

CAN WE TALK ABOUT RACISIM IN EAP?

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Abstract

'Can We Talk About Racism in EAP?' reflects on the Community Session of the same name at the BALEAP 2023 Biennial Conference. In the session, using JPB Gerald's talk 'Bad at English' (2021) as a stimulus, participants discussed the challenges and benefits of integrating anti-racist pedagogy into English for Academic Purposes (EAP) curricula. Questions raised included the extent to which ideas around linguistic deficit were related to racism, the potentially compromised role of EAP practitioners when adopting a raciolinguistic perspective and the extent to which raciolinguistic theories originating from a US context were more broadly applicable. Although self-selecting, participants made compelling arguments for addressing colonialism and racism in EAP. This write-up contends that EAP and anglophone academia are rooted in British and US imperialism and White supremacy, which manifest in discriminatory language practices and raciolinguistic ideologies, such as native-speakerism and monolingualism. It concludes by advocating for EAP educators to adopt a raciolinguistic perspective to challenge colonial legacies with the aim of dismantling systemic racial and linguistic inequities in EAP and beyond.

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Keywords: EAP, Linguistic Racism, Raciolinguistics, Anti-racist Pedagogy, Standard Language Ideology, Language Deficit

INTRODUCTION

To begin the write up of this session, it is important to provide some context and make a case for why a discussion on the topic of racism was essential at the BALEAP 2023 Biennial Conference, and why such discussions are needed in the field of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) more generally.

Firstly, something that all EAP practitioners should be aware of is that the dominance of English as the international language of academia did not happen by chance but was rather rooted in a history of British and US imperialism and supported by deliberate policy choices aimed at promoting the spread of English and English language teaching around the globe (Phillipson, 1992). These policy choices provided the funding and impetus for the formation of the academic discipline of English Language Teaching (ELT) and created a global demand for teachers from neocolonial anglophone countries, such as the UK, the US, Canada and Australia, often placing them in positions of prestige and influence, such as university lecturers or teacher trainers (Phillipson, 1992). This meant that right from the outset, colonial and racialised power relations from the colonial era were being reproduced in the field of ELT.

Given this historical context, it is perhaps unsurprising that some of the discriminatory ideologies used to justify the global spread of English, such as the belief that the ideal English language teacher is a White, middle class, male, native speaker with a 'standard' accent from Britain or the US, or the best way to learn a language is through complete monolingual immersion, emerged from the field of ELT (Phillipson, 1992; Holliday, 2006). These ideologies still loom large in the profession today (Ramjattan, 2019; Tupas, 2022), despite being widely criticised not only as unscientific fallacies at odds with the multilingual reality of the world (e.g. Phillipson, 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas, et al., 2009) but also as having potentially harmful and discriminatory consequences. For instance, children from multilingual communities around the world are often compelled to complete their education in English, even when the evidence shows this is often not the best option for their educational outcomes (e.g. Mohanty, 2009; UNESCO, 2016; Sah & Li, 2018).

These discriminatory language ideologies and practices can also be found in a higher education context, upheld through de-facto policy instruments (Shohamy, 2006), such as university entrance examinations (Piller & Bodis, 2024) and the publishing requirements of academic journals (Mur-Dueñas, 2019), which can work to maintain the dominance of the White native speaker of English as a linguistic standard for anglophone academia. Consequently, EAP teachers often find themselves in a compromised position, being required to act as linguistic gatekeepers for multilingual students hoping to study in anglophone universities (Mortenson, 2022). If they approach this task uncritically without an interrogation of these colonial and racist histories that underpin English as the global language of academia or with narrow and reductive notions of academic and linguistic proficiency (Flores, 2020), then they run the risk of reproducing these colonial and racialised power dynamics (Rosa & Flores, 2017; Tupas, 2022).

Yet despite this, colonialism and racism are topics that are largely ignored in EAP (Robinson, 2020) and there is a significant lack of research into the use of anti-racist pedagogy (Von Esch, Motha & Kubota, 2020; Mortenson, 2022). The neglect of the issue of racism in EAP is an unethical reality that all EAP professionals, especially those who are White, have a responsibility to address and challenge (Gerald, 2022). We need to acknowledge the historical reality that the dominance of English as the global language of academia is rooted in European-settler colonialism and White supremacy (e.g. Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook, 1998; Rosa & Flores, 2021) and that many of the students who choose to study in neocolonial anglophone countries do so not because their education system is inherently better, but because the legacy of colonialism has ensured that getting a degree from these universities provides them with the cultural and linguistic capital to have a higher chance of success in their future careers (Udah, 2023). The fact that we as EAP teachers are often positioned as the linguistic gatekeepers to racialised students' chance to study at these universities should not simply be accepted as the status quo or beyond our control (Mortenson, 2022). As university educators we have the responsibility to interrogate and change this reality (Janes, 2024). This is why in the context of the BALEAP 2023 Biennial Conference, where we were encouraged to take a 'critical look at every aspect of EAP' (BALEAP, 2023) it was vital that at least one of the sessions asked the EAP community: 'Can we talk about racism?'

SESSION STRUCTURE, AIMS AND APPROACH

There were two parts to this Community Session. Firstly, I wanted to share my experience of incorporating JPB Gerald's talk 'Bad at English' (2021), which addresses the topic of linguistic racism, onto a pre-session English course. This then served as a stimulus for the main aim - a broader discussion around the use of anti-racist pedagogy in EAP to explore why certain topics, such as racism, still struggle to make it onto EAP curricula.

The discussion questions for the session were designed to be exploratory, encouraging participants to consider not only the benefits but also the potential drawbacks. This balanced approach was intended to promote an open discussion, where participants felt free to express their opinions, especially given that it was a potentially sensitive topic like racism. To avoid potential conflicts, I adopted a proactive approach to chairing, making sure that the opportunity to speak was shared around the room rather than allowing back-and-forth exchanges. Additionally, I planned to intervene if anything discriminatory was said

with the aim of maintaining a respectful and inclusive atmosphere at all times.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Discussion 1: Exploration of the talk

- What might be the benefits of using JPB Gerald's talk on a pre-session English course?
- Are there any potential considerations or drawbacks?
- Why do you think the talk elicited polarised reactions from teachers?

Discussion 2: Broader discussion on the use of social justice texts in EAP curricula

- What are the potential benefits/drawbacks of using social justice texts on EAP curricula?
- What forms of social justice are allowed and promoted in EAP/HE? Why? And to what effect? Who benefits?
- What discourses/practices of social justice remain marginalised and why?

SCREENING OF 'BAD AT ENGLISH' – THE STIMULUS FOR THE DISCUSSION

We began the session with a screening of JPB Gerald's (2021) thought-provoking talk 'Bad at English' on the topic of linguistic racism. I was confident the talk would serve as an effective stimulus for our discussion because when introducing it into my teaching context, the response from the teachers had been deeply polarised. Although some felt it raised relevant issues on linguistic racism that were important to discuss with students, others raised some quite strong objections (which unfortunately I do not have permission to share). Thus, by choosing to hold a screening of 'Bad at English', rather than discussing anti-racist pedagogy abstractly, I aimed to provoke the audience with a concrete example, hoping this might provide a stimulus for people to share their own experiences of working with anti-racist pedagogy.

You can watch JPB Gerald's talk for yourself on the BALEAP website as part of my session recording (Hardman, 2023), or you may prefer to read the chapter 'Bad at English' from his book 'Antisocial Language Teaching' (Gerald, 2022) on which the talk is very closely based. However, I will also attempt to provide a short summary here:

'Bad at English' is about JPB Gerald's own experience of working as an English language teacher and a speaking test administrator in the United States. In his role as test administrator, he began to feel uncomfortable with the fact that the assessments ended up identifying 'problems' with students' English language ability, even though to him it seemed like they could communicate perfectly well in English. He observed that the scores these students achieved did not seem to truly reflect what they were actually able to do in English and that they often formed the perception of themselves that they were 'bad at English'. What JPB Gerald argues is that these students were not really bad at English at all, but they were being made to believe this was the case because of the raciolinguistic ideologies they had internalised through their language learning experiences and the standardised language assessments they were forced to take. Raciolinguistic ideologies, first theorised by Flores and Rosa (2015), are a set of beliefs about the relationship between language and race that shape how we evaluate people's language use.

Raciolinguistic ideologies can lead people to believe that the language practices of racially dominant groups are superior to those of racially marginalised groups, even though in reality there is no objective difference in the linguistic quality of their language practices. JPB Gerald gives the example of the US where the Standard American English often associated with White people is seen by many as inherently superior to varieties of English that are traditionally spoken by their racialised counterparts, such as Black American English. Thus, he argues that it was not the students' actual ability to communicate in English but rather raciolinguistic ideologies that were leading them to believe that their language was deficient. These tests along with their other English language learning experiences were leading them to judge their ability based on how they would be perceived by an idealised White speaker of standardised American English, that is, the 'White listening subject' (Flores & Rosa, 2015). JPB Gerald addresses his talk directly to international students who are just about to embark on their university degrees in the UK. He concludes the talk by advising them to reject deficit evaluations of their language use based on raciolinguistic ideologies, reassuring them that 'there's nothing wrong with your English, no matter what the tests and your professors believe, your English is legitimate... and I hope you refuse to believe ever again that you are bad at English'.

The screening of the talk was well received by the audience. Watching it all together in the conference room created a shared energy and really brought out the humour in the talk. On several occasions the audience laughed along with the JPB Gerald's use of irony, which although present in his book, comes across even more effectively when delivered in person. The talk concluded with an enthusiastic round of applause and was followed by discussions in small groups and a whole group discussion.

WHOLE GROUP DISCUSSION

The whole group discussion was lively with many different people contributing. One emerging theme was that JPB Gerald's talk would be beneficial to use not only with students but also with teachers as part of teacher training or induction. This led me to reflect that when introducing the talk onto the course in my own teaching context, I probably hadn't done enough preparation with teachers beforehand. Theoretical concepts such as 'raciolinguistic ideologies' and 'the White listening subject' can be difficult to understand for those encountering them for the first time, and it's likely that for some teachers, the idea of explicitly discussing the topic of racism with their students could have made them feel uncomfortable (Janes, 2024). I could, for example, have done a training session on the rationale for using JPB Gerald's talk and provided an opportunity for teachers to discuss any questions or concerns beforehand. This is not to absolve them of their responsibility to engage with such issues but to acknowledge that teachers need training and support when tackling decolonial and anti-racist approaches (Qin, 2021). If the field of EAP were more attentive to issues of linguistic racism, EAP practitioners would have had already been exposed to arguments about the colonial history of ELT and its relationship to Whiteness as part of their teacher education (Gerald, 2022). However, the reality is that many have been trained through qualifications, such as the CELTA, DELTA and MAs in TESOL, which often fail to adequately deal with issues of colonialism, race and power (Motha, 2014) and can end up reinforcing raciolinguistic ideologies such as native-speakerism and monolingualism by, for example, uncritically presenting the idealised standard of English as a White, middle-class speaker from neocolonial anglophone countries (Rosa & Flores, 2017; Qin, 2021).

Another interesting idea that emerged was the suggestion that the deficit perspective JPB Gerald's students had internalised about being 'bad at English' was also commonly held by White European 'non-native speakers' of English and so might not really have stemmed from their racial identity but was more about them not having English as their first

language. On this point, I would argue that White Europeans experiencing negative perceptions of their own English language use does not preclude the role of raciolinguistic ideologies, as you don't need to belong to a commonly racialised ethnicity to have internalised the damaging deficit perspectives emerging from them. As previously discussed, native-speakerism and monolingualism are examples of raciolinguistic ideologies and it is these same ideologies that lead 'non-native speakers' to perceive their language practices as deficient. What might be worth considering, however, from a raciolinguistic perspective, is how people's evaluations the English of White European learners compare to those of racialised students and how these perceptions might be influenced by the imagined 'White listening subject'.

Although it is important to be able to ask such questions, refusing to acknowledge the role of raciolinguistic ideologies in the formation of deficit perspectives could be argued to lean into 'colour-blind' approaches to racism (e.g. Bonilla-Silva, 2014) that attempt to minimise or explain away instances of perceived racial discrimination by attributing it other causes or ignoring the topic entirely. Such approaches are criticised by scholars of anti-racism who argue that it is only by naming and talking about racism that you can really begin to challenge it (e.g. Eddo-Lodge, 2018; Kendi, 2019). After this question was raised, a number of participants highlighted the problems of adopting a colour-blind approach, sharing their own experiences of racial discrimination in EAP contexts and providing some valuable insights for the session participants.

The final question I would like to discuss was raised by one of the reviewers of this session write-up, which has been echoed by several others who have viewed the talk. I believe it is important to address the question directly as it touches on the complexity and potential contradictions that can arise from incorporating a critical raciolinguistic perspective as an EAP practitioner, described by some as 'the perpetual 'But' in raciolinguistics' (Gonzales Howell, et al., 2020). The question was:

If the argument presented by both Gerald (2021) and the author is that EAP students' English is 'good enough' if a raciolinguistic deficit view is removed, why do students need to study EAP at all? And at what point do we suggest that a student's understanding is not actually 'good enough' to enable them to successfully study an academic subject in English?

In response, I would argue that a raciolinguistic perspective should not prevent us from giving constructive language feedback to students but should rather acknowledge students' language achievements and the richness of the full linguistic repertoires when doing so (Garcia, 2018).

The rejection by EAP practitioners of deficit labels such as ‘bad at English’ should not be particularly controversial. In fact, in my experience, they tend to be among the loudest critics of the negative and essentialising feedback that can sometimes be given by subject tutors. There is no easy answer as to how to adopt a raciolinguistic perspective in a university context, amidst a range of institutional pressures and diverse student needs, as explored by Gonzalez Howell et al. (2020). However, in my own practice, where possible, I try to:

- encourage diverse ways of expressing ideas
- give legitimacy to all varieties of English
- problematise the sole legitimacy of standardised English
- make reference to audience and power relations
- promote student agency in writing choices
- raise awareness of colonial and raciolinguistic ideologies

This brings me to the end of my reflections on the group discussion but, given that it was an interactive Community Session, I wanted to find out what the other participants thought of the session overall. So, I put the call out to all attendees of the session, emailing them directly to ask if any of them would like to write a short reflection up to 200 words on their experience, insights and subsequent practice that emerged during or after attending my session. In the end, 3 attendees responded. I also sent this session write-up to JPB Gerald to get his perspective. Here are some extracts of what they said:

PARTICIPANTS’ REFLECTIONS

TOMASZ JOHN, TEACHING FELLOW IN TESOL, UNIVERSITY OF STRATHCLYDE

‘...the standout element of the session for me was the innovative use of JPB Gerald's (2021) lecture, ‘Bad at English’. This choice was not just apt but, in many ways, revolutionary. Gerald’s work brings forth an audacious, frank, and pivotal view on language, racism, and academia. By introducing this lecture into an EAP syllabus, Wil brilliantly showcased the urgent need to address issues like racism and colonialism in academic settings. It served as a striking reminder that our curricula should be reflective, challenging, and inclusive.’

PAUL BREEN SENIOR LECTURER IN EAP, UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON

In England, politics isn't discussed in polite circles. Thankfully, some vital aspects of it were discussed in this session. But, on a constructively critical note, it was explored through looking at America.

Looking west beyond Brixton, Bradford, Belfast and the Bogside. Of course, it's not EAP's job to deconstruct and reconstruct history. That's tough enough to do within the undefined borders of our own discipline. But as practitioners we are in quite a unique position. We've often cut our educational teeth in far-flung places. Generally, we also carry out most of our work with international students.

Therefore, we're in a prime position to discuss race. And it's important, in an environment where we can slip into the pitfalls of assumptions about our students. However, we too can often bring uncontested assumptions into our practice. That's why I was glad to attend this session, to see an instance of students being taught about race, as part of developing their language proficiency. The materials used were powerful and the reactions of some of the participants quite revealing. These topics can be minefields and I'm not sure that wider British society is ready for them, but discussions like this create a pathway to such an environment. Perhaps by starting in America, we can also eventually move backwards, closer to home, which is still too close for comfort for many people.

KELLY WEBB-DAVIES, EAP PRACTITIONER

I got huge amount out of Wil's session at the BALEAP Conference. I found it invigorating, with both the presentation, video, and discussion offering clarity on concerns I had about the ethics and history of EAP, especially the unfair linguistic standards our students face. These standards, rooted in colonialism and racism, put our students at a disadvantage in academia and I felt I needed to change something in my practice to make a difference.

Inspired by the session, I integrated JPB Gerald's video 'Bad English' into my pre-master's module, aiming to encourage critical thinking about these linguistic standards. Before viewing the video, many students believed that academic English was superior. However, after viewing, their perspectives shifted towards recognizing the validity of all English varieties. It was heartwarming to see them applaud post-video, with one student mentioning it felt like a 'revival of hope'.

This experience has further motivated me to advocate for EAP students being allowed to use digital language tools in academic writing. Given that academic English has its roots in colonialism, leveraging these tools can help increase equity and accessibility in academia, and mitigate some barriers stemming from historical injustices. Also, I recorded an episode of Unstandardized English with JPB Gerald about my experience of using his video in my class (see Gerald & Webb-Davies, 2023).

JPB GERALD, EDUCATOR AND THEORIST

The chapter that turned into that talk was probably the point in the book where, having got through some relatively dry historical context, I could bring my own experiences in the classroom into the story, and as such is sort of a turning point in the work. Similarly, when I learned about Flores and Rosa, it was these very experiences I reflected on and felt the need to share in my scholarship. I didn't necessarily expect to write a book - or, soon, books - on the topic, but I also realized, as this piece brilliantly demonstrates, that people just didn't want to be honest about racism. And, for better or worse, it seemed like a responsibility I was well-suited to take on with my interest in racism and language education. But most importantly, I tried to repeatedly name 'whiteness' in my writing, because I just don't want anyone to be able to get away from the issue.

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Notes

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