism) and across domains of power (e.g., structural, disciplinary, cultural, etc.)
- Intersectionality moves beyond binary thinking and rather capitalizes on *relationality*, "a both/and frame" (p. 27). Rather than differences between or among categories (e.g., how racial experience is different from class related experience), relational thinking focuses on interconnectedness (e.g., how race and class overlap in shaping human experience).
- Intersectionality is *contextual*. Social inequality and power relations are understood within the historical, social, and political context. A particular social category membership in connection to others may privilege an individual or a group of individuals in one context but marginalize the same individual or group of individuals in another.
- *Complexity* is an inevitable characteristic of an intersectional framework. All of the themes mentioned above (e.g., social inequality, power, relationality, etc.) add a layer of complexity to intersectional work and knowledge.
- Intersectional work is closely tied to *social justice*. An expanding circle of intersectionality to include individuals from all kinds of backgrounds to engage in an ongoing critique of the status quo is essential.

- Intersectionality rejects a sole focus on subordinated groups; it rather aims to understand how *privilege and subordination work simultaneously* to sustain the status quo and social inequalities in any given context.

Intersectionality in Education and TESOL

Intersectionality is grounded in Critical Race studies. Originated in the 1970s within the critical law scholarship in the U.S., critical race theory (CRT) focuses on individual rights and freedoms and challenges the dominant social discourses and structures that are shaped by race and minoritize people of color. A number of scholars (e.g., Derrick Bell, Kimberle Crenshaw, Richard Delgado) have challenged the idea of color blindness and capitalized instead on the historical, legal, societal, and institutional ideologies and structures that have consistently and historically privileged White people while "making social justice for people of color unattainable" (Crump, 2014, p. 212).

With over two decades of work, Gloria Ladson-Billings and other educational researchers (e.g., Adrienne Dixon, David Gilborn, Marvin Lynn, Daniel Solorzano) have developed a line of critical race scholarship in the context of American or Western education. In her writings, Ladson-Billings has used race as an analytic tool to analyze and understand school inequity and argued that the traditional forms of multicultural education promote the idea of "unity of difference" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 62) and thus encourage the use of "politically correct code words for race, such as ethnicity, culture, and language" (Crump, 2014, p. 212). Such politically correct language leaves no room for explicit and meaningful discussions of systemic inequity and institutional and structural racism in educational settings. Chan and Coney (2020) encourage TESOL educators to engage in various levels of actions and move the TESOL field "from liberal forms of multiculturalism, which ignore power and confuse equality with equity, to critical forms, which challenge white norms and consider systemic oppression" (p. 1). In efforts to move beyond traditional forms of multicultural education that primarily focus on the recognition and appreciation of 'diversity,' an essential argument is that "raced inequities are shaped by processes that also reflect, and are influenced by, other dimensions of identity and social structure" (Gillborn, 2015, p. 278), which brings *intersectionality* to the forefront in pushing against social inequities and injustices and promoting social activism.

The use of intersectional justice in education has been introduced by those engaged in DisCrit, looking at the intersections of race and ability (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013; Annamma & Winn, 2019). In the TESOL scholarship around race, the intersections among various social identities have not been invisible to TESOL researchers and educators (e.g., Kubota & Lin, 2006; Amin, 1997; Motha, 2006, 2014; Ruecker, 2011; Varghese, Daniels, & Park, 2019). Kubota and Lin (2006), for instance, acknowledge that racialization is closely related to practices of colonialism, different forms of racism, and linguicism. One common example of an intersectionally racist institutional practice is the hiring of teachers who are not only native speakers but also predominantly White. Kubota and Lin thus argue that race is not intersect isolated in the construction of language teacher identities and their potential for agency:

> Just as the idea of race interacts with gender and sexuality in identity construction and negotiation, racisms can also with other types of injustices such as sexism, classism, homophobia, linguicism, ageism, and so on. The combination is not manifested in a zero-sum fashion but in a complex way. (p. 480)

Similarly, Motha (2006) points out the institutional and systemic racialization of language teaching practices by examining the perspectives of four K-12 teachers through a feminist ethnography. She

acknowledges that teachers' racial and linguistic identities are inherently related and that identities are not defined only by race but are multilayered and fluid.

One significant connection that still needs to be furthered is how intersectionality and social justice interact and what role TESOL education can play in it; it is a connection that we attempt to make in this paper. Recent social movements in the U.S. (e.g., Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, etc.) have made the need for engaging in such discussions explicitly more urgent than ever. For instance, Silva (2021) tackles the question of how language practitioners can teach intersectionally by incorporating issues such as Black Lives Matter. Citing scholars such as Macedo (2003) and Rosa and Flores (2020), who claim that racialized speakers are perceived as linguistically deficient, Silva proposes a raciolinguistic perspective that connects critical concepts such as purism and nativeness in language teaching. Lawrence and Nagashima (2020) explore the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, race, and native speakerness by employing a duoethnographic approach. Focusing on classroom practice, Midby, Mugabonake, Shea, and Kayi-Aydar (2020) challenge the traditional understandings of L2 motivation and describe an intersectional lens and pedagogy to understand and foster learner motivation. They argue, for example, that "treating English language learners as a different group than their English native-speaking peers will not help explain the motivation issues in a K-12 U.S. classroom, but identifying (un)privileged positions each learner occupies and recognizing the (in)visible intersects will help identify the complexities of the problem" (p. 1115). These are important conversations that show TESOL researchers' awareness of the multiple factors that underlie the language teaching profession.

Intersectional Justice Pedagogy for TESOL

We believe that the field of TESOL is uniquely positioned to develop and employ an intersectional justice pedagogy that focuses on intersectional identities and multiple forms of oppression that our TESOL students and their language learners might encounter. The implications of different social identities and structural inequities for the lives of teachers and learners as evidenced by the theory and research discussed in the previous sections demand for such pedagogy.

An engagement in intersectional justice pedagogy in the ESL classroom begins with *understanding the history of racism and intersectional oppression in the U.S.* (Annamma & Winn, 2019). Most often, teachers try to understand the intersectional forms of oppression through their own personal experiences. While making personal connections is encouraged, reliance on personal experience may not always support the societal and structural patterns that emerge in the classroom (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). If teachers are unable to understand those patterns that oppress or minoritize, they will not be able to identify them in their own local contexts. Those patterns, when documented with empirical evidence or statistical data, communicate certain messages. Annamma and Winn (2019) point out, for example, the disparities in the 2014 disciplinary practices data by the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, which show that Black children receive more in- and out-of school suspensions than any other racial group in the U.S. public schools. We have noticed the same finding in our review of the 2021 data (US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2021). A closer look at the statistical details illustrates that disparities worsen when the data are disaggregated by race *and* disability—another consistent pattern over the years. Not only are Black children more likely to be suspended than other students, but Black students with disabilities are also served more school suspensions than any other student group within the disability category. These are obviously not random coincidences, but systemic intersectional inequalities documented by statistical data. The unchallenged White-centric values combined with ableism that determine "discipline" practices in K-12 schools are indeed evident in almost all teaching and assessment practices, sustaining intersectional injustices over time. While these

sociohistorical patterns and contributing educational practices are important for all K-12 educators, they are even more critical for ESL as over 93% of the ELL students in the U.S. are people of color (NCES, 2019).

An important and necessary set of components of intersectional justice pedagogy would be to *have our students generate critical questions*to help them identify and understand the nature of unjust practices as well as the inclusion of such critical examples of work to generate discussions within the classroom and across communities. Through the generation of critical questions especially around the taken-for-granted and normalized pedagogical practices, we can make the hidden intersections visible and engage teachers in an explicit analysis of power and privilege in their own lives and the lives of those in their larger communities. From K-12 to higher education, we will all continue to contribute to intersectional injustices through White-centric educational practices if they remain unchallenged, unquestioned, and unchanged. As Kendi (2019) argued, *identifying* a racist idea, policy, or process that produces or sustains inequity among racial groups is an important step towards antiracism. Intersectionality helps identify nuances and details in antiracist practices. Kubota (2021) explained this further:

> Although racism is the primary focus in antiracist advocacy, social injustice is not caused only by racism, nor can racism explain all forms of oppression experienced by racialized people. Other types of inequalities related to gender, class, language, sexuality, ability, religion, and so on intersect with racism, shaping human experiences in intricate ways. (p. 241)

Specifically, some assignments that TESOL teacher educators can use in the classroom to raise awareness of intersectional spaces are critical reflections, autobiographies, and especially counter-storytelling. In one of our courses, student-teachers were asked to consider their own intersectional identities in their critical reflections in light of what practices or methods they used with their students. They were urged to reflect on questions such as "Is this practice potentially damaging? Who has power in this practice? Who benefits the most from it?" while considering intersections of their identities in terms of race, gender, ability, class, sexual identity and other relevant identities. The ability to describe lived experiences provides students from marginalized groups with the opportunity to give them voice and a sense of agency while students with privilege understand how they have been positioned historically as well. Furthermore, through a critical reflection of their own experiences, an individual student can recognize how they might be occupying both privileged and marginalized positions in various relationships and settings.

Counter-storytelling is an example of a critical reflective practice that draws on CRT methodology (Connor, 2006), and is grounded in the five elements of CRT (Hall, 2017): intersectionality of race with other forms of subordination, challenges to dominant ideologies, social justice, experiential knowledge, and the inclusion of transdisciplinary approaches. Along with personal narratives, counter-storytelling could be employed to disrupt stereotypical beliefs and help promote social justice. Additionally, through reaction blogs (Hall, 2017) or interviews with English language learners, teachers can learn more about and analyze their thoughts on a particular intersection of their choice (e.g., race, sex, and language background). In particular, focusing on the intersections and related experiences that are inadequately addressed in the scholarly literature or governmental reports (e.g., Asian English learners from a higher socio-economic status, English learners with disabilities, White Muslim English learners, etc.) and examining how they might be contributing to the status quo and systemic injustices will be illuminating. Sharing knowledge gained through counter-storytelling is a useful learning resource. A learning space where certain experiences, ideas, or stories by one race (typically White) predominate produces "resource

inequity" (Kendi, 2019, p. 180). For example, many ESL textbooks as well as ESL teaching practices still reflect the perspectives and practices of White English native speakers (Kubota, 2021). Kendi (2019) acknowledged that "to be an antiracist is to champion resource equity" (p. 180), and an anti-racist intersectional justice pedagogy is one that effectively integrates, equates, and nurtures racial spaces that produce and support *resource equity* and build solidarity among racial groups.

Discussions about anti-racism on college campuses have gained importance as evidenced by publications such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Bartlett, 2021). TESOL professionals can benefit from academic intersectionality and meaningful conversations with colleagues not only in the field of TESOL but other disciplines as well in their anti-racist practices. For instance, they will find some natural allies in Women's studies and Gender departments, Disability studies, psychology, sociology, health sciences, or performing arts (for an overview of how intersectionality impacts these various disciplines and intersectionality across academic areas, see Greenwood, 2017). Given the importance of collective action in furthering an anti-racist agenda, a college campus cannot truly be anti-racist if it fails to seize opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaboration and dialogue. Another example is the possible application of academic intersectionality and developing relationships between our own TESOL students and students in performing arts where agency could be enacted not only through words but also through physically embodying various ideas in texts. Teachers could have the option to select texts that challenge persistent stereotypes and inequality based on learners' proficiency levels or purposes. One specific example illustrating the opportunities that the performing arts can provide is grounded in the concept of the Theater of the Oppressed (Bhukhunwala & Dean, 2019; Cahnmann Taylor & Souto Manning, 2010). Citing Boal's work (1979), Bhukhanwala and Dean explored the potential of this particular approach and how it could be implemented for a socially just teacher education program. With its multiple forms (e.g., forum theater or image theater), it can create a safe space for students to rehearse different realities. More significantly, teachers' active engagement in second-language communities–whether through the arts, texts, or any other forms of social justice pedagogy–can help foster critical awareness of the intersectional identities of their learners and allow them to exercise agency as advocates for minority groups. These are essential prerequisites for reimaging and transforming spaces for learning and teaching, and they are in line with the core of anti-racist pedagogy, in which inquiry, reflection, action, and transformation are all connected (Blakeney, 2005). As Blakeney explained:

> The use of knowledge, reflection, and action defines praxis. Using praxis as its focus, Antiracist Pedagogy is theoretically capable of eliminating these prevailing catalysts of racism in society, ensuring that diversity is promoted and respected and creating a context for promoting social justice. (p. 125)

Blakeney makes a strong claim that teachers who are untrained in Critical Theory, which is the foundation for anti-racist pedagogy, or who are not encouraged to analyze their own racial identities, will be unable to implement anti-racist practices successfully. The scholar suggested that professional development in anti-racist pedagogy begins with a dialogue through which teachers examine and evaluate concepts such as white dominance and institutional racism. Although they are not specific to language teaching, some specific examples of how teachers can analyze their own experiences and reflect on their own practices, including how the latter could be transformed, could be found in Howard's (2016) now classic book *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools*. In addition to reflections on teachers' own positionality, possible scenarios from the classroom entailing interactions between teachers and students and administrators and students are offered as a starting point for discussion. The scenarios challenge white dominance models and teachers' perceptions of students who may be racially,

religiously, or otherwise diverse. These pedagogical practices dovetail with the theoretical lens of intersectionality and the calls for social justice in language teachers' professional development.

Conclusion

In this paper, we aimed to highlight the relevance of intersectionality to language learning and teaching and, specifically, to its application in TESOL education. We outlined relevant pedagogical practices. We emphasize that whatever pedagogical practices are selected, an intersectional pedagogy would prompt teacher educators and language teachers alike to create meaningful dialogues among social agents and across disciplines. As Grant and Zwier (2011) remind us, "by strategically drawing upon a range of approaches—lenses, knowledge, experience, challenging, relevant content, modes of expression, differentiation, and critical consciousness and engagement—teachers can work at being culturally responsive to students' intersectional identities on an ongoing basis" (p. 186). In other words, one of our most important tasks as language teacher educators is to help current and future practitioners not only to understand the theory behind intersectional pedagogy, but to generate their own relevant, critical questions about forms of social and educational injustice in schools and other institutional contexts. As Kubota (2021) claimed, "critical antiracism should recognize and challenge all forms of injustice, rather than attributing all inequalities to race" (p. 241). Intersectionality allows us to accomplish this through its focus on multiple forms of oppression and subordination as well as "multilayered manifestations of racism" (Kubota, 2021, p. 241). Integrating an intersectionality lens with antiracist practices and policies contributes to social justice efforts in ESL classrooms and TESOL teacher education programs.

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