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Carla R. Chamberlin
The Pennsylvania State University, Abington College

Muhammad Ali Khan
Community College of Philadelphia

Critical Media Work as Antiracist Pedagogy in Language Learning Classrooms

Language learning classrooms are sites of discovery not only of language, but of identity, culture, and community. The pedagogical approach described here, critical media work (CMW), integrates language teaching and social issues by using media literacy as a bridge. CMW explores antiracist discourse in popular media (digital and analog) to dismantle simplified, binary thinking about race. CMW encourages semiotic analyses of antiracist discourse and examines messages along continuums that emphasize complexities and intersections of race, language, and culture. We share how language teachers at two urban colleges that serve immigrant populations integrate CMW into their classes, and we discuss the effectiveness of this pedagogy in terms of language learning and antiracist education. We maintain that language teaching and social justice education can support each other and that media literacy provides a meaningful and effective foundation for engaged antiracist pedagogy.

Keywords: critical media literacy, antiracist discourse, migrant education, antiracist pedagogy

Critical Media Work

Critical media work (CMW) is a pedagogical approach that merges ideas from media literacy education, language learning, and critical discourse analysis. For language learners unfamiliar with certain idioms, metaphors, and cultural references woven into popular media, CMW opens up discussions of how meaning is constructed through the intersection of symbols, contexts, and identities. In the following pages, we situate this approach within TESOL, introduce the general framework, and share how we adapted and implemented CMW to address racial justice and language awareness with our undergraduate college students. Muhammad Khan (Mak) describes how he uses CMW in ESL classes at a community college, and Carla applies CMW to TESOL classes for preservice teachers. The focus on racial justice emerged from our conversations about teaching against the backdrop of COVID-19 pandemic, racially motivated murders, and contentious elections in the United States, all which heightened the imperative to address social justice in our communities and classrooms. As language educators, we wanted to help our students decipher messages about race that they encounter in their daily lives and widen their communicative repertoires to respond to these messages. We focus on local media to encourage students to engage in conversations about how racial justice, in particular antiracist discourse, plays out where they live, work, and attend school.

Language Learning, Media, and Race

Language learning should be relevant and meaningful. It should engage with the discourse of local communities and encompass face-to-face interactions, analog media (e.g., printed signs, flyers, posters, newspapers), and digital platforms. Whether learners are in front of screens or walking through their neighborhoods, the texts and images of their local mediascapes comprise a rich source for learning. Using popular local media as an effective resource, however, requires adopting a critical lens that recognizes media as powerful cultural storytellers (Chamberlin, 2018; Lippi-Green, 2012). In TESOL, we have already begun to integrate critical media literacy into language learning and teaching, focusing on the language of advertisements, film, news, and websites (Chamberlin-Quinlisk, 2003, 2012a, 2012b; Egbert & Neville, 2015; Hobbs, He, & Robbgrieco, 2015; Park, 2011). By focusing more specifically on local media about race, we aim for students to gain a deeper understanding of the relationships among language, race, and media in their communities. Although all students need to become critical viewers of media, it is vitally important for language learners, whose status and agency have historically been marginalized. Likewise, language teachers are sometimes pushed to the peripheries, their work represented as remediation and judged by anglonormative and monolingual ideologies. CMW is a pathway for both learners and teachers to approach language development in tandem with social and cultural awareness. For example, learners can look at the language of Black Lives Matter signs and street art but also ask why these messages have recently been challenged and vandalized throughout California (Chabria, 2020; Chui, 2020; Flynn, 2020). Preservice teachers can explore how the label English Language Learners (ELL) in educational discourse in California has come to be associated with inability or deficiency (Nguyen, 2021). CMW can be used to encourage a more active response to media messages about race and social justice.

Critical media literacy scholars, in fact, call for audiences to be engaged participants rather than passive consumers of media (Hobbs, 2020; Kellner & Share, 2005, 2019; Lewis & Jhally, 1998; Mihailidis, 2019). In language classrooms, critical media literacy builds students' skills in analyzing how messages are simplified, decontextualized, amplified, downplayed, or otherwise manipulated to frame social issues. Then, students are empowered to examine how narratives about race and antiracist activism, for example, are constructed in media as well as how attitudes impacting their lives are cultivated. The semiotic exercise of decoding enables students to go beyond vocabulary acquisition to see how meaning is generated through the interplay among language, imagery, modalities, and contexts (Fairclough, 2010; Kress, 2010; Wodak, 2011). Through critical media work, language learners and TESOL preservice teachers alike may learn to disrupt patterns of avoidance or hostility that characterize many public conversations about race. TESOL and ESL classrooms are fertile landscapes for exploring complex and fluid media messages about communication, society, and race.

Critical Media Work as Pedagogy

Critical media work (CMW) is a flexible approach in which analog and digital media are examined through the lenses of critical discourse analysis, semiotic analysis, and media literacy. CMW looks closely at texts and images and how they combine in various platforms to create meaning. Students explore modalities, content, and contexts through assignments that are adapted to their needs and abilities. The core of CMW is not a prescribed sequence or single method; rather, CMW is a cyclical process of observation, interrogation, interpretation, reflection, and response (Chamberlin, forthcoming). The first stages explore linguistic, visual, nonverbal, and auditory features such as verb choices, metaphors, language varieties, voices, fonts, colors, sounds, and layouts (Fairclough, 2010; Kress, 2010), as well as media strategies of simplification, omission, and emotional appeals (Higdon, 2020; Hobbs, 2020). Next, CMW asks students to think critically about media in their local communities and reflect on their roles in creating, maintaining,

or disrupting social narratives that are relevant to their lives—such as racism and what it means to be antiracist.

For this article, we specifically focus on using CMW with undergraduate college students to explore what "antiracism" looks like in media, what meanings are conveyed, and how these messages reflect a spectrum of attitudes and sentiments about race. Chamberlin (2021) suggested using continuums to interrogate antiracist messages in terms of commitment to action, orientation to others versus self, and level of risk-taking within specific communities. Likewise, in the activities we describe here, students are encouraged to dismantle binary thinking about race and identify antiracist messages as fluid, complex stories that move along continuums, rather than fit neatly into static categories. Continuums should be based on class content and ideally co-created with students. Kendi's (2019) *How to be an antiracist* and DiAngelo's (2018) *White fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism* provide practical starting points for constructing continuums. For example, a Passive—Action-oriented continuum reflects the idea that antiracism must include action that disrupts racism, otherwise it is a passive proclamation of "I'm not a racist" that maintains the status quo. An Individual—Systemic continuum asks how antiracism is positioned as an individual or social response. A Binary—Fluid continuum questions how race is presented as a simple binary or a complex, nuanced issue. Continuums remind us that discourse about race is complex, and our students need to be equipped to communicate effectively about and within these complexities.

Continuums can also be based on specific content covered in classes and used in various ways. Carla introduces continuums explicitly to preservice teachers, and for this article she incorporated Von Esch, Motha, and Kubota's (2020) article, "Race and language teaching" into the activity to explore how race has been conceptualized in TESOL, especially how anglonormativity and color-blind approaches need to be challenged. For his ESL classes, Mak added the continuum of Agency—Lack of Agency (who does what to whom in the text world) to reveal how asymmetrical power structure in the text might provide insights into uneven social orders. Mak did not, however, use continuums explicitly with students. Instead, the continuums served as guides for his teaching, allowing him to gradually and implicitly introduce useful terms to his ESL students.

Doing Critical Media Work

CMW begins with data collection and sharing of data on digital platforms. Students are asked to take photos of media or artifacts that they believe represent antiracist messages or attitudes. Students take photos of signs, documents, ephemera such as labels, posters, bulletin boards, advertisements, etc. and post their photos on a class platform such as a Google Jamboard or Padlet. With a teacher's guidance students look at word choices, verb tenses, use of multiple languages, idioms, slang, local references, style (formal/formal), connotations, voices, punctuation, and basic design (images, color, font, layout). Teachers can ask how colors grab attention, how font sizes highlight or de-emphasize content, whether the language seems conversational or authoritative, and whether or not assumed cultural knowledge is necessary for understanding. Who is represented in voice or in images? Who is missing? Modalities too can be questioned. Where and how is this message displayed? Who has access to it? How does the modality constrain or augment the message? Moreover, media messages often reflect current changes in language and break prescriptive rules of grammar—features that are of interest to language learners. This stage of analysis should aim to be descriptive, helping students to identify components of message construction and meaning.

The next stage includes closer interrogations, based directly or indirectly on continuums, of how language and imagery reflect social narratives. At this point, the intersectionality of student identities such

as race, gender, language learner status, immigrants, and "perpetual foreigners'' becomes part of the conversation as these identities shape their interpretations. In order to facilitate discussions and learning, teachers can provide space for constructive communication. For example, prompts for discussion should focus on connecting media to social narratives (continuums): What action does this media call for? How are the proposed actions carried out, by whom, where, and to what extent? Is antiracism portrayed as an individual or social issue? Who is responsible for antiracist initiatives and results? Whose identities are represented, and what agency do they have? How are racial, cultural, and linguistic hierarchies maintained or disrupted? Ground rules for discussion can be negotiated by the class to ensure that all voices can be heard and that aggressive and hostile language is not acceptable. Teachers can provide vocabulary and communicative strategies that give students a repertoire for talking about sensitive or controversial issues. In addition, offering a wide range of options for responses (journal writing, multimedia creations, group projects, etc.) gives students more opportunities to express their ideas in ways that inspire conversation and learning rather than hostility or disengagement. Eliciting individual responses through writing, in fact, can be the first step to help teachers align activities with students' experiences. The following sections illustrate how we adapted CMW to address race in two different teaching contexts.

Classroom Applications and Outcomes

In this section, Mak shares how he used CMW in ESL classes at a metropolitan community college, and Carla discusses CMW in TESOL classes for education majors at a college serving the same region. We both wanted to give our students tools for talking about racial justice and equity, we both wanted to use CMA as a catalyst, so together we devised different ways to adapt CMW to our teaching contexts.

Implementing Critical Media Work in Our Classes

Mak

All my nineteen adult students, ages ranging from 20 to late 40s, were multilingual speakers of English; they were speakers of French, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, Russian and Burmese, and all but one of them have lived in the United States for more than three years. For this advanced college ESL course, I designed a module titled "Race and Cultural Diversity in American Life." The module has four sections: 1. Introduction to Mediawork, 2. Oral Presentation Project on Cultural Diversity, 3. Project on Media Representation of Cultural Diversity in Philadelphia, and 4. Academic Lectures and Discussion on Racism. The key objective of the module was to help students become critical consumers of texts. Specifically, I wanted to teach them about the issues of racism in American culture: how to recognize biases in media where that may present limited perspectives on race and cultural diversity. I also wanted my students not only to find the overt and latent biases in media but also to express them in academic language. Although the development of such skills takes time, it is possible for us to teach our students to see and evaluate media information carefully and critically. Culture is considered here as intersecting with race, not as a means to avoid talking about race. For these ESL students, racism is part of their lived experiences of American culture and language learner identity.

For the introduction of critical media work, I shared eight media observation questions with my students (see Appendix A) and then showed them the application of these questions to a video titled "White House Arming the Taliban as it Disarms Americans." To introduce my students to issues of race and cultural diversity, I showed Kenneth and Mamie Clark's video colloquially known as "the doll tests."

For the oral presentation project, students carried out a small, scaffolded project: "Media Representation of Cultural Diversity in Philadelphia." In this project, students selected one or more media resources to analyze through a particular field such as *business, health, sports, science, technology, food,*

religion, etc. In the third section, they shared media images/clippings highlighting the cultural diversity of Philadelphia on a digital wall (Padlet). The final section had two components: two brief academic lectures on race and cultural diversity with a listening comprehension quiz and reading and discussion of the story "Why Frog Never Played With Snake" to explore discrimination as a learned behavior.

Carla

In my TESOL classes for preservice teachers, the number of students who are white monolingual speakers of English ranges from 50-80%; the rest consists of students from multilingual and multiethnic backgrounds. In class, we review relationships among language, thought, and identity and use current topics, such as Critical Race Theory, as a departure point for examining how race is discursively constructed in educational settings. Students read Von Esch, Motha, & Kubota's (2020), "Race and language teaching" for an overview of language and race in the field. They complete a reading guide, and we devote at least two hours of class time to discuss the article. For many, it is their first time reading about concepts such as colonialism, critical race theory, and anglonormativity in relation to language teaching and teacher identity. To make these ideas more concrete, I designed CMW to circle back to this article in the reflection stage. This assignment is conducted in stages over three weeks. First, I ask, "What does antiracism look like in schools today?" Students find examples in posters, books, worksheets, websites, newsletters, classroom decor, etc. and post photos on a shared digital platform. Second, I introduce the continuums described earlier and as a class, students discuss their examples on these continuums or continuums that they have created. After this discussion, students add to their media collections, continue with their analyses, and present their findings in class. Finally, students write individual reflections, and I ask them to consider the media they documented individually as well as the media collected by their peers as they address these questions:

1. What are the big ideas that emerge in the media collected in schools?
2. Are continuums useful for looking at antiracist messages? Why or why not?
3. How can you relate your observations to ideas from the article "Race and language teaching"?
4. Reflect on your own conceptualization of "antiracism." Have your ideas changed or expanded in the past few weeks? Explain your answer.

The Outcomes of CMW

In this section, we summarize the outcomes of CMW activities in our classes. We examine students' collections of media, notes from classroom discussions, written reflections, and responses to quizzes and other assignments. We approach this as an exploratory and reflective process. For ESL students, this included observations of language skills as well as learning about racial and cultural identities. For TESOL classes, outcomes centered on reconceptualizing antiracism and understanding nuanced meanings of media found in schools. Because it is not possible to include all the stories we have in this one article, we focus on representative examples.

Mak

Students' postings of media representations of cultural diversity on Padlet (Appendix B), interactions on discussion forums, and video-recorded oral presentations showed three clear language improvements. First, learners learned to share their experiences through academic English. They responded with excitement and enthusiasm, spending significant time and talking in depth about race and cultural diversity with each other. Their responses showed that they had a lot of lived stories to share on this pressing issue; each student had their own unique experiences of navigating the new social milieu. In other words, the very selection of the topic of race seemed to have opened the lid for sharing their lived

experiences with racial discrimination, oppression, and exclusion. Recounting the early days of a pregnancy, a student from West Africa described her experience needing immediate medical attention at a hospital. She was provided with an incompetent French translator, and even though she tried to show the hospital staff that the translator was inaccurate, she felt she was ignored because she did not speak English. Another student from Russia noted, “All Russians are not vodka sellers'' while talking about stereotypes of Russian culture and language in his community.

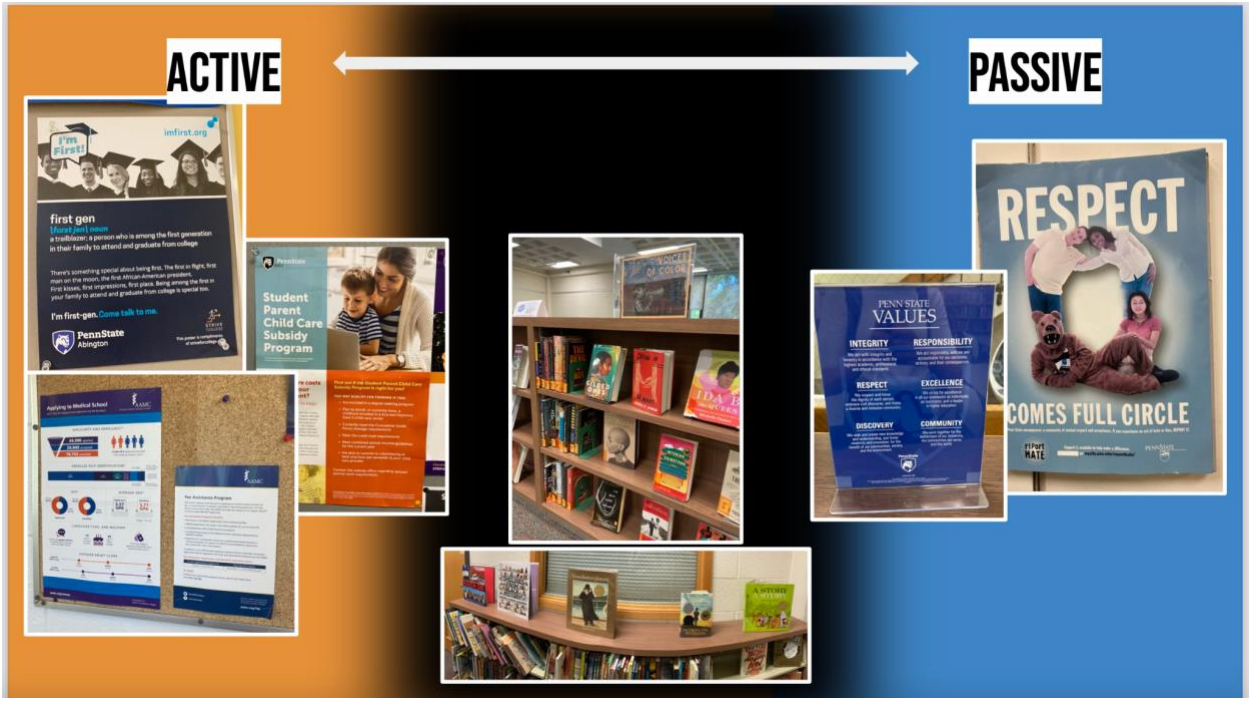
Second, learners expressed their understanding of superficial claims to multilingualism and cultural pluralism in the United States. While showing Chinese orthography in Philadelphia’s Chinatown, a student remarked that the Chinese language is only allowed in Chinatown although Chinese live everywhere in Philadelphia. Perhaps more importantly, the module gave them the opportunity to reflect and express how their lives are shaped by competing discourses of racism and cultural diversity. Many students in my class noted that they have come to accept whatever they learned in their countries of origin as useless and irrelevant and that they have to restart their lives from scratch. “Teacher, my French is useless in America,” noted the student from West Africa, reflecting the lack of appreciation for multi-cultural knowledge, resources, multilingualism, and all that immigrants bring to this country.

Third, learners had the opportunity to practice their academic language in two different genres: online discussion forums and oral academic presentations. Their presentations and discussions show that they know how each genre is organized, and how each genre has its own distinctive discourse and linguistic features. Last but not the least, students became proficient in academic discourse on racism, having learned the vocabulary items: *diversity, discrimination, legacy, consequence, contest, deny, existence, oppression, racism, presuppose,* and the contrast clause to express the social contrasts they have noticed in media and real life. For instance, a student comments on the discussion board, “While Chinese is allowed in Chinatown, it is never seen in public spaces in Philadelphia.”

Carla

Students’ insights and comments in my TESOL classes cover a wide range of ideas, mostly fitting into the themes of appreciating continuums for interpretation, the desire to (re)position oneself as actively antiracist rather than “not a racist,” and understanding race as complex and socially constructed. In this study, students embraced continuums as a way to both conceptualize and interpret meaning. Conceptually, they liked the idea of not having to fit everything neatly “into a box,” of being able to visualize a spectrum of meaning, and of seeing the possibilities for movement or improvement along the continuums. Although most students focused on the continuums we had discussed together, a few added their own and shared them with the class. For example, interpretations of media in schools can consider location (classroom---district wide) and impact (short---long term). Figure 1 illustrates a student’s interpretations of media found on a college campus, ranging from calls for action, potential action, and more passive displays of ideals.

Figure 1
Example of a Student Analysis of Media (Used With Permission)



As a method of interpretation, students noted that the continuums encouraged them to think critically about the difference between passive messages and action and to see the relationship between the two. One student remarked that both ends of the passive-active continuum can work together. For example, posters and signs in classrooms may only convey superficial "feel good" messages about respect and love toward everyone, but they can be a catalyst for deeper conversations about race and how to be antiracist. The continuums also highlighted the fact that many of the messages that students saw displayed in elementary schools and in children's books focused on antiracism as an individual responsibility rather than a systemic problem. This activity led to discussions of how many lessons and materials focus on teaching children about respect for others and oneself as individuals but overlook the fact that many children are acutely aware of the systemic racism that affects their families and communities on a daily basis. Minority students in my classes, in fact, have attested that they were aware of systemic racism at a young age. They speak from experience, and their stories are more powerful than any readings or lessons that I can provide.

The second major theme involves repositioning oneself as an antiracist. A few students were already familiar with writings of Kendi and DiAngelo, but the difference between identifying as "not a racist" and "antiracist" and the problem with taking a "color-blind" stance were novel ideas for most. All students either wrote or talked about their desire to become more active as antiracists. Their responses were deep, specific, and not merely conveyed to please their professor. After analyzing media that display well-intended messages of affiliation, hope, and positivity, students recognized that these messages often lacked action, sometimes masked racism under the umbrella of other issues, made people feel good rather than challenged, and provided little or no incentive to take action. Students pointed out that such messages seem to be full of inspiring "buzz words" but do not directly address racism. They noted that attractive multicultural book displays did not necessarily lead to actual reading and discussion of those books. Moreover, students became more cognizant of their own actions, particularly on social media.

Several reconsidered their online sharing and reposting of messages about social justice within like-minded communities. They questioned the sincerity and effectiveness of these actions. Students talked about changing their positions from thinking about racism as something that certain people endure to now thinking of racism as something that involves everyone.

The third theme centers on understanding race as a complex, socially constructed concept. The conceptualization of race as social rather than biological was not a new idea for the students, but the *scope* of social variables that define race was expanded. They learned that some messages that tell stories about race are straightforward, but many are indirect, subtle, and nuanced. For example, one student shared a photo of a sign hanging in a school that serves a majority Spanish speaking population. The message was in English, followed by a translation below it in Spanish, in a different color, smaller font, and in parentheses. Students described it as a good example of inclusivity at first, but their second look revealed more complex interpretations. They questioned why English was on top and in a bigger font, and more importantly, why the Spanish text was placed within parentheses. Students discussed this signage in relation to linguistic hierarchies intersecting with race as well as the need to see race as a complex, rather than a binary issue. Many called for more accountability in following through with antiracist actions in schools. Several realized that inclusivity does not necessarily challenge anglonormativity. Others reflected on the need for antiracist pedagogy to include some discomfort and possible push back as part of a larger process of change, and some commented on the importance of understanding community and social climate when interpreting antiracist discourse. All of these comments revealed students' abilities to look closer at antiracism and interrogate its meaning through contextualized, critical lenses.

As a whole, students' responses to CMW revealed critical thinking and interrogations of antiracism. However, a couple of patterns arose that may be attributed to students' lack of experience (given their age and preservice status); namely, a tendency to conflate race with culture, and to conceptualize diversity, equity, and inclusion in the abstract. A few described their desire to do better but lacked concrete ideas for doing so. Some repeatedly mentioned "culturally sustaining pedagogy" as a goal but did not define what it means and how it relates specifically to race. They assumed that "cultural responsiveness" unequivocally addresses race. A few described classroom celebrations of diversity, displays of multicultural materials, and school media that are translated into various languages as adequate displays of antiracism. CMW challenged these views, and although we pursued deeper critical analyses together in class, some still struggled with understanding whiteness as an invisible norm. I addressed this struggle by continuing to examine course content throughout the semester through critical lenses.

Reflections on CMW for Antiracist Education

Mak

While using CWM in ESL classes was a great opportunity to provide avenues and forums for my students to share their authentic experience, I did come across some challenges. The greatest challenge was getting students to see how their lives are shaped by pervasive racism. The transformation required time, and activities and student success was evident by their postings on Padlet. A good number of students thought that racism was only restricted to the discrimination against Black Americans. However, after spending more time analyzing implicit racial biases in the media, students transformed their previous perspectives on racism. This reconceptualization was largely achieved through highlighting the experiential outlook and reflections on racism of non-black students in our classroom space. Classroom discussions on students' submissions were a catalyst for generating vibrancy and confidence among learners to share their lived experiences on Padlet. Titles of postings included "Racism in Health against Hispanic Speakers,"

"Arab Representation in American Politics," "Chinese only in Chinatown," and "Russians in Philadelphia" to name a few. Moreover, from a linguistic viewpoint, students learned the discourse of two academic genres: oral academic presentations and online discussion forums.

Carla

The insights and challenges that arise when I use CMW changes from year to year and class to class. My most recent observations tell me that TESOL students are more and more aware of the need to address racial and social justice in their careers. I was very impressed that students in this study paid close attention to each others' work and referred to their peers' media collections in all of their discussions and reflections. Collecting and displaying the photos on a common platform facilitated a collaborative mindset and allowed students to add to their media collections throughout the activity. I was also impressed by the connections that students were able to make between their collections and ideas from the Von Esch, Motha, and Kubota (2020) article. For example, many were unfamiliar with the term anglonormativity, so CMW offered an opportunity for them to visualize and contextualize this idea. A challenge of the activity centered on getting students to see that antiracist and racist messages can be indirect. They moved from only noticing blatant signs to seeing how subtle choices in language, and even punctuation, can carry powerful meaning. Most poignantly, all of the students talked about repositioning themselves from being "not a racist" to being an "antiracist." They learned that their identities as antiracist educators will require more than displaying antiracist and "feel good" messages. They learned that systemic change will require work and that this work is complex and ongoing.

Conclusion

Critical media work offers distinct advantages. First, it is a language-focused activity that can be therapeutic for ESL and TESOL students who bring rich first-hand experiences of navigating environments where their languages and cultures may be blatantly ignored and suppressed. CMW allows them to use language in real life situations; they share meanings and adapt to new ways of talking, such as academic language for ESL students and professional discourse for teacher candidates. Another advantage is that learners are able to reflect on intersections of racial identity and other forces that have shaped their lives. For both language learners and future ESL teachers, reflection on their racial identities are limited to the individual level because CMW encourages them to think about their positions in specific communities including the power of their collective voices and actions. Third, CMW promotes autonomy where learners direct their own learning from topic selection to presentation. They learn from each others' presentations, postings on digital platforms, and discussion forums, all which provide avenues for meaningful exchanges of ideas. Finally, critical media work is a catalyst for both teachers and learners to question the power of language in their daily lives and to reflect on their own ways of communicating their thoughts and feelings about racial issues. CMW assignments can lead to discussions about microaggressions in language, how we all react to microaggressions, and how we can become more aware of the emotional power of language.

Authors

Carla R. Chamberlin is a Professor of Applied Linguistics/Communication Arts & Sciences at The Pennsylvania State University, Abington College. Dr. Chamberlin teaches courses in language teacher education, critical media literacy, sociolinguistics, and intercultural communication. Her current research focuses on integrating critical media literacy into language learning classrooms.

Muhammad Ali Khan is an Assistant Professor of English at Division of Liberal Arts, Community College of Philadelphia. Dr. Khan teaches College ESL courses, teacher education, and professional practicum in

TESOL. His research interests include application of corpus linguistics in ESL, critical discourse analysis and anti-racist pedagogy.

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Appendix A

Media Observation Questions

Skilled readers are those who can recognize the author's point and the support for that point. Critical readers, on the other hand, are those who can evaluate an author's support. Below are media observation questions meant to help you be a critical consumer of media.

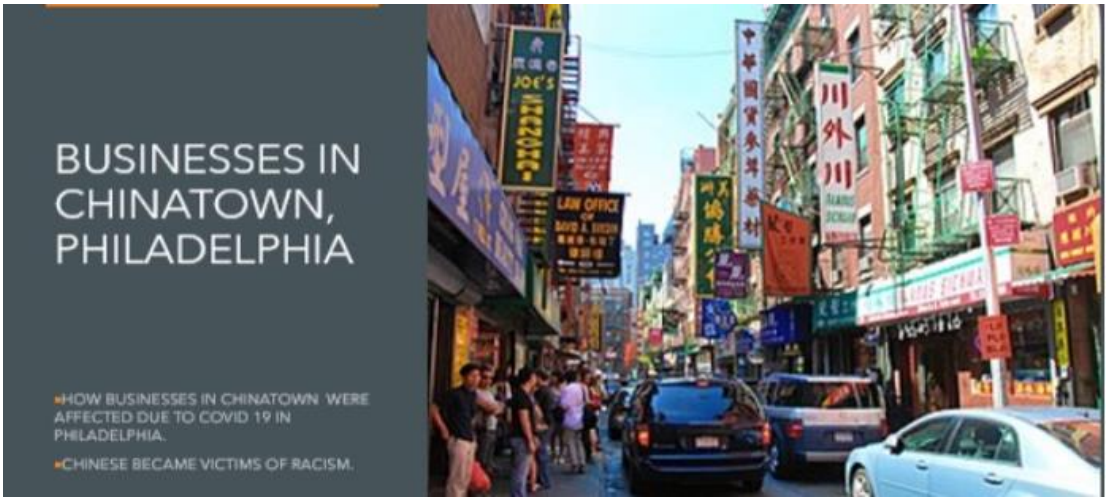
Media Observation Questions

1. What issues, events, or topics are discussed in the news story?
2. Is the story written by a recognizable journalist or produced by a known media outlet?
3. What facts or figures are presented?
4. Can you check the facts and figures? Where could you check the information for accuracy? If you cannot verify the information, why not?
5. If quotes or ideas from other people are included, is the source named?
6. Are there any people involved in the news story? Who? How does the news story portray the people involved? Do you think this is a fair and accurate representation?
7. Does the news story address multiple opinions or perspectives on the topic. What opinions are included? What might be missing?
8. Did the news story leave you with many unanswered questions about the topic, event, or issue? What are the questions? Was there anything that you believe was left out of the news story?

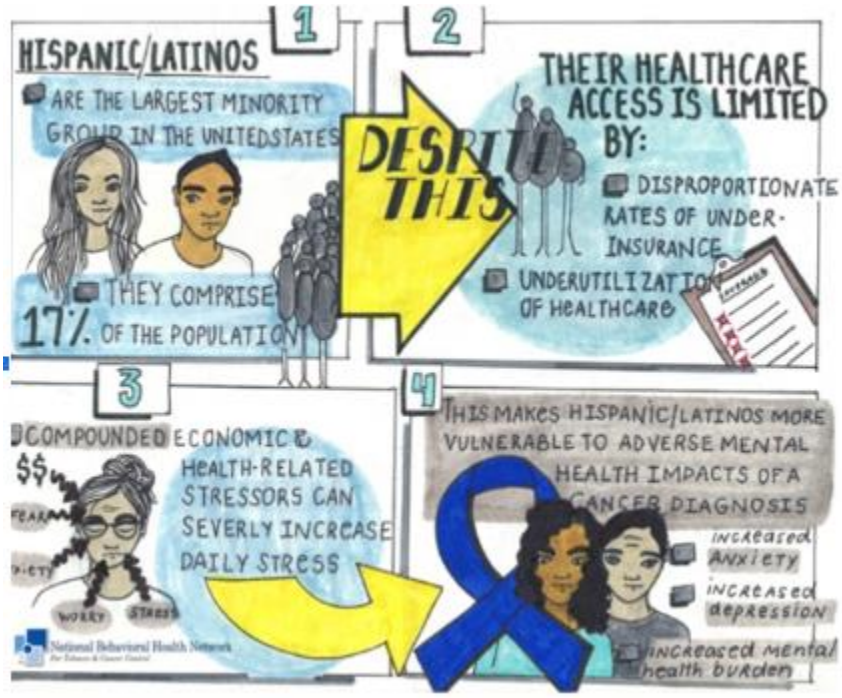
Appendix B

Student Postings on Padlet

Chinese Became Victims of Racism



Racism Against Latinos in Healthcare Settings



Overview of the Padlet on Racism and Cultural Diversity