# A critical reading of multiculturalism in English

# language teaching and learning

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**Abstract:** Multiculturalism becomes the buzzword in educational fields. The implication of multiculturalism is critically examined to appreciate its relevance to English language teaching. Critical multiculturalism is advocated whereby L2 learners need to examine how social and historical discourses construct their identities and have a critical reflection about the discourses' power/knowledge and social impact. Viewing language and culture as artificial systems with ideological dominance, critical multiculturalism leads to a critical pedagogy to negotiate, reverse and resist such ideological dominance. Critical multiculturalism enables L2 teachers and learners to create, maintain and transform language uses, hence their identities and social realities.

**Key words:** critical multiculturalism; discourse, identity; power; language teaching

## 1. A critical reading of multiculturalism

Globalization is evident in numerous spheres of our everyday life with persistent penetration of the global capital and increasing immigration from developing countries to developed countries, resulting in the phenomenal growth of the culturally diverse L2 learners. Globalization also brings destabilization and recreation of identities in Diaspora for L2 learners. Nowadays, multiculturalism becomes the buzzword in political and educational arenas. A critical examination of the implication of multiculturalism is needed to appreciate its relevance to English language teaching. The understanding of multiculturalism has to start with culture, discourse, identity and power. Culture refers to meanings embedded in social interactions, which involves two aspects—discourse and identity, both of them are social constructions. Identity is embodied in discourse that speaks through people, implicating in the exercising of power (Fairclough, 1995; Hall, 1997). Discourses are ways of constructing knowledge and its related social practices (Weedon, 1987). Identities are composed of multiple subjectivities deriving from heterogeneous discourses available in the society (Canagarajah, 2004). Discourse is the site of "production of knowledge through language" (Hall, 1997, p. 44). As knowledge is always socio-historically meaningful, it inevitably leads to the power relations that are manifested in the ideological domination and exclusion as well as the ideological reversal and resistance. As Foucault (1995, p. 27) claims, "(T)here is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations". Yet social interactions are not exactly characterized by the confrontation and struggle of opposites. It is a very complex and interweaving scenario. One's identities exhibit shifting, overlapping, conflicting and complementing quality (Sridhar, 1996). One has to negotiate these competing identities in various discourses of power/knowledge (Norton, 1995).

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## 2. Multiculturalism in English language teaching and learning

Kubota (2004) reminds us that a superficial appreciation of the diversity of cultural identities will not dismantle but perpetuate racial and linguistic hierarchies. She advocates critical multiculturalism instead of liberal multiculturalism and a rhetorical pluralist model. Liberal multiculturalism emphasizes commonality and natural equality across racial, cultural, gender and gender differences for everyone. Such difference-blind vision obscures the power and privilege attached to the dominant groups. It highlights differences between different ethnic groups by exoticizing and essentializing such differences, celebrating "cultural difference as an end in itself" (Kubota 2004, p. 35). For example, some ESL (English as Second Language) pedagogies label Japanese culture as a group-oriented one that emphasizes harmony. Therefore, individualism, critical thinking and self-expression are not assigned to Japanese students, but English native-speakers. Such cultural dichotomy between the East and the West reifies a view on culture as a fixed, apolitical and static entity. It reinforces the stereotypical misconception of Asian students as passive and silent learners, who fail to become autonomous learners (Kubota, 1999). However, Ho and Crookall's (1995, p. 242) study on a simulation exercise suggests that Chinese students become autonomous learners and "critical thinkers; they learned to argue intelligently and to write effectively (in English)". Matsuda (2001) shows the practice of constructing individual voice discursively is not entirely foreign to Japanese learners in a "collectivist culture". She claims that Japanese learners' difficulty in constructing voice in written English is not due to the incompatibility with their cultural orientation but different ways in which voice is constructed in Japanese and English and the unfamiliarity with the strategies available in English. Moreover, cultural differences are celebrated in decontextualized and trivialized ways of "cultural tourism" (Derman-Sparks, 1998), which serve as typical activities for ESL students. Ethnic customs and traditions are merely displayed and consumed without interrogating how they are sociopolitically constructed. Native-speaker TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages) teachers are asked to change their ways of feedback and evaluation following a rhetorical pluralist model, which promotes and preserves ESL's students' native cultural and linguistic tradition in mainstream English-speaking discourse community (Land & Whitley, 1989). But such cultural tolerance respects and affirms cultural difference as a given, not a sociocultural construct interweaved with power. It makes learners embrace rigid cultural nationalism that views L1 culture as primordial (Kubota, 1999). Both inclinations are politically correct. However, such superficial sameness and equality will suppress and suffocate diversity, which is the essential prerequisite of multiculturalism. In the above two models, diversity is endorsed in the context where all differences are equivalent in status and legitimized by the dominant ideology that contains, transforms, and erases the diversity to achieve a sort of cohesion and unity. Therefore, a cultural space is manufactured where the diversity is accommodated and contained. A prevailing value criterion is to govern everything. At the same time, a social climate is generated where each diversified element is assimilated in the framework of unequal equality. The uniqueness of varied cultural identities serves as visible cosmetic and decorative device for diversity. This is the process of "mainstreaming the margins" (Fleras, 1998).

Critical multiculturalism rejects the above two models that treat social identities as permanent and taken-for-granted. Conceptualizing culture as a site of power contestation characterized by inherent tension, critical multiculturalism claims that identities are discursive practices through which "social difference is both invented and performed" (McClintock, 1997, p. 89). In order to understand and appreciate such invention and performance of identity in intercultural communication, learners need to examine how social and historical discourses construct their identities and have a critical reflection about the discourses' power/knowledge and

social impact. Critical multiculturalism advocates multicultural education for all students rather than ethnic minority students. It demands all students and teachers to critically examine how curricula, materials, daily instructions and social differences are constructed, legitimated and contested within unequal relations of power (Kubota, 2004). It affirms multiplicity of perspectives and linguistic forms, encouraging learners to reflectively engage with standard form of English, negotiating and subverting the "normative linguistic code" (Kubota, 2004, p. 46), which leads to learners' empowerment. It claims that purposeless exercises of memorizing, copying, filling out worksheets of dominant linguistic/cultural codes are detrimental to critical literacy (McKay & Wong, 1996). It mobilizes learners both to develop skills for success in mainstream society and maintain their cultural heritage, empowering themselves by appropriating the dominant language to construct different meanings (Rodby, 1992). Critical multiculturalism claims that no particular culture or language is superior than others and cultural differences are sociohistoric inventions (Valdes, 1998). So I think learners and teachers, learners and native-speaker students, colored learners and white non-native-speakers shall treat each other's culture(s) as equal and be aware that the inequality of power relations is evident not only in the dominant culture, but also in everyone's own culture. As SHI and Wilson (2001, p. 91) claim, teachers encourage and help L2 learners "critically examine the relevant language and culture of our own, through which we have historically represented the other" (italics in original). Moreover, English as Second Language (ESL) teaching shall provide opportunities to explore learners' linguistic appropriation not only as a political construct, but an artistic artifact embodying unique novelty and aesthetic creativity. Otherwise, it would lead to a new form of political correctness.

## 3. Some cases in English language teaching and learning

### 3.1 Dialogic writing: Articulating your voice

Dialogue journal between the teacher and students can enact a learner-centred dialogical curriculum (Meath-Lang, 1990). The prerequisite is that teachers must try to treat every student as a unique individual. Characterized by autobiographical methods, individual focus and political concern, "teachers and students journey together" (Meath-Lang, 1990, p. 16) to re-conceive their identities. Students gain great control and real fluency of their L2. It could be viewed as one of the "distinctive ways of 'being and doing' that allow people to enact and/or recognize a specific and distinctive socially situated identity" (Gee, 2000, p. 2, my emphasis). In this process, students "enact" their inner voices into a written conversation with teachers in "a process of discovery" of self-expressions (Zamel, 1982, p. 206). In a content-based manner, they negotiate their identities in personally meaningful discussions. Publishing of the journal writing, either in-class or on the Internet, can make learners "recognize" and reflect how language constructs and changes their social surroundings and their identities, appreciating the significance and impact of their own voices as writers. The roles of teachers were transformed from evaluators and dispensers of knowledge to facilitators, collaborators and friends (Vanett & Jurich, 1990). Consisting with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical view of social interaction where the influences of social actors/actresses are reciprocal, teachers become learners, too. In addition, successful and fluent articulation of personal identity in journal writing out of learners' life experiences can enable the transfer of writing skills to their academic or professional assignments. Bilingual student could use journal writing to understand his/her positioning and actualize his/her possibilities in the social world. Sluy and Carpenter's (2003) analysis of memoir writing of a Polish teenager girl, who recently immigrated to the US, exemplifies the potential of the girl's negotiation of identity and articulation of her difference as an opportunity for dialogue with native-speaker

students. Actually language learning memoirs shall be treated as a genre to investigate how learners' identities and literacies are sociohistorically constructed (Pavlenko, 2001a). Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) also opens new social space for the (re)construction of learners' identities by means of both writing and other audio-visual means. It is useful to encourage students to design their own web homepages of their interest and engage in Internet chats and email exchanges with their peers in L2, which not only improves their writing abilities, but (re)creates their multiple identities by (re)positioning and (re)design themselves (Lam, 2000).

### 3.2 Creative expression: Reinvent your identity

Creativity enables not only identity construction, but identity reinvention. Learners' innovative expression of their distinct cultural identity in L2 shall be welcomed. ZHANG (2002) analyzes HA Jin's skillful use of English that successfully transcends his native Chinese experience to form an indigenized narrative style. The linguistic exponents of such creativity range from the use of curse words to metaphors, proverbs, and political expressions of contemporary Chinese lexicon. Learners' artistic expressions in terms of creating a subaltern voice and having it participated in the hegemonic discourse in their own terms shall be encouraged. Rivero El Badaoui shows that creative responses to reinvent one's identity originate in the tension between hegemonic and subaltern cultures. One Caribbean writer creatively appropriated English and poetically manipulated it to express himself in Cuban Spanish, lending a voice to his Cuban and Cuban-American community. Such expression leads to self-representation, which binds L2 use together with identity (re)invention. For example, cross-cultural autobiography writing is one effective way of self-representation. Autobiography writing in L2 allow bilingual learners to assume legitimate ownership of their L2 and provide readers with new meanings and perspectives of "being American—and bilingual" (Pavlenko, 2001b). In her autobiography, Kingston (1977) becomes a creative critic of both the mainstream (USA) and her ethnic (Chinese-American) cultures, reconstructing a woman warrior "against custom, silenced by her own culture and as a result engenders her own voice, her own identity" (Jenkins, 1994, p. 65). Kingston claims her autobiography as an "American" novel, defying the labels of both ethnic Chinese and Chinese-American (Lidoff, 1987).

### 3.3 Grammar teaching: Interweaving your identity with reality

Even seemly unlikely topic of grammar lesson can be pedagogically helpful to explore identity (re)construction. Morgan (2004) designs a grammar exercise to teach modals like "will" to a group of newly-arrived immigrants from Hong Kong in Canada in 1995. Modals were employed in the discussion of two co-current parallel political transformations in both Canada and Hong Kong, namely, 1995 Quebec referendum on sovereignty and the anticipated handover of Hong Kong to China. Morgan (2004) encourages his students to explore the impacts on their own future in the context of interweaving the two events through the lexicogrammatical system. Conflicting emotions and loyalties emerged in the discussion about their concerns about the continuity of high-income, low-tax life and the security of their properties and assets in Hong Kong, and the possibility of being underprivileged and unemployed in Canada. The identity of being new Chinese Canadians was created in the ambivalence, apprehension and possibility regarding their own future with the use of modals. Such "contingent, discursive aspects of modality" are a "crucial dimension of meaning making that takes place through pedagogy" (Morgan, 2004, p. 164). Actually, such pedagogical grammar not only serves as a site of identity representation, but also as a site of identity creation (Norton & Toohey, 2004).

## 4. Conclusion

The above discussion takes a critical approach to examine multiculturalism in English language teaching and learning. Focusing on the ideological impact multiculturalism, the pivotal issue is to understand, appreciate, and, in some cases, reconstruct the power/knowledge in prevailing discourses and social identities. Rather than accommodating and containing diversity, critical multiculturalism affirms and enriches diversity. On the one hand, such discussion enables us to view language and culture as artificial systems with ideological dominance, which have tangible sociopolitical implications in people's life. It also facilitates our reflection on the ways in which some linguistic and cultural conventions are naturalized and normalized in everyday usage and second language acquisition. On the other hand, as language is "the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed" (Weedon, 1987, p. 27) and a L2 learner is both "subject of and subject to relations of power" (Norton, 1995, p. 15), such discussion allows teacher and learners to conduct continuous interrogations on the power in multiple discourses as social constructions of their identities, thereby negotiate, reverse and resist ideological dominance in English language teaching and learning. In other words, critical multiculturalism leads to a critical pedagogy to address the inequality in ideological dominance, which enables teachers and learners to create, maintain and transform language uses, hence their identities and social realities. In this way, the "A" in SLA (Second Language Acquisition) becomes learner' activity of ongoing identity construction and the agency co-constructed via interaction with other agents (Block, 2003). However, recognizing L2 teaching and learning is political does not mean over-politicalize it. Over-politicalization itself is not innocent of power and could lead to potential oppressive domination (Grimshaw, 1993). If critical multiculturalism is over-politicalized and/or inappropriately applied, it would lead to rigid political correctness that would inhibit learner's aesthetic creativity, artistic expression and attainment of full potential as a human being.

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