E-Journal Einzelbeitrag
von: Irene Heidt

Critical Language Teacher Education: Unsettling Language and Race/ism in a 10th Grade EFL Classroom with Teacher Candidates

aus: Zeitschrift für Fremdsprachenforschung 1/2025
(ZFF2501W)
Erscheinungsjahr: 2025
Seiten: 73–89
DOI: 10.3278/ZFF2501W006

Im Beitrag werden erste Ergebnisse eines Lehrforschungsprojekts vorgestellt, das darauf zielt, Möglichkeiten und Grenzen einer (rassismus-)kritischen Englischlehrer*innenbildung auszuloten. Lehramtsstudierende konzipierten im Rahmen eines Seminars der Englischdidaktik ein Schulprojekt zum Thema race und Rassismus und führten dieses mit einer Schulklasse im 10. Jahrgang durch. Dieser Prozess wurde qualitativ empirisch begleitet: Der von den Studierenden durchgeführte Unterricht wurde ethnographisch beobachtet, es wurden semistrukturierte Interviews mit den Studierenden durchgeführt und schriftliche Autoethnographien erhoben. Der Beitrag geht insbesondere auf die Unterrichtserfahrungen der Lehramtsstudentin Frieda ein, die im Rahmen des Schulprojekts das Ziel verfolgte, die Ko-Naturalisierung von Sprache und Rassismus zu hinterfragen. Während sie die Englischlernenden zur kritischen Diskurspartizipation ermutigte, stieß sie auf Grenzen rassismuskritischen Sprechens im schulischen Kontext. In der kritischen Diskursanalyse ihrer Autoethnographien wird herausgearbeitet, wie sie mit Momenten der Ungewissheit umging. Ausgehend von diesen ersten empirischen Einsichten sollen dekoloniale Potenziale von Englischunterricht diskutiert und Implikationen für eine kritische Fremdsprachenlehrer*innenbildung abgeleitet werden.

Schlagworte: critical language teacher education; anti-racist language teaching; decolonization
Zitiervorschlag: *Heidt, Irene (2024). Critical Language Teacher Education: Unsettling Language and Race/ism in a 10th Grade EFL Classroom with Teacher Candidates. Zeitschrift für Fremdsprachenforschung, 36(1), 73–89. Bielefeld: wbv Publikation. https://doi.org/10.3278/ZFF2501W006*

Critical Language Teacher Education: Unsettling Language and Race/ism in a 10th Grade EFL Classroom with Teacher Candidates

Irene Heidt[1]

Abstract

Im Beitrag werden erste Ergebnisse eines Lehrforschungsprojekts vorgestellt, das darauf zielt, Möglichkeiten und Grenzen einer (rassismus-)kritischen Englischlehrer:innenbildung auszuloten. Lehramtsstudierende konzipierten im Rahmen eines Seminars der Englischdidaktik ein Schulprojekt zum Thema *race* und Rassismus und führten dieses mit einer Schulklasse im 10. Jahrgang durch. Dieser Prozess wurde qualitativ empirisch begleitet: Der von den Studierenden durchgeführte Unterricht wurde ethnographisch beobachtet, es wurden semistrukturierte Interviews mit den Studierenden durchgeführt und schriftliche Autoethnographien erhoben. Der Beitrag geht insbesondere auf die Unterrichtserfahrungen der Lehramtsstudentin Frieda ein, die im Rahmen des Schulprojekts das Ziel verfolgte, die Ko-Naturalisierung von Sprache und Rassismus zu hinterfragen. Während sie die Englischlernenden zur kritischen Diskurspartizipation ermutigte, stieß sie auf Grenzen rassismuskritischen Sprechens im schulischen Kontext. In der kritischen Diskursanalyse ihrer Autoethnographien wird herausgearbeitet, wie sie mit Momenten der Ungewissheit umging. Ausgehend von diesen ersten empirischen Einsichten sollen dekoloniale Potenziale von Englischunterricht diskutiert und Implikationen für eine kritische Fremdsprachenlehrer:innenbildung abgeleitet werden.

1 Introduction

The English language is often represented "as a neutral medium of international communication, as a language that holds out the promise of social and economic development to all those who learn it, as a language of equal opportunity" (Pennycook, 2019, p. 171). Such a beneficial understanding of English as a language of empowerment, of upward economic and social mobility, a language that promotes access and opportunities on the (global) job market is widely spread in the profession of English language teaching (ELT) (e. g. von Esch et al., 2020; Motha, 2014). Yet, this apolitical and ahistorical view of English as a lingua franca might hold true for some 'cosmopolitan citizens'

1 Irene Heidt, Ph.D, Brandenburgische Technische Universität Cottbus-Senftenberg, Universitätsplatz 1, 01968 Senftenberg, E-Mail: irene.heidt@b-tu.de

of the West, but it disregards the fact that this desirability and superiority of English as a global language has its roots in the colonial context and has also led to marginalization and inequality for those who do not belong to the so-called 'inner-circle Englishes' (Kachru, 1985).

Motha (2014) has illustrated how the discipline of ELT, including English as a Foreign Language (EFL), has played a decisive role in promoting this desirability of English in the colonial context. In this context, English was constructed as the language of civilization, progress, modernity, but also Whiteness[2] and nativeness, thus reinforcing the supremacy of the White native speaker. Given its colonial legacy, the discipline of ELT has shaped a particular image of language learners, embraced Western epistemologies, cultures, ways of thinking, speaking and perceiving the world. Accordingly, Pennycook (2007, p. 13) writes that the "conjuncture between ELT and colonialism has had long-lasting effects on the theories, practices, and beliefs of ELT: From classroom practices to beliefs about the cultural makeup of our students, many aspects of ELT reproduce cultural constructs of colonialism". These "cultural constructs of colonialism" (Pennycook, 2007, p. 13) are still reproduced, but they operate in more silent and invisible ways in form of coloniality. In this regard, Maldonado-Torres (2007) makes a distinction between colonialism and coloniality. While the former is a project of the past, its effects in the form of coloniality still operate in the present:

> Coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and every day. (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243)

Given its colonial past, Pennycook (2019, p. 171) argues that the English language is "ineluctably connected to power and politics, coloniality, and modernity". In this context, the political aspect refers to the symbolic power of language not only to represent but ultimately to create perceptions about the social world as well as legitimate ways of being and knowing, which makes "language [...] inherently political" (Pennycook, 2001, p. 42; see also Kramsch, 2021).

The present paper deals with critical language teacher education (LTE) in the context of teaching English as a foreign language. More specifically, it is argued that addressing issues of colonialism, race, and racism in the EFL classroom requires *critical* language teachers who have insights into the ways language as symbolic power constructs racialized social realities and identities. This insight enables an awareness and critical interrogation of unequal discourses, thus opening up possibilities for discourse participation and transformation in the EFL classroom, instead of unconsciously reproducing them. Such a critical and discursive understanding of language as symbolic

2 I chose to capitalize White to emphasize how Whiteness subtly endures and operates within language, institutions, and communities. Leaving Whiteness uncapitalized risks representing it as a neutral or 'natural' category, instead of an artificial construct, thereby obscuring the underlying mechanisms of racism and colonial historicity. In this choice, I align with Appiah (2020) who writes: "The point of the capital letter, then, isn't to elevate; it's to situate" (see also APA, 2024).

power is of particular importance in LTE, since one of the main goals of teaching EFL is to enable language learners to identify, initiate, and participate in cultural discourses in today's globalized world (Hallet, 2008, p. 88). In addition to discourse participation, a *critical* approach to language education "focuses specifically on the role of language as a social practice and examines the role played by text and discourse in maintaining or transforming these orders" (Janks, 2014, p. 349).

To begin, I shall first discuss the co-naturalization of language and race, then engage with critical LTE and illustrate how it can contribute to disrupting this co-naturalized relationship. To exemplify how this can be achieved, I shall focus on the case of Frieda (pseudonym), a language teacher candidate (LTC) who participated in an anti-racist school project, conducted in a 10th grade EFL classroom at a German secondary school. Frieda's approach was selected as a case example from an ongoing qualitative study focused on critical LTE, to highlight how she raised students' critical language awareness regarding the colonial historicity of everyday language, thereby engaging her students in critical discussions on race and racism. I shall conclude by referring to the lessons Frieda has learned within the anti-racist school project and drawing implications for critical LTE.

2 The Co-Naturalized Relation Between Language and Race

Kubota and Lin (2009, p. 3) argue that a discursive understanding of language as symbolic power is of particular significance when dealing with issues of race and racism since race is (re-)produced through discourse: "Race is socially and historically constructed and shaped by discourses that give specific meanings to the *ways we see the world*, rather than reflecting the illusive notion of objective, stable, and transcendent truths" (my emphasis). Here, the authors emphasize the political dimension of language to shape unequal and racialized ways of seeing the world according to historically constructed Western or Eurocentric discourses which operate in silent and implicit ways. Since we are socialized into these racialized discourses or ways of seeing the world, we might misrecognize them as being commonsensical or 'normal', thus (unknowingly) reproducing the unequal social order (Bourdieu, 2000). This is supported by Rosa and Flores (2017) who emphasize that race and language, serving as social and cultural categories of differentiation, mutually co-construct each other to the extent that they are perceived as natural. This 'co-naturalization' (Rosa & Flores, 2017) of race and language has been termed raciolinguistic ideology, which is rooted in European colonial historicity and still persists in structuring the social order, e. g. through seemingly innocuous concepts such as the 'native speaker', 'standard English' or 'linguistic authenticity' (Schmenk, 2022). For language teachers, being critically aware of this intertwined relationship between language and race would not merely mean "to understand these structuring processes, but also to envision *unsettling* the terms of race and language as part of broader efforts toward decolonization and the eradication of white supremacy" (Rosa & Flores, 2017, p. 641, my emphasis).

In scholarly discourse, to decolonize English language education has been understood as a process to "*delink* language, culture, and thought from the Eurocentric categories that have defined them" (Pennycook, 2019, p. 181, emphasis in original). Pennycook (2019, p. 181) further suggests to "provincialize" supposedly global and commonsensical meanings and epistemologies in an effort to make students aware of the (colonial) historicity of words and to put them into dialogue with more local meanings and discourses so as to enable them to speak otherwise. He writes in this context: "[T]his is a question of unsettling common relations, not only of entering the traffic [of meaning] but of disrupting the traffic" (Pennycook, 2019, p. 177). In the subsequent section, I shall argue that learning how to teach English in a way that unsettles the relationship between race/ism and language is a significant part of critical LTE as a decolonial project.

3 Critical Language Teacher Education

The rationale for advocating a critical approach to LTE is rooted in the fact that, for (future) English language teachers, language serves not only as a medium but also as the content of instruction. Considering that English is not merely a neutral linguistic tool of global communication, but also reflects colonial historicity and Eurocentric epistemology through which speakers tend to (re-)produce unequal social orders, there is a need for critical language teachers who have an awareness of the workings of language as symbolic power (Heidt, 2022, 2023). Therefore, as Hawkins and Norton (2009, p. 32) emphasize:

> Rather than have learners internalize such meanings as normal and right, critical language teachers work with their students to deconstruct language, texts, and discourses, in order to investigate whose interests they serve and what messages are both explicitly and implicitly conveyed.

In line with postmodern and postcolonial theory, I understand criticality as a "*problematizing practice* [...] a perspective that insists on casting far more doubt on the categories we employ to understand the social world" (Pennycook, 2004, p. 329, emphasis in original). Accordingly, employing a 'problematizing practice' in the EFL classroom would mean inviting learners to notice and problematize taken-for-granted cultural practices and discourses and to unsettle or delink those discourses from the Eurocentric epistemologies that have affected them. Such a critical approach to language teaching envisions a transformation of commonsensical discourses that ultimately shape social and cultural practices and the "ways we see the world" (Kubota & Lin, 2009, p. 3).

Decisively, critical LTE does not merely place the focus on the *what* (critical topics such as racism) but also on the *how*: How can LTCs be enabled to initiate and enact a dialogue as a 'problematizing practice' in the EFL classroom, instead of (unknowingly) reproducing issues of race and racism through everyday language and implicit knowl-

edge rooted in their habitus? Bonnet and Hericks (2020, p. 169) argue in this context that a focus on the *how* in the EFL classroom is essential for practicing intergenerational dialogue with learners since differing generations might have conflicting understandings of a 'just' and 'legitimate' social world. Accordingly, learning how to open up dialogic spaces where EFL learners are able to negotiate and problematize potentially conflicting meanings, worldviews, and discourses is a central part of critical LTE. In a similar vein, Legutke et al. (2022, p. 12–13) argue that LTCs should experience such a dialogic, context-sensitive, and action-oriented (*handlungsorientiert*) language teaching in the EFL classroom already during their teacher education.

However, initiating such a dialogue in the EFL classroom might lead to ambiguity of meaning, resistance, or inadvertent reproduction of racialized knowledge on the students' side since language and cultural learning are highly linked to subjective stances, worldviews, and assumptions, rooted in the habitus as implicit knowledge. Since the (prospective) EFL teacher is equally implicated in this dialogic space with her embodied imaginations of a 'just' social world, a critical reflection on LTCs' implicit knowledge is essential so as to avoid unknowing reproduction of racialized knowledge in the classroom (Heidt, 2023; Mihan & Graf, 2021). Simon and Fereidooni (2020) refer to such critical reflection on one's own subject position as *Standpunktreflexivität* ('position reflexivity'). This concept crucially considers intersectionality, inequitable relations of symbolic power, and knowledge production and it is an essential component in developing professional anti-racist competence in critical LTE.

While critical LTE is increasingly gaining attention in the German context (e. g. Gerlach & Fasching-Varner, 2020; Heidt et al., 2025), the influence on the curriculum and the EFL practices seems to be limited. Bonnet and Hericks (2020) name one major reason for this disconnect: the persistent neoliberal practices of assessment and respective types of competence which restrict negotiation of cultural practices, worldviews, and discourses in the EFL classroom in a dialogic and action-oriented (*handlungsorientiert*) way. And yet, moments of uncertainty and ambiguity that are linked to negotiation of meaning are particularly worthwhile in both critical LTE and in the EFL classroom, since they offer critical moments "where something changes, where someone 'gets it', where someone throws out a comment that shifts the discourse" (Pennycook, 2004, p. 330). As a language teacher educator, I was seeking to create and to capture those critical and transformative moments in the anti-racist school projects that became a significant part of my seminars, in an effort to mediate the often-perceived gap between language teaching theory and practice in LTE. In the subsequent sections, I shall provide insights into how the LTC Frieda created those dialogic moments within an anti-racist school project and how she has dealt with and reflected on the critical moments she has encountered while unsettling language and race/ism with 10th graders.

4 The Anti-Racist School Project: Aims and Contents

To address the above-mentioned co-naturalized nature of language and race/ism and to make LTCs aware of the symbolic power of language to construct racialized social and cultural orders, I have designed and taught a seminar in the Master's program 'Teaching English as a Foreign Language' at a university in Germany. The seminar was concerned with diversity-sensitive EFL teaching with a particular focus on critical (race) pedagogy. The goal of the seminar was to enable LTCs to become aware of and ultimately to be able to teach language as discourse and symbolic power in a dialogic and context-sensitive way regarding issues of race and racism. This was realized in the context of an anti-racist school project, where five LTCs designed and taught ten English lessons over two days in a 10th grade EFL classroom. These English lessons were conducted during the regular instruction time at a secondary school (*Gymnasium*), from 8:00 am to 12:35 pm on a Thursday and Friday, and were specifically allocated for the anti-racist school project. The school project took place in a secondary school situated in a predominantly White and socio-economically advantaged area in a larger German city. This demographic makeup is mirrored in the student body, as less than 15 percent of the students have what is commonly referred to as a 'migration background', a percentage notably lower than in other districts of the city.

The five LTCs who took part in the seminar and the school project each designed and taught 90-minute lessons, which were thematically interconnected and built upon each other. The English lessons were concerned with the topic of racism and aimed to unsettle the link between language and race, that is, to delink taken-for-granted discourses and meanings from the Eurocentric epistemologies that have shaped them (see discussion in section 2). Together as a group, the LTCs decided upon the title *#Black Lives Matter and beyond – Facing and challenging issues of racism* for the anti-racist school project, which first dealt with definitions of racism and White privilege, then focused on the power of language to (re-)produce a racialized order of things through everyday language, and closed with a discussion on the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in on- and offline spaces.

In preparing the tasks and materials, the LTCs followed the principle of action-oriented language learning and teaching (*Handlungsorientierung*) that placed the focus on language learners' discourse participation through the topic of BLM. This topic dominated the cultural and political discourse on social media at that time and was also of language learners' interest, as their regular EFL teacher reported in a meeting prior to the school project. Accordingly, the topic seemed to be relevant and meaningful to the students, thus encouraging dialogic exploration of issues of race and racism as envisioned in action-oriented language learning (cf. Delius et al., 2021). Furthermore, in introducing the LTCs to the action-oriented principle in the context of the seminar, I also intended to encourage them to initiate dialogue as a 'problematizing practice' within the school project, instead of merely transmitting declarative knowledge regarding issues of race and racism. Such an approach was also supposed to prepare LTCs to

deal with potentially conflicting meanings, worldviews, and uncertainty in the context of the school project.

Overall, the LTCs had considerable freedom in designing the tasks and materials and selecting the content. However, the school project was required to focus on the topic of race and racism. The choice of this topic stemmed from discussions with teachers at the focal school, who had increasingly observed that students do not take racialized utterances and their injurious and discriminatory effects seriously, as they believe that they are uttering "just words". Here, the functionalist understanding of language as being a neutral linguistic system is clearly reproduced by the students, which is a product of the *Durchprozessierungslogik*, as argued by Bonnet and Hericks (2020). Such an understanding assumes a natural, stable, and predictable link between the signifier and signified. However, this tight link further reinforces the co-naturalized nature of language and race/ism, thus reproducing the unequal historicity of meanings and worldviews.

4.1 Method and Data Collection

The qualitative research project is based on the teaching project described above and offers first insights into an ongoing study that broadly focuses on critical LTE. Specifically, the study examines how LTCs experience, deal with, and reflect on critical or disorienting moments of uncertainty while teaching issues of race and racism in the EFL classroom in a dialogic and discursive way. The data collection included ethnographic classroom observations within the school project, EFL learners' work products as well as semi-structured interviews with the five participating LTCs, conducted subsequent to the anti-racist school project. The interviews lasted for about 60 minutes and were audio-recorded, transcribed, and anonymized. The data further involves LTCs' autoethnographic narratives which were written before and after the school project.

The present paper focuses more closely on Frieda's autoethnographies. Frieda was chosen for this analysis as her reflections provide particularly detailed accounts of her teaching experiences, thus offering insights into the ways she has dealt with moments of uncertainty while unsettling language and race/ism with 10th graders. Frieda signed an informed consent regarding the academic use of her data, ensuring the ethical integrity of this research project. Her autoethnographies will be analyzed by using critical discourse analysis (CDA) which focuses on uncovering the ways in which language as discourse constructs and perpetuates social, structural, and epistemological inequalities. Blommaert (2005, p. 37) further emphasizes the importance of historicity in CDA, since "[p]ower and inequality have long histories of becoming". This is especially relevant for analyzing issues of race, racism, and coloniality in discourse, thus making CDA an apt methodological choice for this study.

In scholarly discourse, autoethnography is understood as both a qualitative research approach and an emergent teacher learning tool (Yazan, 2018). Autoethnography combines elements of autobiography and ethnography, thus offering an introspective view on personal experiences and how they (mis-)align with cultural and political discourses and norms in a particular cultural context. In that sense, autoethnography

allows to advance *criticality* in LTE in that LTCs are encouraged to "engage in rigorous self-reflection – typically referred to as 'reflexivity' – in order to identify and interrogate the intersections between the self and social life" (Adams et al., 2017, p. 1). Reflexivity is understood in the present paper as a process that can support LTCs in moving away "from dogmatic, essentialized truths about themselves and others, and possibly get at the deeper, underlying ideological conditions and attachments, which may have led to such 'truths' in the first place" (Byrd Clark & Dervin, 2014, p. 4). Thus, critical reflexivity can also be understood as a 'problematizing practice' in that the LTCs were encouraged to problematize taken-for-granted categories, labels, and stories through which they perceive the world, themselves, and others. Such critical reflexivity also involves 'implicit reflection' (Gerlach, 2021, p. 42–43) on the embodied discourses, which are rooted in the habitus that both constrain and shape LTCs' subjectivities, thereby potentially affecting their perception of teaching practices, materials, and their students.

To initiate critical reflexivity, the LTCs were asked to write three autoethnographies in the course of the seminar: In the first autoethnography, they analyzed and critically reflected on their privileged and oppressed subject positions and how these subject positions intersect with each other (intersectionality). This critical self-reflexivity relates to Simon and Fereidooni's (2020) concept of *Standpunktreflexivität* and is a central aspect of critical and anti-racist language teacher education. Kubota (2015, p. 3) further adds that self-reflexivity "enables us to understand racism in broader relations of power and to take greater ethical responsibility in antiracism". The second autoethnography was concerned with LTCs' past school experiences which might implicitly orient their imaginations of 'good' language teaching practice, rooted in their habitus through their 'apprenticeship of observation' (Lortie, 1975). LTCs were also encouraged to potentially reframe these former language learning experiences in the context of the school project. The third autoethnography was composed after the school project and focused on the uncertainties, disruptions, and experiences the LTCs potentially made within the anti-racist school project. Thus, the focus was placed on 'reflection-on-action' (Schön, 1991), which is a retrospective reflection on a disorienting or critical moment, including implicit knowledge rooted in the habitus. Wilken and Bonnet (2022, p. 259) maintain in this context that "[i]f the disorientation remains, the individual may undergo a process of actual change in terms of their relation to self, others, and the world, which means that transformative learning/*Bildung* is initiated". In the following section, I shall reconstruct Frieda's teaching experiences in the anti-racist school project, primarily drawing on her autoethnographies and focusing on critical moments that have the potential to initiate transformative learning.

5 Unsettling Language and Race/ism in the EFL Classroom: Challenges and Chances

Frieda, a LTC in her thirties, initially pursued studies in multilingual communication, but found herself in an administrative work environment where she increasingly felt dissatisfied, as she reported in the interview. She started working in suicide prevention

where she learned to actively listen and pay close attention to the language articulated by people who have reached out over the phone when experiencing suicidal thoughts. Here, Frieda has sensed the power of language to affect and move people to get a different perspective on their social reality, relationships, and the self. Ultimately, her experiences in assisting and supporting others through dialogue have motivated her to pursue a career as an EFL teacher.

In the following excerpt, taken from the second autoethnography written prior to the school project, Frieda emphasizes the significance of "active listening," creating a "safe space" and "open dialogue", particularly when addressing issues such as race and racism as a White teacher:

> It requires a lot of empathy and active listening but can be very effective if the safe space is created. [...] I have seen how other teachers failed to create a safe space and offer the possibility of open dialogue. [...] I was observing an English class in an 8th grade on September 11. [...] In this class there was a student with a migration background, he fled the war in Syria and found refuge in Germany. He raised a very valid question as to why September 11 was such a big deal in Germany and the Western world in general, but no one ever talks about the war in Syria, where more people die on a daily basis. The teacher of this class completely ignored the comment and continued with her planned class. [...] The teacher was reflecting the white norm, which is manifested in the education system but this would have been an opportunity to question this norm and learn something as the teacher, which is something I think a critical teacher should do.

According to Frieda, the EFL teacher perpetuated "the white norm" by ignoring the student's critical comment on the unequal discussion of the war in Syria. Such a norm privileges Euro- and Anglo-centric knowledge which is deemed universal and legitimate in detriment of epistemologies produced in the Global South. This epistemological inequality also reveals the "different layers of historicity" (Blommaert, 2005, p. 131) that operate in a context and are not of equal order, thus creating tensions on a particular issue. In academic discourse, such an epistemological inequality has been termed 'epistemological racism' (e. g. Kubota & Lin, 2009) which goes unnoticed unless being questioned or problematized in the classroom. Accordingly, challenging epistemological racism in the EFL classroom requires problematizing taken-for-granted discourses by delinking or unsettling these discourses from the dominant Euro-/Anglocentric epistemologies that have defined them. This process has been understood as a decolonizing practice, as has been discussed earlier. However, as Braselmann (2023, p. 168) argues, discussions on issues of racism are "frequently avoided, if not tabooed in many classrooms". This reaction has also been observed by Frieda, who reports that the teacher disregarded the student's comment and "continued with her planned class".

Contrary to this classroom observation, Frieda decided to design complex competence tasks (Hallet, 2013) that raised students' awareness of issues on race and racism, encouraging them to engage in interaction and negotiation of meaning. Due to space constraints, I shall focus on one of Frieda's tasks that aimed at problematizing the historicity of everyday words and phrases commonly used in the US which, in fact, carry racist connotations. Examples included 'black sheep', 'cakewalk', 'law and order', 'long

time no see', etc. In this context, Frieda prepared short informative texts and also asked her students to further explore the historically and culturally constructed meanings of these words and phrases on the internet. The target task was to create posters for a gallery walk so as to inform and discuss with other students how people unconsciously uphold an unequal and racial order of things by using these phrases in their everyday language. The ultimate aim of the task was to foster students' critical language awareness and, as Frieda writes in her second autoethnography,

> [...] to question the language [students] use, also in the other languages they speak. That they become aware that every phrase that can be found in a language has origins and sometimes these origins represent beliefs that they would not want to reproduce, like the German '*Jedem das Seine*' which was ingrained in the gate of the concentration camp Buchenwald. While its history may be older, the meaning of the phrase has changed with the Nazi time. While it is the free choice of everyone to continue to use certain phrases, even with knowing where they come from, an awareness needs to be created for the use of language. That is the overall goal of the lesson.

In essence, she intended to foster students' critical awareness that the language we unconsciously use is charged with sedimented historicity, that is, with "alien value judgements" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 276) for which we are answerable, even though we do not wish to "reproduce" them, as Frieda writes above. To make her point clear, she draws a parallel to the German saying 'to each what s/he deserves' (*Jedem das Seine*) which was cynically (mis-)used by the Nazi regime. This saying has been reproduced to such an extent that it has become a conventional, commonsensical or, as Butler (1997, p. 14) puts it, "citational" everyday phrase, "breaking with the prior contexts of its utterance and acquiring new contexts for which it was not intended". Due to this citational character of language, we unknowingly reproduce the "condensed historicity" (Butler, 1997, p. 3) embedded in the everyday language we have been socialized into, thus (unknowingly) upholding an unequal order of things. Regarding this condensed historicity of language, Kramsch (2006, p. 103) argues that "[t]he role of the language teacher should be to diversify meanings, point to the meanings not chosen, and bring to light other possible meanings that have been forgotten by history or covered up by politics". This is the very process of disrupting the "dangerously monolithic traffic in meaning" (Kramsch, 2006, p. 102) and unsettling language from its problematic historicity which silently operates through discourse.

And yet, unsettling common discourses and diversifying normative and hegemonic meanings is quite a challenging endeavor, as Frieda's teaching experiences have shown. While ethnographically observing her teaching lessons, I recorded in my ethnographic field notes that some students voiced disagreement such as "Isn't it racist to say that we are all racists?", "I don't think that the phrase 'long time no see' has racist connotations, today it is just a way to say that we haven't seen each other in a while", "I don't agree that words such as 'black sheep' are racially loaded terms, they just refer to the black color". These statements illustrate students' referential understanding of language, which is not surprising given the structuralist and functional understanding of language that largely dominates EFL textbooks and classrooms (Bonnet & Hericks,

2020). However, as Frieda reflects in her third autoethnography composed after the school project, these comments had a disorienting effect on her:

> When I was challenged the first time, I was stumped for a brief moment as I wasn't sure whether I should engage in that form of discussion. However, I quickly remembered why I was doing this project and one of the reasons was to get students talking about racism even if that means challenging what I say. So instead it was a chance, an opportunity to stray a little from the initial plan for the lessons and to allow the students to critically engage.

In this retrospective 'reflection-on-action' (Schön, 1991), she reflects on a feeling of uncertainty when being "challenged" by the students. Here, Frieda reveals the transformative purpose of her lesson, that is, creating awareness of racial and colonial historicity of seemingly innocuous language and engaging the students into a critical dialogue despite being challenged. However, it becomes evident that while Frieda intended for the transformative moment to occur in the students' consciousness, it also happened in her own consciousness and teaching practice as she chose not to ignore students' comments, but to divert from her lesson plan, thus allowing a dialogic discourse participation on the issue at hand.

Despite these challenges, Frieda felt that she had initiated the process of "unsettling common relations" (Pennycook, 2019, p. 177), which includes disrupting the traffic of unequal meanings carrying racist connotations. Accordingly, she notes in her third autoethnography, written subsequent to the school project:

> [L]anguage is ever changing and maybe language has changed in a way that certain phrases that are historically racially connotated [sic] do not have this connotation in the generation the students are in. However, I do think it is important to understand that at some point it was used in racially charged way. I do not have any control over how students perceive the phrases but at least they were made aware of their origins. Whether they accept or reject that meaning is up to them. I think the fact that they voiced disagreement with the connotations shows that they were critically examining the phrases.

Here, Frieda reflects on the beneficial, but sometimes challenging nature of epistemological decentering which is also understood as "the willingness to step out of one's usual way of feeling, reasoning and talking about things and enter 'someone else's problem' – and to understand what makes it a 'problem' for that particular person in the first place" (Kramsch, 2023, p. 33). However, to decenter from the epistemologies and discourses one has been socialized into or has been familiar with requires the students to problematize the very discursive categories they use to make sense of the social world, themselves, and others. This decentering experience can cause disagreement and rejection, as was the case in Frieda's lessons. However, as Frieda writes, it is important to make the students "aware" of the condensed historicity and the racial connotations since, according to Butler (1997, p. 8), it is a question of ethical responsibility of "those who inherit the responsibility for whether language will live or die".

6 Lessons Learned: Language, Race/ism, and Critical Language Teacher Education

Critical LTE in today's uneven times requires a different understanding of language, one that disrupts the "monolithic traffic in meaning" (Kramsch, 2006, p. 102) by making language learners aware of the political effects of language as symbolic power to construct unequal or racialized social realities and perceptions through everyday language according to which we (unconsciously) act. Unfortunately, such an understanding of language is often neglected in both EFL classrooms and LTE. Fandrych (2021, p. 59) supports this perception by writing with regard to foreign and second language education: "Außen vor bleibt, dass Sprache selbst unauflösbar mit gesellschaftlichen Machtstrukturen, Differenzverhältnissen und sozialer Positionierung verbunden ist und somit kein neutrales Instrument des Interessensausgleichs [...] darstellt".

Accordingly, the anti-racist school project did not aim so much at applying best teaching practices LTCs have learned in the seminar, but rather at preparing them to experience the symbolic power of language and the accompanying symbolic power struggles that arise from negotiating conflicting meanings and discourses in the EFL classroom when issues of race and racism are discussed. In this context, Braselmann (2023, p. 171) equally argues that "[r]egarding racism, teachers in predominantly white classrooms should be prepared to deal with [...] negative responses of denial and resistance". Thus, the development of professional anti-racist competence in LTE cannot be reduced to declarative knowledge of specific content, teaching methods and practices, but also has to include learning how to navigate and respond to critical moments that are contingent on conflicting discourses, meanings, and worldviews brought about by the EFL learners when discussing issues of race and racism. As Frieda's autoethnographies have illustrated, dealing with such critical moments also includes grappling with one's own subject position when being challenged or confronted with moments of rejection in the classroom. Pennycook (2004, p. 333) notes in this context that

> [l]earning to teach is not just about learning a body of knowledge and techniques; it is also about learning to work in a complex sociopolitical and cultural political space [...] and negotiating ways of doing this with our past histories, fears, and desires; our own knowledges and cultures; our students' wishes and preferences; and the institutional constraints and collaborations.

From this perspective, contradictions, misalignments or unpredictable critical moments will necessarily emerge in the EFL classroom, since both experienced and future language teachers have to reconcile various norms, perspectives, and expectations while teaching: their own, those of their students' as well as institutional and sociopolitical. However, encounters with uncertainty resulting from these contradictory and conflicting norms and expectations can also serve as productive opportunities for dialogic or (self-)reflexive engagement with issues on racism, thus offering transformative moments of *Bildung* for teachers and students alike (Gerlach & Fasching-Varner, 2020; Wilken & Bonnet, 2022).

Critical language teacher educators play an important role in supporting LTCs to reflect on and reconcile different and conflicting norms and knowledge domains in an effort to avoid what Roters (2012, p. 273) has termed as "*Diskrepanzerfahrungen*" ('experiences of discrepancy'). These experiences occur when misalignments between theory and practice or, as in Frieda's case, between her desire to implement critical perspectives on language as symbolic power in anti-racist language teaching and the learners' resistance to such an understanding of language, remain unaddressed. Offering spaces for reflexivity, negotiation, and discussion of those moments by searching for an alternative regarding the choices made in class by LTCs seem to be vital. For example, Frieda's complex task fostering students' critical language awareness of racially charged terms was innovative and engaging. However, in our conversation after the school project we discussed whether her task design could engage students more strongly on an affective level so as to lay the ground for epistemological decentering, that is, „to step out of one's usual way of feeling, reasoning and talking about things and enter 'someone else's problem'" (Kramsch, 2023, p. 33). For instance, the racially loaded terms could be discussed not merely as historically but also as emotionally charged terms that have "affective resonances in the bodies of speakers and hearers" (Kramsch, 2009, p. 2), thus allowing students "to understand what makes it a 'problem' for that particular person in the first place" (Kramsch, 2023, p. 33). This would make the idea of language as symbolic power less abstract and could also allow for exploring the emotions these terms evoke. Using literature with characters whose biographies significantly differ from those of the predominantly White students in the focal school could facilitate this exploration.

A further moment of critical reflection occurred when we discussed the parallel to the German phrase *Jedem das Seine* used by Frieda in one of her autoethnographies. Surprisingly, she decided not to draw this parallel in the classroom which in fact could have helped her students to grasp the emotional power of highly charged terms and phrases that are associated with historical traumas and collective memories in the sociohistorical context her students are situated in (e. g. Martin & Häuser, 2024). In our discussion, we agreed that drawing such a parallel that is familiar to the students' life worlds could have greatly helped them to understand and potentially to unsettle the link between language, culture, and thought from the problematic historicity and epistemologies that are silently reproduced in conventional everyday language. This is what Pennycook (2019, p. 173–174) has termed as "provincializing" supposedly commonsensical meanings and epistemologies in an effort to make students aware of the (colonial) historicity of words and to put them into dialogue with more local meanings and discourses so as to enable them to speak otherwise.

Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that this joint reflection and discussion with Frieda also reflects my own subject position and understanding of what constitutes 'critical' LTE, which is largely shaped by postmodern and postcolonial discourses. This highlights the relevance of what Pierre Bourdieu (2003, p. 282) has termed 'epistemic reflexivity', the practice of "objectivizing the subjective relation to the object", which involves scrutinizing how the researcher's embodied knowledge and posi-

tionality might inform the research process. Far from being "anti-scientific subjectivism", Bourdieu (2003, p. 282) asserts that such reflexivity is essential for "genuine scientific objectivity". This tension between researcher positionality and scientific objectivity reveals a methodological challenge that requires critical awareness and reflection from language teacher educators and researchers.

In conclusion, learning to teach and navigate sensitive discussions in today's increasingly diverse classrooms has undoubtedly become a challenging yet deeply inspiring, rewarding, and in some cases transformative experience for both LTCs and their respective language teacher educators. However, it has to be noted that the observations in the present paper are based on a single-case study. Further research is needed across diverse educational contexts regarding critical language teacher education.

Eingang des revidierten Manuskripts 06.02.2025

References

Adams, T. E., Ellis, C. & Holman Jones, S. (2017). Autoethnography. In J. Matthes, C. Davis & R. F. Potter (Eds.), *The international encyclopedia of communication research methods* (pp. 1–11). Wiley Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0011

APA = American Psychological Association (2024). *Racial and ethnic identity*. APA Style. Retrieved on the 22. February 2025, from https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/racial-ethnic-minorities

Appiah, K. A. (2020). The Case for Capitalizing the *B* in Black. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved on the 07. November 2025, from https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/time-to-capitalize-blackand-white/613159/

Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*. University of Texas Press.

Blommaert, J. (2005). *Discourse: A critical introduction*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511610295

Bonnet, A. & Hericks, U. (2020). Fremdsprachendidaktik pädagogisch denken – oder: Was ein Staatsanwalt mit Englischunterricht zu tun hat. In D. Gerlach (Hrsg.), *Kritische Fremdsprachendidaktik: Grundlagen, Ziele, Beispiele* (S. 165–180). Narr Francke Attempto.

Bourdieu, P. (2000). *Pascalian meditations*. Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (2003). Participant objectivation. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 9(2), 281–294. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.00150

Braselmann, S. (2023). I'm Not Racist! – Addressing Racism in Predominantly White Classrooms with Cooperatively Designed Multimodal Text Ensembles. In C. Ludwig & T. Summer (Eds.), *Taboos and controversial issues in foreign language education: Critical language pedagogy in theory, research and practice* (pp. 168–180). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003220701-19

Butler, J. (1997). *Excitable speech: A politics of the performative*. Routledge.

Byrd Clark, J. & Dervin, F. (2014). Introduction. In J. Byrd Clark & F. Dervin (Eds.), *Reflexivity in language and intercultural education: Rethinking multilingualism and interculturality* (pp. 1–42). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315879604

Delius, K., Surkamp, C. & Wirag, A. (2021). Handlungsorientierter Fremdsprachenunterricht: Zur Einführung in den Band und zum Stand der Forschung. In K. Delius, C. Surkamp & A. Wirag (Hrsg.), *Handlungsorientierter Fremdsprachenunterricht empirisch: Studien zu schulischen und universitären Lehr-/Lernkontexten* (S. 7–34). Universitätsverlag Göttingen. https://doi.org/10.17875/gup2021-1609

von Esch, K S., Motha, S. & Kubota, R. (2020). Race and language teaching. *Language Teaching*, 53(4), 391–421. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444820000269

Fandrych, C. (2021). Nachhaltigkeit im Fremd- und Zweitsprachenunterricht: Sprachkonzeptionelle und sprachenpolitische Desiderate. In E. Burwitz-Melzer, C. Riemer & L. Schmelter (Hrsg.), *Entwicklung von Nachhaltigkeit beim Lehren und Lernen von Fremd- und Zweitsprachen: Arbeitspapiere der 41. Frühjahrskonferenz zur Erforschung des Fremdsprachenunterrichts* (S. 55–66). Narr Francke Attempto.

Gerlach, D. (2021). Making Knowledge Work: Fostering Implicit Reflection in a Digital Era of Language Teacher Education. *The Langscape Journal*, 3, 39–51. https://doi.org/10.18452/22342

Gerlach, D. & Fasching-Varner, K. (2020). Grundüberlegungen zu einer kritischen Fremdsprachenlehrer*innenbildung. In D. Gerlach (Hrsg.), *Kritische Fremdsprachendidaktik: Grundlagen, Ziele, Beispiele* (S. 217–234). Narr Francke Attempto Verlag.

Hallet, W. (2008). Diskursfähigkeit heute. Der Diskursbegriff in Piephos Theorie der kommunikativen Kompetenz und seine zeitgemäße Weiterentwicklung für die Fremdsprachendidaktik. In M. Legutke (Hrsg.), *Kommunikative Kompetenz als fremdsprachendidaktische Vision* (S. 76–96). Narr.

Hallet, W. (2013). Die komplexe Kompetenzaufgabe. *Der fremdsprachliche Unterricht Englisch*, 124, 2–9.

Hawkins, M. & Norton, B. (2009). Critical language teacher education. In A. Burns & J. C. Richards (Eds.), *The Cambridge guide to second language teacher education* (pp. 30–39). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139042710.006

Heidt, I. (2022). Fostering symbolic competence in the age of Twitter Politics: A teaching unit on linguistic and political emergencies for learners of English. *Anglistik – International Journal of English Studies*, 33(3), 75–90. https://doi.org/10.33675/ANGL/2022/3/8

Heidt, I. (2023). Fostering critical language teacher education through autoethnography: Empirical insights into an EFL teacher candidate wrestling with raciolinguistic ideologies and embodied knowledge. In E. Wilden, L. Alfes, K. F. Cantone, S. Çıkrıkçı & D. Reimann (Hrsg.), *Standortbestimmungen in der Fremdsprachenforschung* (S. 228–243). Schneider bei wbv.

Heidt, I., König, L., Louloudi, E. & Merse, T. (2025). Kritische Fremdsprachenlehrkräftebildung: Desiderate, Beispiele, Vernetzungsideen. In N. Kulovics, O. Mentz & T. Raith (Hrsg.), *Grenzen, Grenzräume, Entgrenzungen: Perspektiven in der Fremdsprachenforschung* (S. 410–419). Schneider bei wbv.

Janks, H. (2014). Critical literacy's ongoing importance for education. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 57(5), 349–356. https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.260

Kachru, B. (1985). Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: The English language in the outer circle. In R. Quirk & H. Widdowson (Eds.), *English in the world: Teaching and learning the language and literatures* (pp. 11–30). Cambridge University Press.

Kramsch, C. (2006). The traffic in meaning. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 26(1), 99–104. https://doi.org/10.1080/02188790600608091

Kramsch, C. (2009). *The multilingual subject: What foreign language learners say about their experience and why it matters*. Oxford University Press.

Kramsch, C. (2021). *Language as symbolic power*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108869386

Kramsch, C. (2023). Re-imagining foreign language education in a post-COVID-19 world. In C. Lütge, T. Merse & P. Rauschert (Eds.), *Global citizenship in foreign language education: Concepts, practices, connection* (pp. 15–40). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003183839-3

Kubota, R. (2015). Race and language learning in multicultural Canada: Towards critical antiracism. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 36(1), 3–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2014.892497

Kubota, R. & Lin, A. (2009). Race, culture, and identities in Second Language Education: Introduction to research and practice. In R. Kubota & A. Lin (Eds.), *Race, culture, and identities in second language education: Exploring critically engaged practice* (pp.1–24). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203876657

Legutke, M. K., Saunders, C. & Schart, M. (2022). Zwischen den Disziplinen: Anmerkungen zur Fachspezifik des Professionswissens von Fremdsprachenlehrkräften. *Zeitschrift für Fremdsprachenforschung*, 33(1), 3–27.

Lortie, D. C. (1975). *Schoolteacher: A sociological study*. University of Chicago Press.

Maldonado-Torres, N. (2007). On the coloniality of being. *Cultural Studies*, 21(2–3), 240–270. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162548

Martin, I. & Häuser, N. (2024). Decolonise your mind: Critical language awareness: Machtstrukturen und Kolonialität in der Sprache aufdecken. *Der fremdsprachliche Unterricht Englisch*, 190, 39–45.

Mihan, A. & Graf, A. (2021). Kritische Community Autoethnographie und die Sensibilisierung angehender Lehrpersonen für rassismuskritischen Englischunterricht. In A. Wegner, M. Busch & J. Frisch (Hrsg.), *Bedingungen und Bezüge politischer und sprachlicher Bildung* (S. 229–262). Wochenschau-Verlag.

Motha, S. (2014). *Race, empire, and English language teaching: Creating responsible and ethical anti-racist practice*. Teachers College Columbia University.

Pennycook, A. (2001). *Critical applied linguistics: A critical introduction*. Routledge; L. Erlbaum. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410600790

Pennycook, A. (2004). Critical moments in a TESOL praxicum. In B. Norton & K. Toohey (Eds.), *Critical pedagogies and language learning* (pp. 327–346). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139524834.017

Pennycook, A. (2007). ELT and colonialism. In J. Cummins & C. Davison (Eds.), *International handbook of English language teaching* (pp. 13–24). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-46301-8_2

Pennycook, A. (2019). From Translanguaging to Translingual Activism. In D. Macedo (Eds.), *Decolonizing foreign language education: The misteaching of English and other colonial languages* (pp.169–185). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429453113-7

Rosa, J. & Flores, N. (2017). Unsettling race and language: Toward a raciolinguistic perspective. *Language in Society*, 46(5), 621–647. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404517000562

Roters, B. (2012). *Professionalisierung durch Reflexion in der Lehrerbildung*. Waxmann Verlag.

Schmenk, B. (2022). Das *Native-Speaker*-Konstrukt im Fokus. Kritik und Kontroversen. *Zeitschrift für Fremdsprachenforschung*, 33(2), 163–187.

Schön, D. A. (1991). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Ashgate.

Simon, N. & Fereidooni, K. (2020). Rassismus(kritik) und Fachdidaktiken – (K)ein Zusammenhang? – Einleitende Gedanken. In Fereidooni, K. & Simon, N. (Hrsg.), *Rassismuskritische Fachdidaktiken: Theoretische Reflexionen und fachdidaktische Entwürfe rassismusskritischer Unterrichtsplanung* (S. 1–18). Springer VS. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-26344-7_1

Wilken, A. A. & Bonnet, A. (2022). Transformative learning and professionalization through uncertainty? A case study of pre-service language teachers during a STIE. In G. Barkhuizen (Eds.), *Language teachers studying abroad: Identities, emotions and disruptions* (pp. 256–268). Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.22679749.24

Yazan, B. (2018). Toward identity-oriented teacher education: Critical autoethnographic narrative. *TESOL Journal*, 10(1). https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.388

The article was accepted as part of the thematic focus ‘anti-racist foreign language education’. The anonymous peer review process does not apply to issues with a thematic focus. The contributions are reviewed by the guest editors and the ZFF editorial team.