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The Positioning of Black ESL Teachers in the United States: Teacher Perspectives

This study draws upon critical theory for its theoretical underpinnings and narrative inquiry as a methodological tool to examine the ways that Black ESL teachers working in Intensive English Language Programs in the United States position themselves and define their roles as language educators especially with consideration of their diverse racial, linguistic, and cultural identities. Data collection consisted largely of a questionnaire survey and interviews that were conducted with seven teachers and administrators of African descent. Results suggested that teachers in the study see themselves as more than English language specialists but as role models, life coaches, cultural ambassadors, and agents of social change in ESL classrooms. Narratives showed that Black teachers' perspectives and approaches to teaching English as a second language are a valuable resource for educators seeking to incorporate race pedagogy in the ESL curriculum and improve faculty racial diversity.

Keywords: Black teachers; teacher identity; race; racialized discourse, ESL teaching

It is a well-known fact that research in TESOL has made significant efforts to highlight the multifaceted nature of the English language and the diversity of its speakers (Faez, 2012; Holliday, 2015; Manara, 2018). Theoretically, different perspectives, considerations, and criticisms of the one-dimensional nature of the native-nonnative speakerism concepts have been examined (Aneja, 2016; Kubota, 2018, 2019). Practically, revisions to pedagogy that are more culturally inclusive and context-suitable have been made to cater to the needs of language learners and teachers all over the world (Faez, 2012; Taylor-Mendes, 2009; Yazan & Rudolph, 2018). However, similar attempts to highlight the experiences of Black teachers, who represent the minority of English language teachers in the profession but reflect the diversity of the students that they teach, have barely been addressed in TESOL research (Chung Constant, 2012; Javier, 2014; Kubota, 2018; Manara, 2018).

The few studies done show that whether native or nonnative, Black educators are often viewed as less capable teachers of English by their students, colleagues, language administrators, and even potential employers (Charles, 2017; Cooper & Bryan, 2020; Daniel, 2019; Hernandez, 2016; Nabukeera; 2020; Penn, 2017). These teachers reported incidents in which their nationality and language competence is due to a presumed deficit of the embodied characteristics expected of a TESOL professional (Baratta, 2018; Jenkins, 2018; Kubota, 2018; Motha, 2014; Ramjattan, 2014). It has been argued that these characteristics, unfortunately, have primarily to do with the teachers' race more than any other social markers (Aneja, 2016; Kubota, 2019; Manara, 2018; Penn, 2017; Yazan & Rudolf, 2019). Nonetheless while societal perceptions of Blackness and educators exist within U.S. public discourse, and a growing number of studies in TESOL continue to showcase the lived experiences of teachers of color, not much has been

documented about the professional lives of Black ESL educators. Hence, the purpose of this study is to give voices to this group of educators whose intersecting racial, cultural, and linguistic identities embody the diversity within the Black ESL teacher community. More importantly, this study discusses Black teachers' interpretation of their roles and the work they do in the ESL classroom especially in consideration of the workings of racism that exist in the field of English language teaching.

Literature

According to the few studies conducted on visibly ethnic minority ESL teachers' experiences in both English and non-English speaking contexts, race and ethnicity are instrumental in teachers' professional lives (Constant & Cao, 2018; Javier, 2010; Kubota, 2019; Shuck, 2006). Black teachers in particular face a unique set of challenges as their racial and/or linguistic identities are perceived to be in conflict by employers, students and/or language administrators (Charles, 2017; Flynn, 2017; Javier, 2014; Jenkins, 2018). At the root of this perceived conflict is the dominant ideology that English teachers are white or Caucasian, or of Caucasian appearance (Amin, 2006; Flynn, 2017; Kubota, 2018). According to Manara (2018), the native English-speaking teacher today is understood to be Caucasian, from an English-speaking country, and has superior knowledge of the English language and western culture. Thus, because race is synonymous with linguistic nativeness, it is hardly surprising that Black teachers, whether native or nonnative, report encountering varying forms of discrimination and marginalization in the ESL workplace as their racial and linguistic identities do not fit the norm (Baratta, 2018; Charles, 2017; Cooper & Bryan, 2020; Hernandez, 2016; Javier, 2014; Kim 2017).

Although an extensive critique of the monoglot standard of English language and its impact on the racism endured by teachers of color and nonnative English-speaking teachers (NNEST) is beyond the scope of this article, the legacy of this history can be used to account for the acute underrepresentation of Black teachers in the field and the limited focus on the Black experience in TESOL research (Kubota, 2019; Nabukeera, 2020). The few documented experiences of Black teachers in both ESL and EFL contexts suggest that racialization is part of the experience of teaching while Black. Racialization in this article is described as a system where the teacher is a recipient of "indirect or direct reference to racial categories or using rhetorical patterns most often associated with discussions of race and ethnicity, so that an undercurrent of racial distinctions runs through discourse about linguistic difference [and interactions with others]" (Shuck, 2006, p.260). Consequently, this racialization serves to delegitimize a teacher's identity that Black teachers may resort to coping strategies such as identity masking; where a Black applicant opts not attach a photograph to a resume as a way of maintaining racial ambiguity (Jenkins, 2018) or linguistic passing; where Black teachers will deliberately change or modify their accent to avoid being stereotyped (Manara, 2018; Motha, 2014).

Examples of racialization and discrimination have been documented by Black teachers working in China, Korea, and the United States (Charles, 2017; Hernandez, 2016; Penn, 2017). In China, for example, researchers contend that Blackness is commonly perceived as nonnativeness to such an extent that Black teachers who were born and raised in English speaking countries such as Britain, Canada or the United States are mostly thought to be nonnative speakers and are either asked to prove their citizenship and nationality by employers (Charles, 2017; Hernandez, 2016) or feel compelled to do so in order to avoid prejudicial treatment (Kim 2017; Ramjattan, 2014). For example, in Penn's (2017) study on Black female educators, a teacher participant cited similar racial discrimination when she was told that Chinese parents "wouldn't trust she was American [because of] her dark skin and locs" (p.123). Similarly, Hernandez (2016) cited a language administrator who said that "my teachers out [of schools] many times when they find a white skin . . . it doesn't matter where the person is from, they just want white color. They say the students are scared of Blacks . . . this is the problem in China. The only thing we can change is to be white" (p.102).

Consequently, due to a perceived inferiority in linguistic competence, Black teachers are often treated as subpar educators and underpaid. Black teachers in Korea stated that the term *black* was used by students in a derogatory manner or in reference to unattractiveness (Charles, 2017; Flynn, 2017; Kim, 2017). And Flynn (2017) noted that her Korean middle-school students' inquiries about whether she had had a bath was largely because of their associations of dirt or uncleanliness with dark skin. As one participant in Charles' (2017) study remarked, "I think it's literally the parents; they wanna be taught by an English-speaking person who is most likely a white person. Even if I have a master's in teaching and a TEFL and this person could be fresh out of college, they would rather just see their kid being taught by a white person" (p. 158). In the United States, studies on Black teachers of English as a second language are limited. Nevertheless, they provide examples of Black teachers being stereotyped, caricatured, and othered. Penn (2017) cited a teacher-participant who during the third week of classes was told by her students, "You're so pretty...you must be from Africa-not just Black American" (p. 122). Chung Constant (2012), a Black-Jewish instructor, also recalled similar encounters in class with a new student who said to her, "I did not come to America to learn bad English, and everyone knows that Black people in America speak bad English" (p.172). These two quotations illustrate the preconceived beliefs and attitudes that students have about Blackness. In another study, Chung Constant (2016) recalled instances where "some of the Saudi students chose to change teachers, while others threatened to change schools if they had to take a class with me" (p. 179).

Throughout these examples, it is apparent that students come to class and administrators bring with them preconceived notions about their teachers' race, accent, and teaching ability (Aneja, 2016; Constant & Cao, 2018; Hernandez, 2016). And for any Black teacher, "skin color [has] certain sociopolitical implications that are very visible to each student sitting in the classroom" (Chung Constant, 2016, p. 173). In fact, I would venture to argue that it is largely through a white lens that students' opinions about Black teachers are made, and consequently serve to shape not only the construction and negotiation of power within the language classroom but also impact a teacher's overall working experience and longevity in the profession. For Black teachers in the United States who embody multiple marginalized identities of race, language, and cultural background, the ESL teaching experience is compounded by the awareness of the dominant, often stereotypical perceptions attached to Blackness in the society. Inevitably, the need to confront and challenge these perceptions becomes almost as central as the work of teaching the language itself. Thus, while the increasing number of ESL teachers of color and emerging TESOL diversity research seems to imply an ostensibly race-neutral profession, Black teachers continue to contend with varying forms of racial and linguistic prejudice that suggest otherwise. This study was an attempt to give Black ESL educators an opportunity to speak for themselves.

Research Questions

1. How do Black English-speaking teachers understand and position themselves as teachers of English as a second language in the context of the United States?
2. To what extent does the perception of belonging to a minority race, ethnicity and/ or language play a role in the teaching lives and professional experiences of Black ESL teachers in the United States?

Theoretical Framework

Narrative Inquiry

This study was qualitative in nature as the primary objective was to gather opinions and perspectives of Black teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) who have worked in Intensive English Language programs (IEPs) within the United States. To adequately tell the stories of these teachers, a narrative

methodological approach was deemed suitable for this research. First used by Connelly and Clandinin (1990) for teacher research purposes, narrative inquiry offers a more direct approach to addressing the needs and concerns of teachers through personal storytelling. It is assumed that this method of inquiry is more likely to represent the actual lives of teachers, the demands of the job, as well as an insider's perspective on curriculum and pedagogical approaches, that may not have easily been accessible outside of individual narratives (Bell, 2011; Zheng, 2016). In this study, the justification for adopting this methodology was that I believe that there is an inextricable relationship between the stories of teachers, the formation of teacher identity as well as the influence of broader educational issues such as the socio-cultural contexts within which they teach (Bell, 2011; Clandinin, 2013). Clandinin's (1990) three-dimensional space narrative framework was deemed suitable for this study that aimed to explore the firsthand perspectives and lived experiences of Black ESL teachers in the United States. Also, because teachers were required to engage in discussions about race and racism in the workplace and so may not have been willing to directly criticize the systems within which they work, narrative inquiry allowed for those hidden beliefs to be revealed. Knowledge constructed in this way was therefore considered more reliable as it did not simply rely on recollections of events (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Also, most studies focused on the Black teacher experience in TESOL have employed narrative inquiry (Charles, 2017; Cooper & Bryan, 2020; Daniel, 2019; Han, Scull, Nganga, & Kambutu, 2019; Hernandez, 2016; Javier, 2014; Kim, 2017; Ramjattan, 2014).

Critical Race Theory

This research was grounded in Critical Race Theory (CRT) because the overarching goal was to elevate the discussions of race and racism in TESOL by showcasing the perspectives of Black educators who are underrepresented in the field of English language teaching. Birthed out of the civil rights activism in the 1950's, 60's and 70's, CRT provided the framework within which to address the institutional racism that was prevalent in U.S higher education at the time by actively challenging and critiquing issues of marginalization and social injustice subjected towards African Americans (Crenshaw, 2011; Sellers, et al, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). One of the most important tenets of CRT is the advancement of Black stories through personal narratives also known as counter storytelling that serve as "a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p.32). In the field of TESOL in particular, the pace towards racial teacher diversity and inclusivity has been slow and tentative. And despite the nondiscriminatory policy on the official website of the TESOL organization that seeks to "promote involvement and broad access to professional opportunities for all and work to eliminate any kind of discrimination" (p. 1), reports of racism, accentism, microaggressions, and underrepresentation in research on Black teacher experiences (Amin, 2006; Baratta, 2018; Daniel, 2019; Kubota, 2019; Nabukeera, 2020; Javier, 2014). The implication is that TESOL is still very white and that although on paper efforts towards diversity and inclusion are at the forefront of the TESOL organization, real conversations with Black teachers that experience the brunt of prejudice, marginalization, and systemic racism have still not been had. Consequently, recent studies by Black scholars and researchers chronicling the experiences of teaching while Black have employed CRT as a theoretical tool within which to examine the institutional inequities embedded in the field of TESOL that contribute to the marginalization of Black ESL educators (Charles, 2017; Cooper & Bryan, 2020; Han et al., 2019; Kim 2017; Penn, 2017). This current study sought to add to this growing body of work by examining the multifaceted nature of Black teachers' racial, linguistic, and cultural identities and its influence on why they teach and what they believe they bring to the ESL classroom.

Positioning Theory

In combination with CRT, Davies and Harre's (1990) positioning theory was used to examine how teachers interpret their roles as language educators. As a social constructionist theory, positioning aims to show that the stories that people tell in conversation, their choice of words and non-verbal cues, not only reveal how they see themselves (reflexive positioning), but also how they are experienced by others within their social world (interactive positioning) (Davies & Harre, 1990; Harre and Moghaddam, 2003). In educational research, this analytical approach has been used in studies on students' beliefs about teachers of color as well as teachers' own lived experiences of racialization (Aneja, 2016; Han, et al., 2020; Shuck, 2006).

Data Collection and Analysis

Table 1 provides a brief breakdown of the demographic and teaching background information of the participants. The names are pseudonyms. As is shown, seven Black participants: two male and five females were recruited for this study. The two main criteria for participation were: a) previous or current ESL teaching experience in the United States and b) self-identification as Black by ethnicity. All participants shared a similar racial and ethnic background as most self-identified as Black American except for Akunna and Talia who claimed African and Afro-Latina identities, respectively. All had impressive academic backgrounds bachelors (BA) and masters (MA) degrees, with five of the seven participants having doctoral degrees in education, either Doctor of Education (EdD) or Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), as well extensive experience teaching ESL to adults in IEP programs in the United States. In addition, all are bilingual with the majority speaking more than two languages. The key differences amongst them were in the range of teaching careers; from Sabrina, a novice teacher to Sherry who has more than forty years of ESL teaching and administrative experience. The varied contexts within which they worked were also unique. Talia, Sherry, and Khadijah had taught English as a foreign language in Senegal, Spain and Turkey while Craig as a former navy officer had taught English in mostly unconventional or informal settings.

Table 1:
Participant Demographic Information

Name	Year	Gender	Ethnicity	Other Languages Spoken	Academic Qualifications	Years of Teaching Experience	Teaching Context
Sabrina	30	Female	Black American	Spanish	BA, MA, EdD	1	IEP in Texas
Francine	34	Female	Black American	Spanish	BA, MA, EdD	4	IEP in New York/California
Talia	36	Female	Black American (Afro Latina)	French, Spanish Arabic	BA, MA	10	Adult Ed in New York, IEP Washington, DC, TEFL in Senegal
Akunna	36	Male	Black African (Nigerian)	Spanish Igbo	BA, MA	15	IEP in Southern California

Khadijah	40	Female	Black American	Arabic French	BA, MA, PhD	16	Adult Ed in New York, IEP Virginia, TEFL Turkey
Craig	63	Male	Black American	Spanish	BA, MA, EdD	30	IEP in California TEFL in the U.S. Navy
Sherry	64	Female	Black American	French, Spanish, German, Farsi	BA, MA, MA, MA, PhD	40	IEP Adult Ed in California/ Florida/Texas; TEFL Spain

These varied experiences largely informed each teacher's conception of self and their interpretations of the work they do, which will be discussed later. Also, in the case of the four participants that spoke three or more languages (Sherry, Talia, Khadijah, and Akunna) and as such affiliated with more than one culture, this multicompetence played a significant role in their work identities. It must be mentioned that although all the participants racially identified as Black, each participants' narratives suggested that in comparison to racial identity, teachers' multilingual and multicultural identities were regarded as more central to the way they understood their roles and positioned themselves as language educators. This is an important consideration because race and ethnicity in contemporary race discourse in TESOL is often conceptualized through the prism of a single culture to the extent that learners and teachers belonging to a minority race are seen as a monolith or representative of their cultures rather than individuals with unique stories and experiences (Kubota, 2019; Nabukeera, 2020). It is no wonder, therefore, that these essentialist notions about race have contributed to the stereotypical attitudes, disparate treatment and microaggressions that ESL/EFL teachers of color report (Hernandez, 2016; Kubota, 2019). To recognize and appreciate the nuances and diversity within the Black ESL teacher community in IEPs is vital to addressing issues of underrepresentation and racism in our field. The findings of this study will show the dynamic ways in which the multiplicities of race, heritage, language, socio-cultural background, religion, and gender inform the work that Black teachers do to address issues of race, racism, and diversity in the ESL environment.

An online questionnaire survey was used as an initial starting point to collect biographical information from the participants as well as their prior knowledge about the research topic. Then, a prearranged approximately 90-minute semi-structured interview was conducted virtually with each participant using video conferencing platforms zoom and skype. An interview guide containing open-ended questions explored teachers' interactions in the workplace with students and coworkers, teaching philosophies, pedagogical choices, as well as the influence of their racial and linguistic backgrounds on teaching practice. The first 20 minutes of the interview were about teacher identity. Here, questions centered around the beginning of teaching careers, self-definitions of their roles in the classroom, as well as their perspectives on the differences between native' and nonnative English teachers. Then we moved on to talk about the impact of race on their professional work. Here we discussed perceptions about ethnic, cultural and language background, relationships with students and employees, pedagogical approaches in their teaching practice, how to deal with conflict in the workplace, and other identities that play a role in how teachers see themselves. The final question participants were asked was to reflect on lessons learned throughout the span of their teaching careers and on what advice they would give novice Black teachers. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed with each transcript read multiple times to find

connecting threads within each narrative and amongst them. Repeated ideas were coded and reclassified into larger categories that later began to reveal emerging themes. My interpretation of these themes produced the findings of this study. Because of the word count limitations of this article, only a few findings will be highlighted.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

The data showed that teachers perceived their roles in the ESL classroom and positioned themselves in four different ways as: relatable, cultural ambassadors, life coaches and models of authentic Black representation.

The Relatable Teacher

“How can I teach you and I have never experienced being the other in a culture?” – Talia

The teachers in this study shared that they felt a kinship with their ESL students because they understood what it meant to be othered as racial minorities. TESOL research on Othering has highlighted the racial and linguistic marginalization of international students studying abroad in western countries (Rich & Troudi, 2006; Sterzuk, 2014). In Hanassab’s (2006) study, the findings showed that international students from Africa and the Middle East experienced disproportionate discrimination in comparisons to students from other parts of the world. Rich and Troudi (2006) concluded that international students being positioned as foreigners affects their self-esteem and even academic performance as exemplified in the following statements made by participants such as “the problems I face here are because I’m an international student. All international students feel the same,” and, “people here look at you first as a foreigner” (p. 620). Another participant also expressed similar challenges when he said: “sometimes, not sometimes, many times, I would be questioning attitudes you know a lot, whether this person did that to me because I’m from the Middle East. A smaller [beard] or no beard with more smiles eases the misconception of many towards me. Many feel that due to what they hear about strict Islamic practices” (p. 621). In the aforementioned studies, researchers argued that international students are often viewed as a collective representation of their cultures and not as individuals and are often made to feel inferior by western teachers, other students, and the society at large (Hanassab, 2006; Rich & Troudi, 2006). Therefore, although Black ESL teachers in IEP programs in the United States are not foreigners as are the international students they teach, TESOL is a white dominant profession. As such, it can be assumed that most international ESL students in IEPs in the U.S have not been taught by a Black teacher. Thus, it is not surprising that the teacher-participants in this study reported being met with awe, some confusion, and a lot of curiosity when they walked into classrooms for the first time or met new students. For instance, participants stated that either students (a) did not think of them as ethnically Black or African American at all, (b) assumed the teacher was not Black because of a lighter skin tone or (c) were made to feel as though they were not Black enough. Sabrina and Sherry also said students often asked questions like “what are you?” and “are you black” while Craig concluded that “they see me as a threat because my skin is a lot lighter.” In the case of Talia, a first-generation American who was raised in New York city by a Ugandan mother and Cuban father, she described the difficulties in navigating her dual identities as a biracial teacher who embraces both her Latin and African identities:

Being an ESL teacher, being from New York, no one knows where I’m from based on my accent. I have had to tailor the way I speak to the point that I speak in a way that is so standardized, you can’t pinpoint where I’m from. And a lot of times this becomes an issue with students because you get the question well why don’t you sound like other Black people. Or why don’t you sound

like other Latinos? And I don't think they understand what I have had to do in order to be taken seriously.

These questions and statements made by students reveal their unspoken beliefs about Black teachers but also the tension that exists between Black teachers' own racial self-identification vis a vis how they are racially positioned by others. The underlying assumption is that there is one way to be Black. Therefore, like the negative stereotyping encountered by international students studying in universities in the U.S. (Rich & Troudi, 2006), being Black evokes certain racial assumptions and stereotypes attributed to Black teachers. This is why the teachers in this study expressed a sense of camaraderie with their ESL students because of the shared experiences of racial stereotyping, linguistic profiling and multiracial microaggressions. Consider the following statements made by the teacher-participants.

When some of the students I have from Africa tell me things . . . this feeling of being discriminated against. And then I would sit with her and tell her I know how you feel. You know, being Black in America. – Sherry

I think they consider themselves fortunate to have an African American teacher because my experience and my background prompts me to care for them more. Because if anybody understands what it's like to be understood, it's me. They already know that I'm not a man of privilege even though I am an educated man. – Craig

Majority of my students are Black or of color . . . And I think because I'm black, students feel like . . . I don't know if the word is comfortable but whatever it is they think . . . you know this will be fine. They get like a little bit relaxed. – Khadijah

I have a lot of cultural values that are very similar to [my students]. With some of the Asian students and even the Europeans. So, I think coming from a different place, I'm pretty much like them. I tell them I am like you. The only difference is I came at a different time. – Akunna

These quotations show that teachers' own racial and cultural positioning in American society has fostered a greater empathy for their students implied in the phrases: '*comfortable*', '*I know how you feel*' and '*if anybody understands what it's like to be understood, it's me.*' It must be said that in highlighting the relatability that Black teachers feel to their students, I am not disregarding the unique qualities that non-Black teachers bring to the classroom. It is merely to point out the contributions of empathy, cultural sensitivity, and the advantage therein that these participants as well as other Black teachers bring to the classroom. Another way that these teachers related to their students was through their own experiences of learning other languages. Francine and Talia, for instance, shared that learning Spanish informed some of their pedagogical choices in English language teaching. Sherry and Talia also cited their own difficulties learning Spanish and French in Spain and Senegal respectively while trying to acclimate to the foreign culture was life changing. Sherry cited her multilingual identity as a tremendous resource for building rapport with her ESL students as explained in this statement:

I think that the biggest influence was the language learning because all the students think that . . . have a feeling that I can identify with them. When I go into a room and say, how are you today in Japanese, and I'm speaking all these different languages they would say wow, you know Japanese? . . . That gives them a feeling that I am one of them. And I think to me that is very important as a teacher of ESL more than anything else. I bring that into the ESL classroom. More than my race.

Akunna and Talia also talked about how being enrolled in ESL classes as children they were assumed to be nonnative English speakers despite their rich linguistic backgrounds. Talia, who speaks four languages fluently and was exposed to two other languages at home was placed in EFL classes mainly because “my parents had accents it was assumed that I didn’t speak English.” On the other hand, Akunna who emigrated from Nigeria to the United States when he was 9 years was also put in EFL classes as a teenager because he spoke English with a Nigerian accent. He attributes this experience of feeling singled out and labeled as instrumental to how he approaches issues of accentism that come up in his teaching practice:

One of the things I always tell my students who are struggling with accents because I struggled is your accent is beautiful. It’s what makes you unique. Having an accent has nothing to do with being able to speak English. And I constantly have to tell them. They try to change their style. And I tell them if that’s what you want to do, that okay. Do that. That’s not going to make you a better user of English. And I tell them my story of what I went through in middle school and high school with bullying. I also feel like because I speak English and Igbo and some Spanish, I know that I have a certain ear for accents. I can pick out accents and sounds more than people that are from here. So those things are advantages.

The issue of weaponizing nonnative accents as a measuring tool for assessing oral proficiency as well as the inherent language biases and subtle racism towards English speakers with foreign accents have been widely documented in American society and problematized by language scholars (Aneja, 2006; Baratta, 2018; Lippi-Green, 1997; Llorca, 2004; Schuck, 2006). Unfortunately, children of immigrants not only endure the brunt of the judgements made about their parents’ linguistic abilities but often must navigate their own conflicting feelings of social belonging (Motha, 2014). The bilingual and multilingual advantage was cited by most teachers in this study as a tremendous resource for relating and establishing meaningful connections with students.

The Cultural Educator

“I am not a white person . . . so am I pushing the language, or pushing white culture, white American culture?” – Talia

The participants in this study represent a myriad of cultures as is shown in Table 1. They are not just Black, African American, Afro-Latina, and African but also represent variations of what it means to be a Black ESL teacher in America; a diversity that is hardly portrayed in U.S media and public discourse. These teachers are highly educated with doctoral degrees, multilingual, and most have spent considerable time living and working abroad. Because of these experiences and multiple identities, they positioned themselves as having an unparalleled advantage in the ESL classroom especially when it comes to the creation of culturally relevant teaching materials. They stated that as multicultural educators, they bring a lot more to the classroom beyond linguistic knowledge and content. Rather, the overarching objective is to create classroom environments that reflect the diversity of English language speakers in the world. To this end, teachers’ pedagogical choices seemed to challenge the systemic ideologies that have traditionally centered the English language as western and white and inevitably contributed to the microaggressions and racism that Black teachers endure in ESL working environments. As Sherry put it, “my training has nothing to do with my race and does not affect my teaching. But my experience, my race does affect the materials I bring into the class.” Craig mentioned several instances where he encouraged candid class discussions on controversial topics such as Christopher Columbus, Khadijah had similar conversations with students about Black face, and Akunna had engaging debates about Colin Kaepernick’s stand for racial

justice. Owing to his African background, Akunna felt it was imperative to present a balanced view of Africa in discussions about the continent:

I also talk about Africa, and I have to balance it out like it's not always bad. I have to give examples of good leadership too to show that there's economically advanced nations in Africa, great ethnic groups, great histories, you know, things about myself. Sometimes students don't really get it.

Sherry also talked about teaching her class about racial discrimination in other communities of color outside of the Black American experience such as the historical segregation of Asian Americans and Hispanics in America. The importance of educating both local and international students about issues affecting communities of color within the country was of paramount importance for these teachers. As Khadijah noted,

I think most of them have sort of like a cursory knowledge of things like slavery, but I don't think many of them grasp like how it still continues to play a role in some of the structures and systems and things that they encounter every day.

In all these examples, teachers modeled examples of critical anti-racist pedagogy that by encouraging students' critical analysis about racial issues in the United States but also provided them with opportunities to engage in critical self-reflection about their own positions and from their own cultural contexts. Beyond talking about race, these teachers stressed that a vital tool in increasing intercultural awareness and cultural sensitivity is by exposing students to learning materials that are inclusive of minority and/or non-mainstream cultures. This is expressed in the following quotations:

I made my students read books by authors who are Latino, Afro Latino, Black American and no one who worked with ESL students understood why I needed to do that for the ESL students. They were doing it for the native English-speaking students but not for the ESL community. So, I found poems by African authors, by Central American and South American authors. – Talia

I'll try to find other things to complement what the students are doing. And if I can, I find things written by other people than just the mainstream white man or white woman. But it's hard to find materials written by others that are deemed academic and given a worthy presence. When I think about the English language and the materials, it makes me wonder like what perspective are these materials written in? . . . But then I understand it's hard to represent all cultures in one book. So, it's really hard to find the right things. – Francine

What is notable here is that Francine and Talia both provide a critical response about the implied meanings attached to the current teaching and learning materials in TESOL. Francine presents both sides of the coin; where on one hand the current teaching resources continue to perpetuate the deep-rooted dominant ideologies of English as western and white, but on the other hand recognizes the challenges in trying to find materials that are inclusive and representative of the international students in an ESL classroom. Personally, my understanding of representation is not necessarily about ensuring that textbooks portray all the cultures in the world. Rather it is more about addressing the underrepresentation or exclusion of minority cultures such as African speakers of English as though these speakers do not represent the English-speaking world. As such, revision of ELT materials for ESL students in the States demands a more balanced portrayal of the other cultures even within the target culture such as Black Americans, Asian Americans, etc). Also, while Francine expressed the difficulty of finding suitable materials, Talia was able to find materials that addressed the needs of her students. But her statement also exemplifies the institutional pressures that ESL teachers deal with when they try to go against the

grain. The phrase *'no one who worked with ESL students understood why I needed to do that for the ESL students'* is poignant because it underscores the disconnect between rhetoric concerning inclusion and diversity strategies in current TESOL discourse compared with the limited resources that are made available for teachers to execute those changes.

Thus, through participants' narratives it can be concluded that the work that the Black teachers do in the classroom is informed by the simple fact that the traditional understanding of 'Standard' English as a yardstick for English language teaching is not representative and inclusive of non-American or non-white cultures. To that end, a concerted effort is being made to provide a more nuanced perception of the English language and its speakers by engaging in conversations that counter popular rhetoric and incorporating materials that represent the other. It must be said that it is not uncommon for ESL instructors in general to have intercultural competence because of their own lived experiences. However, the point being made here is that Black teachers seem to integrate cultural awareness in language learning without necessarily putting the target culture on a pedestal, a criticism that has been raised concerning the suitability of teaching materials for ESL learners (Holliday, 2008, 2015; Pennycook, 2007). In other words, although these teachers are American, their pedagogical approaches are not filled with patriotic intentions. Rather, they are doing their part to counter hegemonic tendencies brought about by the standardization of English language teaching that favors the western world, Americans or white English speakers. It must be emphasized that merely representing diverse cultures in ESL coursebooks is a knee jerk solution that will not bring about meaningful change especially if language learners studying English in this country are not given the opportunity to examine their own biases and interrogate their own belief systems about race, racism, teachers of color, and Black teachers. Therefore, as has been illustrated throughout these teachers' approaches in class, engagement in discussions with students about the nuances of race and racism in the U.S and around the world is an important strategy and first step towards shifting and changing perspectives in the classroom and incorporating anti-racist pedagogy in a larger institutional sense. Fearless conversations about race need to happen. But the processes that enable all ESL teachers regardless of racial identity to be held accountable for the implementation of this work is what still remains to be seen.

The Life Coach

"I'm teaching them about life." – Craig

Most of the teachers in this study posited themselves as more than language educators because they established important connections with students that went beyond the language classroom. Craig, Talia, and Khadijah acknowledged that this was the most rewarding aspect of their professional careers. Craig, for example, stated that because his desire was "to motivate, educate and inspire" he often shared personal anecdotes of his life, stories of triumph and struggles as a man and a father, his military service, mental health, and even lighter topics like how to find a spouse. He argued that his willingness to be more personal is an attribute that a white teacher may not readily do:

I don't think a teacher who is white would be willing to reach out to that extent. They tend to teach content only and focus on what's being taught and they don't go above and beyond . . . you can't be just fluent by just learning vocabulary.

While this statement may be a generalization and the perspectives of white teachers in the field would be required to make a fair comparison, Craig's argument is that his racial and ethnic background informs his holistic teaching approach that centers students' emotional and spiritual well-being as an essential component of the language learning experience. A similar view was shared by Khadijah who

believed that “aside from the language, I want to give my students the tools they need to be successful in this society. I think it extends beyond the language aspect.” For instance, she pointed out times when she prioritized students’ personal needs over school policy such as adjusting exam times to accommodate the fasting schedule of her Muslim students or showing leniency towards a pregnant student who was not able to attend classes. When she was criticized by the administration for passing students that ‘*don’t deserve it,*’ she rationalized her decision by saying, “it’s about understanding that your class is not just one of many things that people are dealing with and your goal is not just to teach them . . . a comma here and all this technical grammar stuff.” Also, she reflected on how race and religion have influenced her interactions with these students, and the reason why these relationships are an important part of her professional identity:

I am cognizant of many of the issues that my students are experiencing in their immigration journey here. And I’m not afraid to address those issues. I can relate because I think if you have not experienced what it’s like to be Othered which you experience a lot in this country, it’s hard to relate to what our students experience, you know having an accent, trying to navigate systems that they are not familiar with. So, I think because of my race, my experience, because of how I identify as a Muslim woman, I am not afraid of addressing those issues with students because they come up a lot in our discussions. I think that’s one way my sort of identity lends itself to speaking to students and their experiences.

Likewise, Akunna mentioned instances when his conversations with students about racial bias or political propaganda imparted life lessons were not just about language acquisition. He recalled an incident in one of his classes where a student from a European country made disparaging comments about a classmate from Asia. Akunna felt the need to intervene and had a brutally honest conversation about subtle racism that was so impactful that the offending student later admitted that “I have never had anybody talk to me in this way about these things, but I’ve always questioned whether I was treating people well.” Akunna reflected on this experience by attributing his African identity as the reason why he feels empowered to address issues of racial insensitivity in the quote below:

I’m not trying to say that native speakers will not have this perspective while teaching, but I think a certain background that I come from, and I’m speaking for myself, gives me certain perspectives and certain approach to things that they could never do . . . never be able to do it my way.

In the examples described thus far, Black teachers see themselves as mentors, surrogate family members, advocates, and life coaches, all attributes that extend beyond teaching English. It must be mentioned that participants’ comments about the qualities that they bring to the classroom could easily be misconstrued to mean that teachers of other races do not possess similar qualities. Or arguments can be made that a white teachers’ racial, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds can be as equally impactful as those of a Black teacher which would mean that a teachers’ race does not play a significant role in the relationships and connections formed with ESL international students. Therefore, for purposes of clarification I would like to argue that because the day-to-day experiences of racialised individuals in the United States are markedly different from those of white people, a Black teacher’s positioning as a racial minority in the English classroom will never be equivalent to their white counterparts. In her bestselling book, *White Fragility*, DiAngelo’s (2019) best describes this distinction when she states that as a white woman, “I belong when I turn on the tv, read best-selling novels, and watch blockbuster movies . . . I belong when I look through my textbooks and at pictures on my classroom walls. I belong when I speak to my children’s teachers . . . when I consult with their doctors and dentists . . . In virtually every situation or context deemed normal, neutral, or prestigious in society, I belong racially . . . the experience of

belonging is so natural that I do not have to think about it” (pp. 52–53). On the contrary, race for a Black person in America is quite remarkable as everyday life is marked with daily reminders of one’s blackness and its implications. For this reason, Black teachers are more likely to share similar racial experiences to those of their culturally diverse students because they are familiar with the feelings of unbelonging. This is not to say that a white American teacher lacks the empathy necessary to relate and respond to the needs of international students. The point being made is that despite their best intentions, white teachers occupy a dominant social position in U.S. culture to such an extent that there will always be a narrow understanding of the needs of international students particularly from an ethnocultural and/or socioeconomic perspective.

The Model for Authentic Black Representation

We have a very large percentage of Hispanics. A very small percentage of white Europeans. Our faculty representation is 80% white. In our own department, out of 11 faculty, we have one Hispanic, and one Black, me. This is very disproportionate. – Sherry

What drew me to your project was working in a place where no one here looks like me or talks like me. I am the only Black faculty. – Sabrina

Currently there are three of us on staff who are Black. I am the third and was recently hired. I know I was a diversity hire. I was told by the woman in HR who is also a Black woman. – Talia

I’m the only Black faculty, only Black ESL faculty. – Khadijah

I’m the only African American on my team. The only African American in my department. – Craig

Right now, I am currently the only Black teacher at the English Language Institute where I teach. My entire six years at this university, I have only seen one Nigerian woman that was there when I arrived, and she left soon afterwards. Since then, I have only seen two other Black people hired. My concern is that feeling of . . . you know the one on an island. – Akunna

It was a small program of 10-15 students and there were three teachers, white, Asian and I was the Black teacher. – Francine

A unifying thread that emerged from teachers’ narratives was the issue of underrepresentation in the IEP institutions where they worked as expressed by each participant in the quotations above. Because of this lack of racial diversity, the teachers in this study stated that the presence of Black teachers in ESL classrooms shatters the preconceived beliefs about Black people that students may have. For example, Francine stressed the fact that her education and credentials speak volumes when she made the following statement:

Not just any Black person can come and teach. You have to be a qualified Black teacher. It speaks volumes, it gives me more reason to be in the classroom. And not only just in the classroom, but in front as the head.

Sherry also recounted numerous times when students were genuinely surprised to learn that not only was she Black but that she was also a fluent speaker of multiple languages. Craig also said that students were often shocked to find out that he was former military and had travelled extensively around the world. Students’ reactions seem to suggest that these teachers do not fit the mold of students’ expectations of a Black teacher. As such, Black teachers understand that they epitomize

positive images of Blackness when they encounter international students who are not often exposed to Black ESL teachers. Khadijah also echoed similar sentiments about the fact that the exposure to Black teachers makes a difference:

I genuinely care about my students; I care about their well-being. I care about them as people. And it's not just about you know, giving a grade in a class. And I'm not saying that my colleagues don't care . . . But I kind of think that because of who I am, because I am a Black woman, because I am a Muslim woman, because I'm a mother.

Sabrina also stated that her identities as an educated, well-travelled Black woman play a role in students' perceptions of her:

They [students] have their own opinion of Black people, so I try to show them, like, no, I'm normal too. I travel well, I'm educated, so there's nothing to fear. And then they kind of after the first week or so they're not looking at me like shocked, like who is this?

The use of the words *'fear'* and *'shocked'* are significant because they reveal Sabrina's awareness of the societal perceptions of Black people as less educated. In trying to counteract these perceptions, Talia and Akunna said that they are intentional about highlighting the contributions of Black people in American culture. An example of this is when Talia mentioned an incident where a student from China threw money at her, which she later found out was a derogatory gesture. When a coworker advised her to ignore the students' behavior because "in China they are not accustomed to taking directions from Black women," Talia's response was, "we are not in China. If they wanted, they could have stayed in China. We are in America where Black women run things. You know they won't tell you that. But we run things here, we are the backbone." Akunna also stated that he is mindful about showcasing Black male excellence with famous African American men such as hip-hop rapper and entrepreneur Jay Z because "students need to understand that Black people are at the forefront of American culture . . . That we are avid exporters of American culture, we define American culture." From these examples, it is undeniable that teachers are aware of the dominant rhetoric surrounding Black people and thus are determined; whether through their visibility in the classroom or pedagogical approaches, to tell a different story than the one that has been portrayed in global media, in TESOL discourse, and in American culture at large.

Implications for Teaching and Research

The Need for More Black ESL Faculty Representation

As was previously discussed, the teachers interviewed for this study stated that they were often the only Black faculty in the ESL environments where they worked. Although this small sample of participants cannot be generalized enough to represent the actual racial composition of Black ESL faculty in IEPs in the United States, the fact that these seven teachers with varied experience teaching in diverse parts of the country all attest to being the only faculty of color suggests that a problem exists. Thus, "while quantifiable data would reveal the *extent* to which we have a problem . . . our eyes and our ears tell us that there *is* indeed a problem" (Jenkins, 2018, p.7). This lack of Black representation is alarming, especially considering the significant strides that have been made in TESOL scholarship to magnify the voices of teachers of color (Motha, 2014; Aneja, 2016). However, these efforts have not translated to Black faculty recruitment and retention. As Cooper and Bryan (2020) noted, "these efforts must extend beyond vision, mission statements in order to be evident in the actual practices and principles of the TESOL profession (p. 140).

During my interview with Sherry, an administrator who is on the hiring committee at the University where she works, I asked her what can be done to address the disproportionate number of

Black instructors. One of her suggestions was that Black applicants need to include a racial identifier on resumes such as a historically Black college or membership to a professional Black organization to increase their chances of getting hired. But, research has also shown that Black candidates are more likely to receive a call back if they do not make any references to race on their applications or what has been referred to as “whitening a resume” (Gerdeman, 2017, p.1). Other forms of hiring biases such as the discrimination of applicants with Black sounding names are well documented in the United States (Charles, 2017). What cannot be argued is that the small fraction of Black educators in TESOL is because Black teachers cannot or do not want to teach ESL. My experience in finding participants for this study showed me that highly qualified experienced Black professionals are in abundance as within a few days of posting my request for participation on the TESOL.org communities of practice, I received more than 10 emails from teachers that were willing and ready to take part in the study. So, if the teachers exist, why are there so few in the profession?

For the few that have taught or are currently teaching ESL, the knowledge garnered from the participants’ narratives in this study suggest that Black teachers would benefit from more representation in the workplace and the potential professional connections that can be made with other Black professionals. In fact, four of my participants stated that one of the reasons for involvement in my current study was for the benefit of other Black teachers in the field who also have a unique understanding of what it means to be a Black ESL teacher. Craig, for example, said that he agreed to take part because as Black, doctoral students and teachers of English, “we are in the same boat.” Sherry mentioned the need for more research studies by Black teachers and more Black oriented professional groups within the TESOL community while Talia pointed out an important deficit that needs to be addressed:

There’s a lot of things that I have seen [but] I don’t have other Black ESL professionals to reach out to who are actually in the field as opposed to using teaching English as a means to travel . . . so I wouldn’t say I have a colleague like you to say, hey did this ever happen to you?

She also commented on the dearth of Black presenters at the annual TESOL conferences. Personally, the impetus for this study sprung out of a session I attended at TESOL about Black teachers where the realization that despite our individual backgrounds and teaching contexts we shared similar stories piqued my curiosity enough to pursue this line of inquiry for my doctoral dissertation. The implications of this lack of racial diversity for ESL teachers go beyond the scope of this article and will not be discussed here. However, what cannot be understated is that “[Black teachers] tend to notice when they are not represented, perhaps subconsciously questioning the absence of people who look like them and how it affects their sense of belonging” (Cooper & Bryan, 2020, p.135).

I believe that for real change to happen, there must be some recognition that the field of TESOL in the United States has not taken the time to acknowledge its own failings in diversifying the teaching population and increasing the number of Black teachers. Theoretically, more quantitative research that paints a picture of the statistical realities of this problem should be conducted as there is hardly any demographic information on faculty racial diversity in TESOL education within the United States that is readily available and easily accessible. And qualitative studies that amplify the contributions of Black educators in ESL are a significant step in the right direction. It must be stated that building a diverse ESL faculty is complex and takes a lot more than hiring more Black teachers. But having one black teacher on a teaching team is not diversity, either. But the success of equitable and inclusion strategies as well as anti-racist education in TESOL is contingent upon a thorough examination of the current institutional systems, implicit biases and racism that plays a role in this disproportionate representation would shine a much-needed light.

The Importance of Candid Conversations about Race in the Classroom

While race is considered too sensitive a topic that it is rarely discussed or brought up by ESL teachers in and outside of class (Kubota, 2019, 2018; Motha, 2014), the teachers in this study willingly encouraged students' questions concerning race related issues without shying away from the potential problems that could arise as a result of these discussions. This is an important consideration as an explicit anti-racist lesson has the potential to cause student resistance particularly in ESL classrooms where the only Black person in the classroom is also the teacher. This is because despite the teachers' best intentions to foster critical awareness, students might feel attacked and picked on because of the teachers' positioning as the authority figure in the classroom.

Some would claim that it is expected for Black teachers to talk about race in comparison to their white counterparts, for example. This is an important argument as Motha (2014) posed a similar question: "when white teachers draw attention to and explicitly name racial stereotypes, do they risk propagating the stereotypes and concretizing the established social order?" (p. 214). However, studies exploring the experiences of Black faculty working in higher education in the U.S. and Canada suggest that Black teachers often pay a much heavier price for discussing race in classrooms such as being categorized and pigeonholed as racial scholars by colleagues and even research institutions and even worse labelled racist by their own students. (Daniel, 2019; Griffin, 2016; Han, et al., 2020; Harley, 2008). In fact, Smith and Lander, (2012) contend that in comparison to a white professor, the way students perceive a Black lecturer who chooses to openly discuss issues of race in a class setting is fundamentally different. It is "in the manner in which student objections are expressed: rather than objective critical comments as part of a seeming rational debate, they become overt and personalized remonstrations against the Black teacher" (p. 341). Thus, accusations of racial bias are more likely to be levelled against a Black educator more than any other teacher of color or not. Also, it must be mentioned that not all Black people, especially those working in environments that are not racially diverse, feel comfortable engaging in conversations about race due to the emotional toll that it takes. Blackwell (2018) puts it this way:

If you're white, you have a choice about whether you engage in uncomfortable conversations about race, and you have a choice about how much you feel the racial inequities of our society. If you are a person of color . . . conversations about race are unavoidable—we're pulled into them whether we've invited such discourse or not. White people often interpret our mere presence in a room as an opportunity to talk about race, and these are not conversations we always want to have.

Therefore, when teachers in this study chose to openly engage in these discussions with their students and incorporate instructional materials that are more reflective of the diversity of world cultures, it is a testament to their willingness to make a difference despite the potential personal and professional costs. Mostly, it is the recognition that these conversations are a necessary part of ESL students' language learning experience especially because the country is amid a transformational change when it comes to race relations. As such creating a compassionate classroom environment that is conducive for these kinds of discussions where students are comfortable enough to freely engage, question, and interrogate is a vital component and initial step in the design and implementation of anti-racist pedagogy and curricula. The commitment for language educators must be to reflect on one's own biases and develop critical consciousness when it comes to issues of race and racism in this country such that we are better equipped to engage in critical anti-racist pedagogy. Granted, there is still a lot of research and practical work that needs to be done in training ESL teachers who are not of color on best

practices, but the willingness to engage and accountability to implement this work in the classroom should be a priority.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it is apparent that Black teachers' racial, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds are not separate from the work they do. They care deeply about their work in the classroom, their students' academic and general wellbeing, and are drawn to pedagogy that is culturally relevant, inclusive, and reflective of minority cultures that are often not featured in TESOL curricula. Unfortunately, the dominant and restrictive racial and linguistic conceptualizations of what an English teacher looks like continue to prevail in the social consciousness of ESL learners. This has inevitably meant that the few Black educators in the field often feel an obligation to proactively challenge preconceived misconceptions of Blackness, Black people, and Black culture. Other studies on Black educators working in institutions where they are underrepresented described the mental and psychological pressures as well as the emotional price tag attached to being the only Black person in the room (Charles, 2017; Cooper & Bryan, 2020; Hans, et al., 2020; Penn, 2017). Thus, engaging with Black ESL educators and gaining insight into the experiences of Black teachers is an important first step towards meaningful change and equitable policies in the field of TESOL. As James Baldwin (1972) said, "If one really wishes to know how justice is administered in a country, one does not question the policemen, the lawyers, the judges, or the protected members of the middle class. One goes to the unprotected—those, precisely, who need the law's protection most—and listens to their testimony" (p. 72). In other words, do not just talk about Black teachers, talk to Black teachers.

Author

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