

Article

“Aren’t We All Complicit?”: A Commentary on Multiple Faces of Race and Language in English Language Education

Phan Le Ha^a 

Abstract

This paper reviews recent work on race and language ideologies in Asia, aiming to a more complex understanding on the subject that avoids determinism and dichotomous thinking. The first part of the paper discusses current work on English language teaching in Japan, and concludes that greater emphasis on teacher agency is needed. The second part offers ethnographic vignettes of scenarios in which race plays sometimes a surprising role in shaping interactions and exclusions. These scenarios focus on the implications of the scholars’s commitment to social justice in ideological and institutional structures in which prejudice is reproduced and relayed in situations that involve multiple Asian identities and positionalities.

Keywords: English language teaching, English as a foreign language, Race, Native speakerism, Language ideology.

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^aUniversiti Brunei Darussalam, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah Institute of Education/International and Comparative Education Research Group. Kampong Tungku, Brunei.
E-mail: leha.phan@ubd.edu.bn

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Somewhere to Start

I would like to make it clear right from the beginning that this commentary article is written in a way not often seen in academic writing, in case there is an expectation of conformity to conventional norms. I am approaching the topic from an angle largely not seen in the existing literature. And I would like this angle to be regarded as being constructively thought provoking, as I am going to lay down in the paragraphs that follow.

So much has been written on the inter-related issues of race/racism/racial discrimination, native speakerism, language and social justice in English language teaching (ELT), Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), (Applied) Linguistics, and education more broadly (see for example, DE COSTA *et al.*, 2021; DOS SANTOS; WINDLE, 2021; GERALD, 2022; HOLIDAY, 2005; KUBOTA, 2017, 2020; MAGRO, 2023; NASCIMENTO; WINDLE, 2021; SMALLS *et al.*, 2021; WINDLE *et al.*, 2020). So, what is left for me to discuss and how can I offer something different, refreshing and even novel? I am confronted by these questions whenever invited/asked to speak and/or write on this topic. The same applies to the writing of this commentary article.

Given the abundant literature on race, language (English), native-speakerism and Whiteness, I am not going to provide another piece affirming the importance of identifying, addressing, and interrogating these constructs and the many contested discourses and practices underlying them. Rather, I am going to invite readers to ponder with me on aspects and observations that may not have received sufficient scholarly attention. Readers may not agree with me but I hope what is shown in the rest of the commentary sheds some light on the subtlety and nuances of the on-going debates on race and native-speakerism in ELT, TESOL, Applied Linguistics and education in general.

I started to write this commentary right after I had been invited to give a paper and to participate in the conference “*Issues of Race and Native Speakerism in ELT*” (<https://jalt.org/event/kyoto>, accessed on 19 December 2022.) organized by the Kyoto Japan Association of Language Teachers (JALT) in January 2021. At the conference, I was introduced to varied perspectives and theoretical lenses on this topic. These perspectives were offered by the other invited speakers, who were Ryuko Kubota (Critical Approaches to Race, Racism and Antiracism in English Language Teaching), Vijay Ramjattan (Raciolinguistic Enregisterment and Aesthetic Labour in ELT), JPB Gerald (Worth the Risk: Decent(e) ring Whiteness in English Language Teaching), and Robert J. Lowe (The ‘Native Speaker’ Frame in English Language Teaching). These perspectives and lenses, later, were echoed, to varied extent, in other papers presented by ELT teachers at the conference. These ELT teachers were teachers of English in Japan, and they came from different countries and from varied educational, ethnic, racial, cultural, linguistic, economic, gender and experiential backgrounds.

Then, not long after the JALT 2021 conference, I was invited to read and endorse the manuscript entitled "*Multiculturalism, Language, and Race in English Education in Japan: Agency, Pedagogy, and Reckoning*" conceptualized and edited by Gregory Paul Glasgow (forthcoming, Candlin and Mynard Publishing, Japan). As evident in that volume, the mobilities of ELT teachers going through Japan are hugely diverse and well established. Like what was covered in the abovementioned conference, in the edited volume issues of race and native speakerism were pronounced clearly and loudly; and the antagonists included a range of interrelated actors and factors, namely 'nativeness', 'the West' and what comes with it, colourism, and 'the racist, closed-minded, and monolithic Japan'.

Both the JALT 2021 conference and Glasgow's forthcoming collection offer me much food for thought. They uniformly showcase numerous ways in which the submission by multiple actors (i.e., the general public, policy makers, institutions, schools, language centers, the media, administrators, students, teachers, scholars, parents, locals, expatriates, entertainers, etc) to Western education and societies, Western-leaning native-English-speaking models and the aspiring and idealized 'West' remains rather intense at every level in Japan. Such submission stubbornly persists, despite the numerous efforts to dismantle it among scholars, practitioners, both Japanese and non-Japanese in varied disciplines for several decades (see for example AMUNDRUD, 2008; KUBOTA, 2020, 2018, 2004, 1998; HASHIMOTO, 2000; HOUGHTON; RIVERS, 2013; NONAKA, 2018; RIVERS; ZOTZMANN, 2017; RAPPLEYE, 2020; STEWART, 2018; TAKAYAMA, 2021; etc).

I can say that my commentary, to a great extent, was encouraged by both the JALT 2021 conference and Glasgow's forthcoming volume. As I shall show, I may not necessarily agree with all the points and arguments put forth in these venues; I, however, appreciate the richness of perspectives, positionalities, and theoretical underpinnings. Likewise, I am humbled by the collective well-articulated ambition to engage with race, native-speakerism, language and power issues that manifest themselves in so many different forms and intensities.

Unpacking Layers

I now would like to take a closer look at some of the perspectives and theoretical lenses I have been introduced to in the above platforms. At the JALT 2021 conference, Gerald, for example, drew on the concept of *pathologization*, which is often associated with medical diagnosis of abnormality or disorder, to pinpoint the inherent 'responsibility' attributed to 'native speakers' in relation to the Other in the ELT industry in general and the domain of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in particular. Gerald is right to assert that without naming and addressing this very problem, critiques of 'native speakers' go nowhere but in circles. So, what is the responsibility put onto the shoulder of the 'native speaker'?

Many, indeed: their responsibility to save, to rescue, to correct, to fix, to be a role model, to be perfect and ideal for, and to leverage the cultural Other, in this case the English language learner and teacher who not only appreciate this savior responsibility but also willingly allow themselves to be saved. This very foundational belief is perhaps what the field as a whole ought to counter altogether.

As well as perpetuating the *savior responsibility* of the 'native speaker', ELT has also been guilty of projecting, promoting and harboring whiteness, as Gerald maintains and further affirms in his authored book (GERALD, 2022). In particular, Gerald discusses and explains intricate relationships of whiteness, race, native speaker and power, especially in the ways power is positioned alongside its proximity to race and language in ELT and EFL. Because of these very two elements, ELT and EFL have continued to be condemned for overt and covert racism, native-speakerism, and the resultant power hierarchy between the (post)colonial Self and Other – the very point that Vijay Ramjattan also put forth in his speech at the JALT 2021 conference. Both Gerald and Ramjattan attribute the toxic racism, native-speakerism and whiteness mentality mostly to colonization; and hence, Gerald argues, as long as *pathologization* and *whiteness* remain desired for and fed by needs, wants and the very mechanism of ELT and EFL, the act of colonizing persists and is legitimized and approved by many actors.

Taking a different but related standpoint, Robert Lowe, in his JALT 2021 conference speech, examined native speakerism and the native-speaker frame in ELT. He critiques to the very core of this fundamental lingering problem in ELT and TESOL. He makes it explicit that research must focus on both the obvious surface-level symptoms of native speakerism and what he calls the “*base assumptions*” through which the ideology is operated and kept alive. What may such base assumptions point to? They correspond to the very point that Gerald argues, which is the assumed and assigned role of the native speaker as the savior who saves, rescues, teaches, corrects and fixes the cultural Other in terms of language, accuracy, fluency, meaning making, cultural knowledge representing, motivation, and perfection, to name a few. When the base assumptions about the native speaker discussed by Lowe correspond to the savior responsibility assigned to the native speaker as shown by Gerald, the power of the native speaker gets strengthened and continues. And, indeed, the examples Lowe shows offer very slim possibilities regarding Japanese teacher trainees' changes of perceptions regarding the persistence of the native speaker model, be it associated with Whiteness, Western cultures and societies, or speaker-hood.

Admittedly, at the JALT 2021 conference I found myself taken on a seemingly no-return train to a rather dark, racist and inherently discriminatory ELT land, as the speakers and participants were revealing, discussing, criticizing, commenting on and reflecting upon layers and layers of problems underlying the ELT industry and Japan's ELT as a

focus context. Thankfully, right when there seemed to be no easy way out for such persistence did I see some light at the end of the tunnel as I read Glasgow's manuscript. I was made hopeful by illuminating and refreshing data and new interpretations and new conceptualizations that were not pre-determined and pre-framed by existing race-laden arguments and scholarship.

To me, the collection put together by Glasgow brings a wave of fresh air to the rather gloomy picture and theorization of race, racism and native-speakerism in ELT in general and in Japan in particular, as collectively shown by Gerald, Lowe and Ramjattan. Although many chapters in Gregory's collection point to the disheartening reality in ELT, they also demonstrate ELT teachers' agency and determination to make change and fight back, whether against the system, the many problematic ideologies, the hegemony underlying 'the West', nativespeakerism, Whiteness, and the many existing race-biased and speakerhood-biased policies and practices. Dealing with and recognizing their own perceptions, prejudices and fears that ELT teachers have projected against themselves and others is an important step to move out of the race vicious circle in much scholarship.

Are 'Racists' only White and/or Western of Some Kind?

Indeed, educational studies, ELT, TESOL, and (Applied) Linguistics have continued to see energetic discussion regarding and engagement with issues on language (English in particular), race, speaker-hood, ethnicity, nationality, and Whiteness, among others. The JALT 2021 conference and the edited volume by Gregory Paul Glasgow that I have mentioned above are vivid examples of such energy, as well as strong reminders of the need for actions from all parties for a more equitable, just, and inclusive TESOL globally, Japan included. I also wonder what else is needed, and what else could be done. Maybe we need to take the above question more seriously and more directly, because there is much more to the story, as I shall show.

Studies such as those included in Gregory's edited volume and others like Jenkins' (2019), though modest in scale and scope, are much needed as they examine the core of the 'race' problem in contexts, settings and social domains beyond the immediate Western world. Very importantly, these studies simultaneously debunk the myth that Asian-background teachers and Asian societies and cultures outside of Japan are by default unwelcome and discriminated against in Japanese classrooms by Japanese administrators, recruiters, teachers and students, and also by White, European teachers brought to Japan.

Nonetheless, I do not want to suggest that Asian societies or any human societies are free from their own deeply-entrenched prejudices and seemingly racist ideas. The many references cited in this commentary so far provide ample evidence for this argument in the case of Japan. How about other Asian contexts? Moving to China, one can

see many resemblances though they can be expressed and projected in different manners and forms. Take for example, the entanglements of race, language, power, whiteness, and the savior responsibility of 'Western' native speakers vividly captured in an account provided of the experiences Jasmine, an African-American teacher teaching in an international school in China. The story of Jasmine was featured in "How George Floyd's death changed my Chinese students", an article written by Megha Mohan published on BBC on 29 June 2020. Likewise, as shown in this article, Jasmine's experience in China is also shaped by the everyday realities of Chinese parents' low opinions of Blacks and Africans that then get passed onto their children who are Jasmine's students.

I take the liberty to include below a rather long verbatim extract from the original story about Jasmine so readers can see for themselves.

In Guangzhou, Jasmine has been teaching English literature and language to students aged 14 to 16. Keen to discuss black history with them, she nonetheless made a decision to steer clear of stories about slavery to begin with...

Most of the students took in what Jasmine was saying and asked pertinent questions. But some resisted.

They queried her stories about African wealth and civilisation. They also took issue with the autobiography of African American anti-slavery writer Frederick Douglass... It felt like fiction, one student said. Another asked if a white teacher could come along to corroborate what Jasmine was teaching them.

Jasmine was stung but she forced herself to think how best to handle this with sensitivity to her students and the new culture she was in.

She asked some of her white colleagues to help. They did. They spoke to the pupils and challenged them to think about why it was that they couldn't accept the word of a black teacher.

When the students returned to school after China's lockdown ended in April there was a tangible shift.

... What happened to George Floyd was so disturbing that it had got them thinking about anti-black influences in their own upbringing, they said.

Awkwardly, they began confessing that their families had talked about black people being of lower intellect, and dangerous. It's against Chinese culture to go against what your parents believe, but here they were witnessing a seismic global moment.

"Am I going to believe what I've been told by my parents, who have had almost no interactions with black people?" they said, addressing Jasmine.

"Or am I going to believe what I am seeing on a phone, and in front of me with you?" ...

I hope by now readers may have already come up with some answers to the question I have raised in the heading of this section. In what follows, I continue to complicate the several established views and lenses discussed earlier in this commentary. Specifically, I shall leave readers with varied accounts I have collected from teachers of diverse backgrounds who have taught English in Asian and Gulf countries, as well as from TESOL/ELT scholars and researchers located in English-

speaking Western countries. Through these accounts, I show that many deeply-rooted perceptions and discourses associated with native speakers of English (i.e. Westerners, the idea of the West and the idea of Westerners), race (including White, Black, Asian), ethnicity (for example, Malay, Chinese) and religion (for instance, Islam, Christianity) continue to travel, invade different professional TESOL/ELT spaces and haunt teachers themselves. Many TESOL/ELT professionals remain trapped in these perceptions and discourses, as victims, offenders, both, or somewhere in between. After all, *aren't we all complicit?* Yes, complicity is on the move, too.

"Aren't We All Complicit?": Multiple Faces of Race and Language in ELT

The episodes presented below are crafted from the data collected for my several long-term research agendas on academic mobilities, internationalization of higher education, and TESOL/ELT teachers in global contexts. Issues related to professional identity formation, values in teaching, intercultural interactions, and cultural politics of language, culture and identity are included in the data.

Episode 1: Evy is everywhere, in every one of us

"I'm having a big headache trying to figure what to do with that house. Lots of things involved", Evy sighed.

"Oh, why don't you stay in that house then? You've said you need a bigger place?", I asked.

"No way I'd ever stay there. Africans and Indians have moved into the area and occupied it", Evy replied.

"What's wrong with that?", I continued.

"Troubles and problems, of course", Evy got a bit agitated by my question.

"How do you know? Anyone you know living there?"

"No, it's just that I don't want to live in areas with Africans and Indians", Evy seemed to realize the awkwardness of the conversation.

Evy was a TESOL professional herself, a person of color by definition. Evy used to regard native speakers of English highly and would desire to be like them, when she was working as an English language teacher in her home country in Asia. Then, through her further education and research in an English-speaking Western country, she started to be aware of the power and new identities enabled by much critical scholarship on TESOL and English language – those identities that she and many others could cultivate, claim and enjoy. She is no longer confined to the previous non-native speaker/teacher of English label. She has indeed excelled in her profession and has been teaching students about these transformations and ideas, and inspired them to feel empowered. Like many other TESOL professionals, Evy gets furious about any negative judgements, prejudices and stereotypes made about non-native teachers

of English who are also non-White. She says she is often vocal about any injustices relating to race, language, culture, and ethnicity.

I find this biography of Evy at odds with her own refusal to live in an area she perceives to be problematic because of the presence of Africans and Indians. The inspiring Evy is also the seemingly 'racist' or 'race-biased' Evy, the same person. And Evy is everywhere in our field, and perhaps in every one of us.

Episode 2: There are too many Lins, Michelles, Nicks, Cams and Rachels

In a meeting room in a university in an English-speaking Western country, a group of academics were discussing PhD applications from a good range of candidates, domestically and internationally. There was one particular application that didn't receive any discussion and was quickly marked 'reject'. It was almost like a consensus among the committee that that application wasn't worthy of any conversation. The selection committee was comprised of members of diverse backgrounds in terms of gender, racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic and experiential backgrounds.

The application was from a candidate, who, by the information provided in the CV, was a teacher of English from a Muslim country in the Middle East. The candidate had obtained all previous education in the home country. The proposed topic was relevant to the program, and the quality of writing was decent. The student did not apply for scholarships or any financial support.

Then, out of shock and disappointment, one member of the selection committee disrupted the consensus.

"Why did you all reject that application? What's wrong with that?", Flower raised her voice in irritation.

"We don't know anything about the university where the candidate graduated", Lin was the first to respond. [Flower challenged in silence: The same can be said about many other applicants. No one knows all universities and colleges in the US, in China or even in a much smaller country like Thailand or Jordan. So, does this mean you can reject an applicant by virtue of your own ignorance and lack of desire to even want to check to learn something about that university?]

"We have no expertise on that part of the world", Michelle added. [Flower disputed: You don't, but I do. Why didn't you at least check first? I've worked with so many students from that region. That you don't have any students from there and don't have expertise on it doesn't mean you are the norm.]

"I don't know if the candidate is genuine in applying to our program", Nick and Cam continued, rather indifferently. [Flower found this answer ridiculous: So are you certain about the rest of the candidates? Show me how you can be so sure?]

"I don't think I'd want to offer myself to a research topic that I have no clues about", Rachel affirmed. [Flower got impatient: but you have just offered yourself to work with a candidate from Japan whose proposed topic has little to do with your expertise and research. What's the difference, tell me?]

Oh well. The reasons given above by Lin, Michelle, Nick, Cam and Rachel had nothing to do with the applicant' merit or his/her/their proposed topic. Rather, the reasons uniformly pointed to biases towards and indifference in a specific religion (Muslim/Islam), and the place where the candidate comes from (the Middle East). Flower was the only academic in that meeting who challenged the decision. Flower became disillusioned about the many mottos and social justice aspirations and commitments expressed by many individuals working in education in general and in language education in particular. After all, there are too many Lins, Michelles, Nicks, Cams and Rachels around. They come from diverse (ethnic) backgrounds and embody different physical looks, but share very similar biases and prejudices against Muslims and the Middle East.

Episode 3: "Anyone is fine, but no Muslim examiners, please!"

This excerpt is from Ann, a TESOL scholar working with many Muslim students in her decades-long career.

"Ali and I had a long conversation regarding potential examiners for his thesis. Ali told me about his difficult and unpleasant interactions with a number of TESOL academics/scholars who are of Muslim background but do not necessarily practice it or follow Sunni rather than Shia. He named these individuals as Rakesh, Othman, and Mukti. He said there are many people like that in the profession of English language teaching and TESOL, both teachers and scholars. He was explicit about his educational and family background and positionality in his thesis; and hence, he would not feel at ease to send his thesis to any examiners of Muslim background, because he was concerned about their own biases towards him and where he comes from.

Ann asked him: "All of you are internationally mobile researchers and scholars, who have been promoting the idea of mutual respect, diversity and inclusivity regardless of difference, so why don't you have faith in those potential examiners?"

Ali replied: "Preaching an ideal and a vision is different from practicing it. I am still the minority even in the global world of Muslims. We're TESOL scholars but we're also other things, and I just want to be safe in this case. We can send my thesis to any examiners, native speakers, White males and females, Christian, Buddhist, Jewish all fine, but no Muslim examiners please".

The above narrative between Ali and Ann has taught me about biases and prejudices among our TESOL and ELT professionals and scholars – those biases that are borne out of religion and nationality and may impact the evaluation and examination of scholarly work. These biases may not have anything to do with the normative racial issues that we often talk about and condemn in our work and life, but they are also running deep in our behaviors, manners, practices and interactions towards others. Yes, there are many Alis and there are even more Rakeshes, Othmans and Muktis. They may all condemn any acts

of racism against them as people of color and as Muslims, but they may still carry their own religious and national biases among their own vast community of Muslims.

Talking about race is like a by default mandate. The same can be said about criticizing and resisting racism from the White. But, confronting complicit biases and actions that may have much more profound consequences and effects on individuals in the profession of ELT and TESOL is so rarely brought up and acted upon. I guess the echo from Ali's concern will continue to be unaddressed and overlooked by the normative racial issues. Ali, after all, appeared to have more confidence in a 'native speaker' White scholar examining his scholarly work, and he has the same confidence in scholars of color and of other religions than Muslims. So, to what extent can we talk about race here? Race is not an isolated variable.

When the Whole Field is On the Move: Thoughts for Further Engagement

I would like to reiterate that writing or commenting on issues of race and language is a daunting task, particularly when ELT is ever more complex and diverse with the increasing transnational mobilities of English language teachers (see BARNAWI; AHMED, 2021; DE COSTA *et al.*, 2021; JAIN *et al.*, 2021; PARK, 2018; PHAN; BARNAWI, 2022; POOLE, 2021). Accompanied with such mobilities are multifaceted questions of race, religion, skin colour, nationality, language, work politics, and scholarly and professional perspectives that all come together in nuanced ways that invite rigorous examination. As teachers move across borders, they bring with them certain identities and worldviews, knowledge, ideas, pedagogies and other socio-cultural and linguistic resources and prejudices. At the same time, they constantly respond to varied, even contradicting, demands, needs, expectations and judgements of students, peers, institutions, and the ELT profession.

While all these mobilities and processes are happening, pains, gains, and uncertainties experienced by many teachers as well as the roles place politics, institutional politics and personal politics play in shaping such experiences are often sidelined. These very on-the-ground realities are revealed, demonstrated and painstakingly discussed in my co-authored book (PHAN; BARNAWI, 2022), which is informed by the data collected over five years with more than 200 international TESOL teachers of hugely diverse backgrounds teaching in Saudi Arabia. It is important to note that the international TESOL teachers we have referred to in our book were internationally mobile, motivated, diverse in training, experience and expertise, spoke different languages, and aspired to be the best teachers they could be. Many of them were experienced teachers and highly qualified with recognized credentials.

In this book, we identify and discuss how these teachers were faced by and exercised many within-religion biases and prejudices (e.g., within Islam). In the same vein, we show these teachers often found themselves affected by varying personal, collective and institutional biases and politics involving religion, nationality, and what English one speaks. These teachers' everyday, on-the-ground realities, as we argue, have complicated many existing grand narratives and discourses about race, native-speakerism, and the cultural politics of English and ELT. They call for novel ways to interpret and engage with nuanced realities that may be far from wishful scholarly thinking and outlook. Likewise, in our book (*ibid*) we show the limits of negotiability at multiple levels (i.e., scholarly, pedagogical, policy and identity positioning) when it comes to challenging deemed problematic classroom practices, curricula, hiring, and the application/implementation of progressive ideas in TESOL, ELT and Applied Linguistics such as translanguaging, World Englishes, and English as a Lingua Franca. We argue that it is not that the fields of ELT, TESOL and Applied Linguistics have not done enough in terms of fighting against many troubling and toxic matters and with regards to raising teachers' awareness and inspiring them to make change for a better world. Rather, we are convinced that among many reasons we can name and claim, actors and agents we can blame, discourses we can shame, and actions we can tame, there is a lame problem that does not get sufficiently defamed in much existing literature. Yes, this problem is the persistent disconnect between scholarly literature and advocacy scholarship in TESOL/ELT and what is happening on the ground – an issue that I have also discussed elsewhere (PHAN, 2016).

I hope by now readers can draw their own conclusion regarding complicity in the varied accounts provided above. Likewise, up to this point, I hope that readers can see that the over-emphasis on Western colonization as an almost absolute cause for race-related issues, discrimination and social injustices in education in general and ELT in particular has not recognized and has hence overshadowed many problematic social perceptions and prejudices held in Asian societies about Blacks and Africans. By the same token, the over-emphasis on white native speakers and on 'the West' has also buried the need to examine the racist mentality deeply rooted in the psyche of many communities, hence legitimizing their racist actions. In the same vein, other equally important factors such as religion, membership, social status, class, local and global politics, institutional and professional politics, and personal politics are not called upon (see PHAN; BARNAWI, 2022 for more elaborate discussion). Therefore, unpacking race, language and education needs to go beyond the said overemphases. This also means to decenter much scholarship on colonization and its associated whiteness.

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“Não somos todos cúmplices?": um comentário sobre as múltiplas faces de raça e linguagem no ensino da língua inglesa

Resumo

Este artigo é uma revisão de literatura de trabalhos recentes sobre ideologias de raça e linguagem na Ásia, em busca de uma compreensão mais aprofundada do assunto e que evite determinismos e pensamentos dicotômicos. A primeira parte do artigo discute trabalhos atuais sobre o ensino de inglês no Japão e conclui que é necessária maior ênfase no protagonismo dos professores. A segunda parte oferece vinhetas etnográficas de cenários nos quais a raça desempenha um papel às vezes surpreendente no desenvolvimento de interações e exclusões. Esses cenários demonstram as implicações do comprometimento de acadêmicos com a justiça social em estruturas ideológicas e institucionais nas quais os preconceitos são veiculados e reproduzidos em situações que envolvem múltiplas identidades e posicionamentos asiáticos.

Palavras-chave: *Ensino da língua inglesa, inglês como língua estrangeira, raça, falante nativo, ideologia da língua.*