

Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality: Race, Culture, and Identity in the ESL Classroom

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Abstract: This paper discusses the use of Critical Race Theory (CRT), intersectionality, and different teaching approaches in K-12 ESL classrooms to introduce race-related concepts, culture, and identity. It highlights the importance of such theories and concepts in achieving inclusivity and creating a welcoming learning environment, underlining the need for research on developing in-class activities that focus on culture, identity, and race. The paper begins with an overview of CRT and intersectionality, emphasizing their pertinence in TESOL and ESL pedagogy. Then, different teaching methods such as Culturally Responsive Teaching and Social Justice Education are discussed highlighting their benefits and how they can be used to introduce race, culture, and power relations to English Language Learners (ELLs). The paper concludes with a discussion of the role of literature, counter-stories, and critical literacy in teaching ELLs about race, culture, and identity, accompanied by practical in-class activity suggestions. This paper not only introduces educators to CRT and intersectionality but also provides a range of practical activities and insights for effectively incorporating race-related topics in ESL education.

Keywords: critical race theory; intersectionality; ESL; culture; identity

Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality

Applied linguistics is “[...] a broad interdisciplinary field of study concerned with solutions to problems, or the improvement of situations involving language and its users and uses” (Berns & Matsuda, 2006, p. 394), welcoming theories and concepts from other fields such CRT and intersectionality. According to Yosso (2020), CRT represents “a framework that can be used to theorize, examine, and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact on social structures, practices, and discourses.” (p.114). In other words, this theory focuses on how race, racism, and power interconnect and aims to empower and fight for minorities’ rights.

Several researchers discussed CRT and its key tenets, highlighting five core principles (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Howard, Navarro, Donnor, Dixson, & Anderson, 2016; Tate, 1999; Yosso, 2017). These key principles include a) centralizing race and racism while including other variables that intersect with them such as culture and identity, b) challenging the majority’s view and giving voice to minorities, which can be seen in counter storytelling, a method that Delgado and Stefancic (2017) discussed where minorities tell their own story and challenge the majority’s version, and c) advocating for social justice and valuing “experiential knowledge”, which refers to oral knowledge such as the one presented by indigenous groups or the stories narrated by people of colour (Howard, et. al., 2016). The other key tenets include d) uncovering “the institutional and ideological racial purpose behind the “color-blind” myth of merit and individualism [...]” (Parker, 1998, p. 48), and e) highlighting the importance of discussing race and the injustices faced by people of colour, and underlining that colorblindness inhibits these discussions (Parker, 1998). Examining these core principles underlines how such a theory can play a role in the field of education, where learners and educators from different backgrounds and experiences are subjected to different discriminatory practices and injustices.

CRT focuses on power and power relations, particularly in the education and TESOL fields, where language is recognized as a form of power. Bourdieu (1991) discussed how language represents a form of capital, which is weighed differently based on the form of language that the individual speaks. He highlighted the notion of legitimate language explaining how “[s]peakers lacking the legitimate competence are de facto excluded from the social domains in which this competence is required or are condemned to silence” (p.55). Such legitimacy adds to individuals’ linguistic capital allowing them to be situated in a higher social class, which consequently offers them more opportunities that speakers of different forms of language are deprived of. Morrison and Lui (2000) defined linguistic capital as “fluency in, and comfort with, a high-status, world-wide language which is used by groups who possess economic, social, cultural and political power and status in local and global society” (p.473). Linguistic capital is connected to other forms of capital such as cultural, economic, and educational capitals. In the ESL classroom, these different capitals are present and intersecting; however, they can disadvantage students instead of benefitting them, as ELLs’ capitals are sometimes viewed as deficient compared to the majority’s capitals. In the classroom, Nero (2005) explained that the dominant culture and language are prioritized while minority students’ culture and capital are either ignored or viewed as deficient. The intersection between these capitals in the ESL classroom requires an understanding of the students’ backgrounds and the power relations present in the classroom.

CRT can provide teachers in general and ESL teachers in specific with an understanding of the power relations present in the class and how they affect the teaching and learning environments.

The application of CRT in the language classroom requires an acknowledgement and awareness of a plethora of variables that students bring to the classroom such as identity, culture, class, (dis)ability, and ethnicity. Such acknowledgement necessitates the presence of another concept which offers not only awareness of the different variables but also an understanding of how such elements create unique experiences which can only be understood through the intersection of these inextricably connected elements. Intersectionality, a term that was first introduced by Critical Race Theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, highlights how different variables intersect with race and how such intersection affects individuals' experiences with racism. Gillborn (2015) explained that intersectionality underlines "how multiple forms of inequality and identity inter-relate in different contexts and over time" (p. 278). According to MacKinnon (2013), intersectionality is not merely about adding variables; however, it focuses on the individual and his/her experiences, and examines the overlaps of different injustices, which are usually ignored when utilizing a "single-axis" perspective. Intersectionality "[...] captures not just the static outcomes of the problem it brings into view but its dynamics and lines of force as well. It is this that makes it transformative" (MacKinnon, 2013, p. 1024). The transformative aspect of intersectionality lies in its role in changing not only individuals' understanding of inequalities but also how they think in general.

In the ESL classroom, students bring different capitals, and the intersection of such capitals can subject them to different treatment by their teachers and peers who might view part of or all their capitals as deficient which can negatively affect their learning experiences. Wink (2010) discussed the difficulties students who speak English as an additional language are subjected to in the classroom, and she referred to the different work by Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson on linguistic genocide, and how students' L1 is ripped away from them in the classroom, where English is being given the sole focus while their L1 is ignored. She highlighted that "[...] we are all part of the process that normalizes the majority use of English and disenfranchises all other language"; this process instills shame into students' minds about their L1 and this shame is followed by anger (Wink, 2010, p. 117). The internal conflict that students experience affects their identity formation where they feel that their language, culture, and heritage are not worthy, and their backgrounds and capitals are contested by their teachers, peers, and the school system; a system that privileges English and disregards the wealth of knowledge that minority students bring to the classroom.

In today's diverse classroom, the utilization of intersectionality proves to be essential for ELLs, as "a focus on intersectionality could acknowledge the multifaceted knowledge frameworks that these learners bring to their school context" (Liggett, 2014, p. 119). Such understanding should lead to inclusive learning environments where students' diverse and rich backgrounds are not only acknowledged but also respected and celebrated. In addition, according to Liggett (2014), intersectionality is important in highlighting how learners have different experiences, and these differences are not only present between members of different groups, linguistic, cultural, or ethnic groups, but are also present between members of the same groups. Differential treatment due to linguistic background can be seen both inside and outside the language classroom due to misconceptions and stereotypes about individuals from different countries. Some of the racist and biased techniques that teachers used, consciously or unconsciously, over the years when teaching ELLs were to either "eradicate" or "ignore" students' L2 or vernacular for the purpose of teaching them standard English which, in their view, is how they can achieve academic success (Nero, 2005). These approaches were used with students in the US and the UK in the 60s and 70s with the goal of eliminating the vernacular or L2 and replacing it with standard English, which represents a complete disregard of students' linguistic background leading to partial or, in some cases, complete elimination of students' linguistic capital that constitutes an essential part of students' identity. Phillipson (2009) referred to a similar process called linguistic capital dispossession, which happens when the native language is replaced by English. Intersectionality can assist in reducing such detrimental effects, as it allows teachers to see how their students' backgrounds are complex, and this complexity offers richness which can be lost due to the teachers' deficit view of the students' capitals.

While acknowledging the multiple strengths in the principles of CRT and intersectionality, it is important to highlight some of the critiques of both theory and concept and how different researchers replied to these critiques. As for CRT, Bridges (2019) highlighted that some researchers critiqued some aspects of the theory such as storytelling, which they described as being emotional and subjective and so not suitable for the legal field; however, Critical Race Theorists who support storytelling highlight the importance of these stories in helping minorities heal from racial experiences and serve a persuasive and educational function for the readers. As for the critiques of

intersectionality, intersectionality has been critiqued by some researchers who viewed it as lacking a clear method (Bridges, 2019). Replying to this critique, Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013) highlighted that there is no need for clear cut rules to use intersectionality in research and that there is no need to adhere to a specific method.

CRT, Intersectionality, and TESOL

The earlier discussion of CRT and intersectionality highlights the unlimited number of variables that both concepts encompass which can be observed in any classroom including the ESL classroom where ELLs come to class with a combination of most, if not all, of these elements. For teachers to understand and apply the key tenets of intersectionality and CRT, it is essential for teachers to first understand the relation between TESOL and CRT, as the connection is not always clear to ESL teachers. Liggett (2014) explained that there is a connection between three key tenets of CRT and TESOL. First, CRT views racism as an everyday reality for minorities, a reality that is embedded in the community and reflected in laws leading to systemic discrimination against marginalized groups. Applying this understanding of racism to the ESL classroom highlights how linguisticism has been and is still being used to discriminate against ELLs whose accents and/or language proficiency are used against them, subjecting them to continuous discrimination inside and outside the classroom. Skutnabb-Kangas (1988) defined linguisticism as “ideologies, structures and practices which are used to legitimate, [...] and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources [...] between groups which are defined on the basis of language” (p.13). These daily challenges reflect one of the connections between CRT and TESOL in the way racism and linguisticism have become normalized and are often left unnoticed, and, if noticed, they are usually ignored. The second tenet is the connection between education, and in this case the teaching of English, and colonial history, the impact of which needs to be acknowledged by ESL teachers. The effect of colonialism on different aspects of languages and language education is reflected in false beliefs of English language superiority which, according to Liggett (2014), is partly related to misleading scientific studies that were used to prove that colonizers’ language entails higher intelligence. The third connection lies in the role of narratives in both CRT and TESOL in representing different identities and reflecting personal experiences, which provides an opportunity for individuals and ELLs to voice their opinions and show their identity.

Applying CRT, and intersectionality in education is no longer a luxury. Tangible changes will not happen unless steps are taken against all forms of inequality, and shifting from theories to practical applications is essential. Hostility against CRT, which can be seen on news outlets, is part of the reason why educators and schools are not very welcoming of such concepts. Discussion of topics such as race, ethnicity, and power relations usually “evokes racism which is often interpreted as overt forms of bigotry, rather than structural or institutional inequalities, and this undertone tends to prevent open dialogue” (Kubota & Lin, 2006, p. 472). In addition, some teachers believe that discussions about race related topics are too advanced for young learners (Roy, 2017). However, Kubota and Lin (2006) highlighted that such open dialogues are crucial in the TESOL field, as they “could initiate unique and vibrant inquiries to build on these topics and investigate how they influence identity formation, instructional practices, program development, policy making, research, and beyond” (p. 473). These dialogues can assist in understanding how identities of both teachers and students are formed in the ESL classroom and highlight the changes needed in the teaching methods used and the action needed to be taken by policymakers.

Culturally Responsive Teaching and Social Justice Education

Before applying CRT and intersectionality in the ESL classroom, teachers need to reflect on their own race, privileges, and biases to be able to weave in race and race-related themes consciously and critically in the classroom, as “[b]eing able to “see” and act against inequity is not something one “achieves,” but is a habit requiring constant practice” (Chan & Coney, 2020, p. 4). A suggested first step to start such reflexive and critical process is exploring Glasgow’s (2017) Levels of Inclusive School Communities Chart and checking where an educator falls on the continuum. Glasgow’s chart contains different elements such as school communities and their philosophy, policies and practices and curriculum, and pedagogy, and provides a description of the level of inclusivity on a continuum ranging from most exclusive to most inclusive. Once this step is determined, further reading and research on race and race related topics can begin. In their article, Chan and Coney (2020) provided multiple sources that educators can use to become more critically conscious and reflexive, which will offer them knowledge on how to approach their classes and how to apply CRT, intersectionality, or any combination of critical theories.

After being immersed in the previously mentioned critical and reflexive process, teachers in the ESL classroom should be in good position to start exploring and weaving in CRT and intersectionality in the classroom. A practical application for teaching race-related concepts and culture can be achieved through using multicultural education, which evolves around “[...] cultural differences, cross-cultural understandings, and cultural pluralism” with an aim to help students have a better understanding of different cultures (Taylor & Sobel, 2011, p. 19). Education about culture and race-related concepts and the intersections between them empowers students of different cultures providing them and their peers with knowledge that they might be lacking. Also, the previously mentioned concepts need to be reflected in curricula and McLaren (2002) highlighted how curricula play a role in preparing students for society whether as dominated or dominant. The implication of the multicultural education elements in curricula, which reflects different cultures and ethnicities and aims for the inclusion students of different backgrounds, can assist in fostering equity and inclusion in the learning and teaching environment.

Understanding and acknowledging the intersections between race, culture, language, and identity in the ESL classroom is essential in assisting teachers in creating and providing students with an inclusive and supportive learning environment. An important step for teachers to create such a learning environment is by understanding their students’ needs and being aware of their diverse backgrounds. This understanding can be achieved through applying Culturally Responsive Teaching, which can provide the teacher with an ability to be both understanding and inclusive of all students. Matias (2013) defined Culturally Responsive Teaching as “[...] an approach for reintegrating knowledge that was initially marginalized due to systemic racism” (p. 76), using “[...] the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (Gay, 2002, p. 106). Matias (2013) highlighted that Culturally Responsive Teaching is about the “[...] struggle against the whiten-ing of education” and for White teachers to apply such a teaching method, they need to acknowledge and understand their Whiteness as a racial group and identity (p. 71). She also underlined the importance of renouncing the White-savior idea that some teachers bring into the classroom when teaching minority students and urges them to reflect on their Whiteness first before engaging in Culturally Responsive Teaching which could be damaging to their students where they can be subjected to “racist approaches, ideologies, and curriculum that go unnoticed” (p. 76). According to Chan and Coney (2020), the presence of educators who have “been socialized to avoid race topics disconnects them from students who are confronted with their racial identity daily” and, to tackle this issue, it is crucial to raise teachers’ critical consciousness and critical self-reflection (p. 2).

When applying CRT and intersectionality in the ESL classroom through different teaching approaches, it is detrimental to do so with an end goal of achieving social justice not only in the classroom but also in the field of education. Hackman and Rauscher (2004) define Social Justice Education (SJE) as “an educational philosophy committed to equity and social change[...].” (p. 114). They explain that SJE encourages students’ inclusion and participation in community by promoting their agency and inclusion in community which makes them “[...] feel safe and valued for who they are”, and that it depends on promoting three key goals which are “social responsibility, student empowerment, and the equitable distribution of resources.” (Bell, 1992, as cited in Hackman & Rauscher, 2004, p. 114). For teachers to promote these goals, they need to introduce the concepts of power and race along with multiple intersecting variables to students and teach them to be critical, voice their opinions, and have agency.

Utilization of the previously mentioned teaching methods is part of teachers’ “ethical responsibility” towards their learners whose cultures need to be reflected in the ESL classroom to ensure inclusivity (Cummins, 2009). Nevertheless, representation of different cultures needs to be applied carefully and according to a plan to ensure that this representation is woven throughout the curriculum and is not merely a unit or session on food or festivals in different countries (Nero, 2005). One of the pitfalls that some teachers face when attempting to introduce different cultures is tokenism which is “the process of evaluating minorities against local hegemonic standards” (Ghosh & Barber, 2021, p. 1064). Tokenism can be noticed in superficially representing culture to students without genuine reflection of cultures in curricula or in class. The following section will offer different in-class activities reflecting practical inclusion of race, culture, and identity.

From Theory into Practice

There is no set lesson plan or checklist for ESL teachers to follow to incorporate CRT, Intersectionality, or different teaching approaches. Each teacher needs to tailor their plans to cater to their own classrooms, weaving race-related theories, and concepts, and applying culturally-based methods that best suit their classroom. When using these

methods and theories guided by race and culture, teachers need to model what they teach to their students, prepare lesson plans that incorporate the targeted concepts throughout the course or curriculum, and pay attention when selecting materials and books (Iwai, 2015; Jett, 2012).

Each ESL classroom is different and unique in relation to students' age, students' backgrounds, and curriculum used. Knowledge of these elements provides the base for creating the lesson plans and activities that best fit each classroom, and ESL teachers can modify their plans based on each classroom. Nero (2005) suggested that knowledge of students' background can be achieved through administering a survey asking questions about students' linguistic and cultural heritage. In the ESL classroom, these questions can be part of an English language diagnostic assessment, which is an assessment that happens at the beginning of the semester to evaluate students' English language. Based on this assessment, teachers should have access to more information about the students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and they can use the information to modify the lesson plans or activities accordingly. Such surveys can be written or oral depending on the students age and English language level. To offer ESL teachers practical examples on how to apply CRT and intersectionality in the ESL classroom, the following section provides some activities that crystalize the intersection between race, culture, language, and identity and how they are used in the classroom.

Narratives, Counter storytelling, and Critical Literacy

One way to introduce different cultures in the language classroom can be through literature where teachers choose books that present different cultures and characters. Iwai (2015) highlighted that using multicultural books with students can offer rich information on individuals from different backgrounds. She highlighted that these books must be of high quality where illustrations accurately depict the community or culture, and the dialogues are genuine, with minority and majority groups represented, and with absence of tokenism and stereotyping. Also, using different genres will be useful for students, as they will observe how different variables interplay differently and/or similarly in different contexts, such as the intersection of culture, language, gender, religion, and ethnicity for different characters and in the different contexts they belong to. However, it is important for ESL teachers to be cautious of using narratives that showcase minorities as the "Other" celebrating them as individuals detached from their larger linguistic and racial communities, as this could result in the narratives being a form of tokenism and could potentially "[...] reinforce a worldview that does not address the systemic and cultural constructions of race" (Williams, 2004, p. 165).

Avoiding tokenism when using literature with ELLs can be achieved through critical literacy, which can assist learners in critically exploring and understanding their racial identities. Compared to traditional literacy which focuses on teaching literacy skills, critical literacy "provides a framework for asking critical and thought-provoking questions that relate to the reader and society" (Roy, 2017, p. 542). Roy (2017) highlighted how using critical literacy contextualizes texts in a society that are embedded within politics, culture, and history. In her study, an ESL teacher consciously planned and selected texts and film segments that focused on identity and identity labels, White man, Black man, and red man, and connected them to students' linguistic and cultural background. The students would engage in a literacy cycle consisting of a read aloud activity, followed by a movie segment, and finally a reflective writing activity using elicitation questions while providing space for discussions throughout the cycle. The study proves the possibility and success of teaching ELLs about race-related themes and how it can be achieved along with teaching language and content. It also highlights "how teachers can conduct conversations about race, ethnicity, and language use in ways that honor children's perspectives" (Roy, 2017, p. 559). Finally, the study underlines the essential role teachers play in making these discussions happen, because without them consciously teaching these themes, encouraging discussions, and providing space, the students will not have the opportunity to critically reflect on their identities, race, and languages.

Another way for including narratives in the classroom was suggested by Nero (2005), and it involves students recording stories in their communities and creating dialectical and bilingual vocabulary to share with classmates. These stories can provide an opportunity for ELLs to learn not only about language and culture, but it can also be an introduction to problems faced by different community members and power relations. Students using these narratives to tell the stories of their possibly marginalized communities and the challenges they face can be a form of counter storytelling, which is one of CRT's key elements. Storytelling is a way of introducing race and racism and Delgado and Stefancic (2001) discussed using legal storytelling and counter-storytelling by critical race theorists

and how narratives are an excellent way for minorities to counteract the majority's version of history. Williams (2004) explained that "[i]n describing a different experience, those not of the dominant culture can participate in creating a new narrative that is visible to all and, perhaps, alter perceptions in their community and in the larger culture" (p. 166). These narratives offer an excellent way to introduce race and culture in the ESL classroom and can be used to "challenge the normal narrative about race" and culture (Williams, 2004, p. 167). ESL teachers can use these counter-stories for classroom discussions, and they can ask learners to write their own stories and discuss them with peers. Furthermore, stories in students' L1 can be used in the classroom to compare different stories in different languages in terms of character positioning, power relations projected, language used, and formal VS vernacular. Using storytelling and counter-storytelling can be a way for ELLs to name the challenges that they are facing and break their silencing and, as Delgado and Stefancic (2001) mentioned, "[p]owerfully written stories and narratives may begin a process of adjustment in our system of beliefs and categories by calling attention to neglected evidence and reminding readers of our common humanity." (p. 43). Finally, it is essential to introduce race-related topics with care so as not to invoke trauma and, as Kubota and Lin (2006) underlined, despite the difficulty of such discussions, they can assist in understanding identity formation in the ESL classroom, highlighting the changes needed in teaching methods and the action needed by stakeholders.

Conclusion

This paper provided an introduction to CRT and intersectionality and how they can be used while applying different teaching approaches. It also presented some suggested activities from the literature on how to integrate different race-related concepts in the ESL classroom. More research is required on how to incorporate CRT and intersectionality in ESL classrooms and guidelines are needed on how teachers can utilize them with their learners. Some possible steps include a) schools offering training to educators on how to introduce race and race-related concepts in the classroom, b) curricula genuinely incorporating and weaving in such concepts, and c) educators designing syllabi and activities naturally representing these concepts while avoiding tokenism.

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