Racial Bias within the TESOL Profession and its Implications in the EFL context: Interview with Ryuko Kubota[1]

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Abstract

This article is based on an interview with Dr. Ryuko Kubota, a professor-researcher in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia, Canada. She is a leading author in the areas of critical applied linguistics, critical race theory, and critical pedagogy. More recently, her research has been focused on the issue of racism in TESOL. Her work has served as inspiration and encouragement for several new authors interested in discussing this topic. In this interview, we discussed her views on issues about racism in the TESOL profession, the westernization of countries or cultural imperialism through English language, as well as the ownership of English and the teaching of culture in the EFL classroom.

Resumen

El presente artículo está basado en una entrevista con la Dra. Ryuko Kubota, quien funge como profesora-investigadora en el Departamento de Idiomas y Educación en la Universidad de British Columbia, Canadá. Ella es autora líder en el área de lingüística aplicada crítica, teoría racial crítica, y pedagogía crítica. Más recientemente, sus investigaciones se han enfocado en temas de racismo en el área de TESOL. Su trabajo ha servido como inspiración y estímulo para varios autores nuevos interesados en discutir este tema. En esta entrevista discutimos su visión acerca de asuntos relacionados con el racismo dentro de la profesión de TESOL, el imperialismo cultural del occidente sobre otros países y la 'propiedad' del idioma inglés, así como la enseñanza de inglés en el salón de clases de lengua extranjera.

An overview of Kubota's work in the TESOL profession

Ryuko Kubota has developed a prolific career as a scholar in the area of applied linguistics. Some of her publications include being a co-editor of *Race, culture, and identities in second language: Exploring critically engaged practice* (Routledge, 2009) and *Demystifying career paths after graduate school: A guide for second language professionals in higher education* (Information Age Publishing, 2012). She has also published articles in academic journals, such as the *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *Canadian Modern Language Review*, *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, *International Journal of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education*, *Modern Language Journal*, *TESOL Quarterly*, *Written Communication*, and *World Englishes*. She has been actively involved in the American Association for Applied Linguistics, International Society for Language Studies, and the TESOL International Association.

After her participation last year in the *VI Seminar of Applied Linguistics* at University of Guanajuato, where she gave a talk related to her recent research, we contacted her for an interview to discuss her most well-known ideas. First, Kubota shared the difficult journey that she has faced after addressing a sensitive topic that most authors prefer to avoid—racism—within the TESOL profession. We related this topic to non-native-speakerism since in the context of Mexico there is a growing number of non-native English speakers (NNEST) incorporated in the teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Our interest in this topic originates in our position as non-native speaking teachers, who sometimes feel marginalized, although we have an appropriate level of the English language and a teacher training educational background. Therefore, we asked Ryuko Kubota's point of view about this problem that prevails in TESOL and her suggestions on how it might be solved. In addition, we questioned her position on the Westernization of countries, from the point of view of the issues of motivating students to learn the English language. We also asked for her opinion on issues related to the ownership of English and the teaching of target culture.

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The Interview

Addressing a hot topic

Ryuko Kubota is one of the few authors in the area of TESOL who raises her voice to address a very sensitive issue that has been continuously affecting the field throughout the years: racism. At a first glance, this word may evoke feelings of discomfort among the audience; it seems to be too strong to have a place within such a nice profession as TESOL is perceived (Kubota, 2001; 2002). In the following excerpt, the author shares her motivation to approach this delicate topic:

> *Perla Villegas Torres & Diana Stukan*: What was your motivation to investigate race in TESOL?
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> *Ryuko Kubota*: In 2001, I published an article in *TESOL Quarterly* (Kubota, 2001) to look at how US culture was portrayed in some educational studies that were conducted in the United States. I thought it was very important not just to criticize what I call essentialist understanding of the culture of the 'other' (meaning non-American cultures or non-Western cultures) but also to problematize the dichotomized images of the cultural representation of the US in the context of education. I found it important to examine how American culture, as reflected in the images of students, teachers, and the US classroom, was portrayed in educational studies. Specifically, the typical image is that American culture has a direct and logical communicative style and that American students and teacher interact actively, which is contrasted with the image of passive Asian students.

As seen in this statement, Kubota was not convinced about the cultural representation of non-Western cultures in the educational research within the United States. In fact, the existence of cultural stereotypes within the ESL and EFL textbooks has already been pointed out in many studies (Kumaravadivelu, 2003; Weninger & Kiss, 2013; among others). Kubota refers to the concept of the 'other' to explain such a problematic representation. Murdick, Shore, Gartin and Chitooran (2004) define 'others' as people who look, behave, or see the world too differently from the majority, or whose visions about life are not easily understood. Additionally, the authors mention that the perception of 'otherness' can cause rejection, since it represents an exception in the uniformity of the society in which it appears. Gallaher (2001) describes the way in which socialist regimes established in Europe after WWII imposed educational and social institutions that would speed the creation of the 'ideal culture'. This notion of imposition was also perceived by Ryuko Kubota; she explains the way in which she made the connection between a dichotomized representation of cultures and racism.

> RK: I argued in that article that this kind of cultural dichotomy is a legacy of colonialism, because colonizers came to a new land, and they constructed negative images of the colonized people as opposed to positive images of the colonizer. I made a connection between this cultural dichotomy with colonial discourse, and then argued that the colonial discourse contained elements of racism, because hierarchical racial differences were constructed in colonialism. In a sense, the cultural dichotomy between the images of American and Asian classrooms implies racism.

In effect, colonial discourse seems to be related to racism. Bhabha (1984) sustains that the use of colonial discourse to represent cultural, racial, and historical difference represents a problem of authority. Thus, the colonized 'others' need to be portrayed as inappropriate. Despite the arguments that Kubota used to justify her statement, the article received harsh criticism by other colleagues in the field:

> *RK*: This article was critiqued by Dwight Atkinson, who questioned my reference to racism. He wrote a response by arguing, "are you saying that all TESOL people or applied linguists are racist?" (Atkinson, 2002). I responded to his critique (Kubota, 2002), in which I drew on Gloria Ladson-Billings, an educational researcher who raised issues of racism and advocated critical racist theory. I argued that Atkinson viewed racism only as personal bigotry, or a personal negative treatment of racialized others. However, racism goes beyond that; it may refer to "institutional racism." For example, there are many scholars of color in the field of TESOL and applied linguistics, but not many of them are invited as plenary speakers at major conferences. Also, there is "epistemological racism" or the racial bias in our knowledge system. For example, what kind of literature do you study or cite in your field of research? These distinct types of racism need to be considered when we critically engage in issues of race. Atkinson's response made me realize that whenever we refer to the word racism, people get very upset and tend to view it as an individual problem without looking at a larger picture. That was the time when I thought we needed as a field to address issues of race and racism more directly; it was the beginning of my investigation.

Kubota (2002), calls for applied linguists to recognize the ways in which racism is interwoven inside institutions, and to acknowledge the existence of this issue affecting people who are socially placed in disadvantageous positions because of their perceived race. Kubota's mission is to raise awareness about racism in the TESOL profession with the long-term objective to eradicate it.

Racism and non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs)

Given the fact that the TESOL profession is embraced by people from different ethnicities and nationalities all around the world, we asked Ryuko Kubota what were the ways in which racism affects NNESTs in their performance.

DS & PV: How does racism affect NNESTs' performance?

RK: Of course, not all NNESTs are people of color, but the idea of race intersects with non-native speakerness. For example, if our students compare white NNEST with non-white NNEST, maybe their perceptions are slightly different. They might feel more comfortable with one or the other, although there is a personal preference as well. Rivers and Ross (2013) conducted a study in Japan, in which they asked university students: "What kind of NEST do you prefer as your teacher?" They showed pictures of male and female native speakers from white, black, and Asian backgrounds, and told the students: "These are all NESTs and are all of the same age and the same educational background". The results showed that the students predominantly preferred white NEST. Another study on race and language was conducted by Rubin (1992) in the United States. Rubin had two groups of university students and had them listen to exactly the same lecture audio-recorded by a native speaker of English. In one class, he showed a picture of a female Asian instructor, and in the other class he showed a picture of a white female instructor. After listening to the lecture, both groups were asked to evaluate the instructor. Even though they listened to the same audio, the group that was shown a picture of a white female had better listening comprehension and gave higher evaluation of her perceived professional skills.

As Ryuko Kubota mentions, racism and prejudice seem to affect non-white NNESTs since sometimes they are perceived as less professional and less proficient in English. Research indicates that this phenomenon is replicated as well in Mexican language schools (Lengeling, Mora-Pablo, & Crawford, 2014). Often, the administrators prefer to hire NESTs and students show preference for white NESTs, since they are perceived as the ones that embody the ownership and authority over the language. The issue becomes even more serious when considering that white NESTs are considered more proficient than US-born Mexican-Americans, even if both are actually native speakers (meaning in both cases they have acquired English from birth, although an important number of Mexican-Americans are bilinguals). Nevertheless, one might consider that neither native speakerism nor race are guarantee of language proficiency or appropriate teaching skills. The common beliefs about native speakerism are unquestionably linked to racism.

Practical issues in the EFL context

One of the points that Kubota has discussed during her academic trajectory is the relationship between Westernization and English language education. In other words, it is suggested that the dominance of English and the teaching of English promote Western values and influence not only the Japanese language, but also the culture, identity and views of language. Furthermore, the teaching of English creates cultural and linguistic stereotypes related to English and Japanese (Kubota, 1998). This issue poses a dilemma for practitioners teaching English between motivating students to feel attracted enough to the target culture and at the same time encouraging students to respect and value the local culture. We asked Ryuko Kubota about the alternatives for EFL teachers to find a balance in this matter.

DS & PV: One of the points that you address in your articles is the Westernization of countries through English language. As English teachers, how can we find a balance between motivating students to feel attracted to the target culture, but at the same time respecting the local culture?

RK: I think you need to think about the context. On the one hand, there are groups of students who are really attracted to the culture of the West, which is represented by white native speakers of English. That causes a problem of self-colonization, so we need to deconstruct the notion of English, whiteness, native speakerness, and so forth. At the same time, being exclusively proud of one's own culture could be problematic as well. Especially, in today's political situation in many countries with rising nationalism and religious fundamentalism. I can see that some of these learners who are really rooted and proud of their own culture buy into this nationalistic discourse which can be exclusionary and racist. They may consider

their own group as superior to other cultural minorities in their countries. This situation is very problematic for language educators, since we should promote anti-racism and build a peaceful world. I think we should avoid becoming complicit with such nationalistic discourse. The issue is very complex, but we need to find ways to address these issues in a constructive way, so students can develop more critical understanding of language, culture, and history as well.

In the above excerpt, Kubota addresses the responsibility that language teachers have on promoting culture sensitivity through education. This is a topic worth discussing because teachers are often faced with situations in which students have negative attitudes towards the target language and use their national identity to excuse their lack of interest in learning. In such situation, teachers might make use of Bonny Norton's (2013) construct of investment, which conceives the language learner as having an identity that changes through time and space and that is moldable through social interaction. Under this view, it is possible for language teachers to seek for alternatives to lead the students across a variety of positive learning experiences that might transform their attitudes towards the target language. However, having a strong national identity is not always negative, as Kubota comments:

RK: It depends on where the students are from. If the students are from indigenous communities in Mexico, for example, they are historically positioned at the bottom of raciolinguistic hierarchy, so then being proud of their culture and language is essential for their survival. Nevertheless, that kind of cultural pride is very different from nationalistic discourse among dominant groups that we see in many parts of the world today. These groups' cultures and languages are not in danger of extinction, so the case is different from indigenous groups. We need to have a situated understanding of promoting certain culture and language.

Once again language teachers are placed in a position of power granted by the knowledge of their students' context. Such power can be used in a positive manner if teachers find strategies to evaluate their students' characteristics to design tasks and activities appropriate for them to help them acquire the target language in an enjoyable and yet critical manner. This might result in increasing learners' motivation to continue acquiring an additional language.

The issue of teaching culture

The issue of teaching and learning culture has been widely discussed in previous studies (see Bragaw, 1991; Byram and Morgan, 1994; Grittner, 1990; Moore, 1991). A common belief in this regard is that one cannot teach a language without teaching its culture. However, considering Kubota's work on issues of Westernization and other matters, such as linguistic imperialism, this view should be rethought. As Kubota states, the English language does not belong to a single country. She refers to Kachru's (1990) three-circle models, in which inner circle countries are those where English is spoken as a mother tongue; the outer circle refers to countries where English is has an official status along with other local language(s); and the expanding circle involves the countries in which English is taught as a foreign language. We asked Ryuko Kubota whether teachers should teach target culture and which culture should be considered as representative of the target language, since in the case of English, many countries use this language.

DS & PV: In your opinion, should English teachers teach the target culture in addition to the language in EFL classes? If yes, then which culture should we actually teach since English is spoken all around the world?

RK: It is very difficult to integrate the teaching of culture with English. I think the first thing is to consider the diversity of English. Because English is spoken not only in the inner circle countries, but also in the outer circle and expanding circle countries, we can talk about the diversity of culture. This would be a good approach to think about what cultures we teach. Of course, English originates in England, so we need to talk about where English was originally developed and how it has spread. Then you could talk about the cultures in the inner circle countries, the cultures of colonialized countries, and cultures of all the other countries where English is used. Also consider that even the inner circle countries do not have a single culture—there are so many diverse cultures and languages. For instance, in Canada, multiculturalism is the national policy, so the Canadians embrace diversity of people from different cultures. Addressing linguistic and cultural diversity will keep us from falling into stereotyping or essentializing cultures traditionally attached to English.

Even though English textbooks tend to associate the target language exclusively with the American or British culture, English is widely spoken in many countries either as their first or second language. Kachru and Smith (1985) sustain that "Englishes symbolizes the functional and formal variation in the language, and its international acculturation […] The language belongs to those who use it as their first language or additional language, whether in its standard form or in its localized forms" (p. 210). Therefore, as Kubota argues, teaching culture should consider this diversity of contexts, in which English is spoken, and not only associate it to a specific country.

How to teach culture

Given the fact that English does not belong exclusively to the traditional duality of the UK/US and that it may be associated to a variety of countries worldwide, a new issue arises. We asked Ryuko Kubota how practitioners can approach the teaching of culture.

DS & PV: So how do you think we should incorporate this cultural instruction in the language classes?

RK: As teachers, we can't know all cultures in the world. We might be familiar with the culture of where we are from, but we typically don't know too much about other countries. What we could do is not to focus too much on facts or information about other cultures in our teaching, but rather encourage students to develop skills to find out about different cultures. We can also encourage students to develop attitudes to approach diverse cultures in non-essentialist ways. For example, students can work in small groups to choose a culture and do research about it using English as well as their mother tongue. They can use various information on the Internet. In doing so, they can learn how to gather reliable information. You can encourage students to identify multiple perspectives to develop an in-depth understanding of the culture. In that way, students can avoid cultural stereotyping and gain a complex understanding of the culture. This also constitutes a broader educational process.

In the above excerpt, Kubota provides practical strategies to involve students in developing the knowledge of different cultures while learning English. Paige, Jorstad, Siaya, Klein, and Colby (2000) argue that "Culture learning is the process of acquiring the culture-specific and culture-general knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for effective communication and interaction with individuals from other cultures. This process engages the learner cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively" (p.50). This definition is closely related to aforementioned Kubota's view on the language teachers' responsibility for promoting mutual communication and understanding among learners around the world. It also relates to previously discussed Norton's (2013) view of investment. What we could conclude regarding this matter is that what we language educators do is more than teaching the lexis, grammar, or phonology of a language. Our job goes beyond metalinguistic aspects and touches issues that are involved in essential aspects of human communication, understanding and empathy.

ELT in Canada and Japan

Research on the topic of NESTs vs. NNESTs in the area of ELT usually indicates that NESTs are preferred for the position of English language teacher. For example, Vodopija-Krstanovic (2011) discusses the Croatian context and points out that native speakers are favored in Croatian language schools. Moreover, the author argues that such a preference of NESTs leads to the NNESTs' feeling of professional marginalization. We decided to ask Kubota about the situation of ELT in Canada and Japan which are her two most familiar contexts. To better understand Canadian language education, Ryuko begins with a short historical overview of Canadian French-English bilingualism and multiculturalism:

RK: Well, if you look at the demographics of Canada, it is still predominantly white in terms of racial background of the people, even though you see a great deal of diversity in large cities like Vancouver or Toronto. We do have a national policy of multiculturalism, but there are racial tensions. The predominance of whiteness hidden in multiculturalism is related to the bilingual policy. If you are interested, you can take a look at Eve Haque's (2012) work. Haque examined documents produced during the process of establishing bilingual and multicultural policies in Canada; namely, French and English were designated as official languages in 1969, and then the official policy of multiculturalism was announced in 1971. Around that time Canada had to deal with the nationalist movement in Quebec. Quebec, as the only French province in Canada, wanted to become independent from Canada. As a strategy to unite the whole nation, the national government established the bilingual policy. Around the same time, there was an influx of non-European immigrants. The new immigrants didn't really fit in this English/French binary.

> The Canadian government had to explore how to integrate them into Canada. Thus, multicultural policy was announced in order to create national unity by recognizing immigrants' culture. But the new immigrants were linguistically assimilated into the official languages.

Kubota explains that English-French bilingualism was implemented in order to appease both English-speaking and French-speaking populations in Canada. The policy of multiculturalism was established within this bilingual framework to integrate new immigrants into Canadian both socially and linguistically. Multiculturalism in Canada generates the national ethos non-racist. This is how Kubota perceives the issues of race in Canada, particularly in language teaching:

> RK: Issues of race are relegated into issues of culture and language. In general, people talk about cultural or linguistic difference, but they avoid issues of race. In Canada, the multicultural policy makes people believe, "We are tolerant, we are multicultural, and thus we are different from the United States." Canada is seen as peaceful, multicultural and tolerant. Because of this national ethos, people are typically nice to each other, and individual racism is rather hidden. People usually don't say racist things in front of you. However, you see instances of institutional racism. For example, my university enrolls many students of color, particularly Asian students. However, instructors are predominantly white. Here you see institutional racism.

This comment implies that white native-speaking English teachers may be favored in Canada, in spite of its image of a country tolerant to multiculturalism and immigrants.

Regarding Japan, Kubota mentioned, "Private language schools tend to hire white native speakers of English." As an example, she shared with us one anecdote:

> *RK*: I was communicating with a Japanese teacher of English in Japan. I observed his lesson, in which he used very innovative activities and techniques. I was quite impressed. The topic of his lesson was foreigners in Japan, how foreigners understand Japan, their views of Japan, and so forth. As such, he used the word 'foreigner' many times while showing a video. After the lesson, I asked: "To you, who is a foreigner?". He thought for a while and answered: "Anybody without an Asian face". So, a foreigner is non-Asian. But foreigners in Japan could be Chinese, Taiwanese, Korean, or other Asians. This perception is problematic, although it's not uncommon.

This excerpt suggests that Japanese people perceive foreigners as individuals who do not look Asian, although there are many non-Japanese nationalities with "Asian" appearance. What is more, a native speaker of English may look Asian due to immigration to an English-speaking country. Apparently, race seems to play a role in determining the legitimacy of English teachers as professionals.

Who is a native speaker of English?

During all this discussion about race, NESTs and NNESTs, a simple question arose: Who is a native speaker?

> *RK*: That is a very difficult question to answer because there is so much diversity of people in terms of linguistic background. So, it's hard to define who is a native speaker and who is a non-native speaker. You can read an article by Faez (2011) published in the *Journal of Language, Identity and Education*. She focused on pre-service English teachers in Canada from diverse ethnic backgrounds and asked them if they would consider themselves as a native speaker or a non-native speaker. Then she asked instructors in the teacher education program to identify whether these pre-service teachers were native speakers or non-native speakers and evaluate their language proficiency. It turned out that those two sets of perceptions didn't necessarily overlap. For example, a teacher from India considered himself to be a native speaker of English. But his instructors did not judge him as such. Although Faez did not mention issues of race, this has to do with reverse linguistic stereotypes as seen in the experiment with two different student groups that listened to the same audio recording (Rubin, 1992). So, visual input actually triggers people to perceive non-native speakerness or native speakerness. That's something that we need to problematize with our students and our colleagues as well.

This excerpt made us realize that in reality it is not as easy question as it may seem. To show this complexity, Kubota illustrates the study by Faez (2011). She states that one's own perception and the perceptions of others about being a native or non-native speaker do not always overlap. Moreover, our physical appearance also influences how we are identified with (non)-native speakerness. Kubota considers race in TESOL a serious issue and believes that we need to discuss it with our students and colleagues. So, what does she

advise us to do to eradicate prejudice related to race and racial issues in language teaching? You can find her recommendations in the following section.

How to improve language teaching regarding the issues of racism

Kubota mentions some theoretical and practical implications of her research that can help dispel the stereotype of the relationship between whiteness and native speakerness in TESOL.

> *RK*: We need to continue to do our research on these issues, but I think the important thing is to communicate our research results to teachers, administrators, parents and students. With regard to students we teach, we can try to raise their awareness in the classroom. As for administrators and other colleagues, they don't necessarily read our research journals. So how do we disseminate our research findings to them? I think we need to engage in more public scholarship—that is, writing to general audiences and try to enter into a dialogue with them and talk about all these issues in an accessible way. We tend to use theoretical frameworks and sometimes very abstract notions, but people don't really understand these abstract terms and notions. I think we need to communicate our ideas to the general audience in the ways they understand. Parents are key players. They influence their children about whitenesss and native speakerness. And they are the ones who pay the tuition to send their children to these schools. If they demand white native speakers, the administrators feel that they have to do that. So, we definitely need to talk to these people.

The main point that Kubota suggests in this excerpt is communicating our ideas and explaining our research to the general audience, including school administrators, teachers, students and parents, in an accessible way. She especially emphasizes parents because institutions cater for their needs and try to fulfil parents' demands concerning language education of their children. In the next excerpt, Kubota suggests some practical ideas for English teachers to implement in order to raise their students' awareness of race and native speakerness:

> *RK*: We need to be open to different ideas and we need to be constantly reflective on our own ideas and practices. We should also try to connect theory and practice. As language teachers, we need to think of fun activities that students enjoy, and at the same time address these difficult questions. To do so, what we do doesn't have to be a boring lecture, but rather can be something enjoyable. You might identify racially and linguistically diverse groups from the community and talk about what languages they use or what cultural practices they follow. You could also invite guest speakers from the immediate community. You can also utilize technology to connect your students to students at a different school in a different city or country and have them communities with each other. So, I think we need to first start developing awareness and to constantly reflect on our own ideas and practices and put our ideas into practice with the students collaboratively by using and various resources available.

How are we doing?

To conclude the interview, we asked Kubota if she sees any progress overall regarding the issues of racism and native speakerness in TESOL.

> *RK*: I think, very slowly; some professionals have become aware of these issues. When they become decision makers, they will be aware of whom to hire. But things move very slowly and sometimes there are setbacks. So, I think we need to remind ourselves that this is a long-term project and to constantly remind others about the importance of the issues.

Thus, the above excerpt suggests that Kubota sees some improvement. However, in order not to step back we need to continue working on this topic and constantly communicate these issues to other people. We personally can also see some improvement in our profession. We have noticed that more administrators in Mexican language schools require teacher training courses from their candidates for a position as an English teacher. Nonetheless, many of them still favor native speakers and this means that the problem remains unsolved yet.

Conclusion

In this article, we discussed the interview with Dr. Ryuko Kubota who currently works as a professor-researcher at the University of British Columbia, Canada. Our talk focused on the issues of racism and (non-)native speakerism in TESOL. Some of the main points addressed by Kubota are institutional racism, specifically in Japan and Canada, and Westernization of countries. In educational establishments, native-

speaking English teachers are usually preferred by administrators, students and parents. This affects NNESTs' career advancement because they are perceived as less professional in spite of good knowledge of the language and advanced pedagogical training. Westernization is produced as a result of the dominance of English which promotes Western values in culture, identity and views of the language. In order to avoid this "self-colonization", teachers are responsible for reconceptualizing the notions of the English language and its native speakers.

Concerning racism in ELT, it implies the perceived relationship between native speakerness and whiteness. To dispel this stereotype, Kubota suggests addressing diversity of cultures, people, and language by applying interactive activities in English classes. Furthermore, she believes we should communicate our research to the general audience in an accessible manner in order to raise their awareness of these problematic issues that considerably influence language teaching.

To conclude, there is no one general and correct answer to the questions discussed above. However, we are certain that racism in language teaching does exist, and we need to continue working hard to improve the situation in TESOL. Only by developing awareness among teachers, administrators, students and their parents will we be able to make a change.

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