BRINGING RACE TO THE CLASSROOM: HOW A MULTILINGUAL SPEAKER PERFORMS INFRA POLITICS TO COMBAT RACIOLINGUISTIC IDEOLOGIES

Setiono Sugiharto

Faculty of Education and Languages, Doctoral Program in Applied English Linguistics, Atma Jaya Catholic University of Indonesia,
setiono.sugiharto@atmajaya.ac.id

Abstract

The notion of (anti) racism in applied linguistics in general and in language education in particular has gained considerable attention by scholars in the fields. Contesting the dominance of monolingual ideology in language education, applied linguists and language education scholars have become eager to resuscitate this notion, often implicitly averring that racism has long been insidiously penetrating in the field and surreptitiously operating under the so-called *raciolinguistic ideologies*. It is these ideologies that are alleged to perpetuate, and even to further the hegemony of White supremacy and empire, eventually giving rise to racial inequalities and racial hierarchies in language education. The antiracism movement, it has been asserted, needs to be enacted. This article will argue that the fervent pronouncements of raciolinguistic ideologies need to be taken seriously, so as to promote linguistic justice and linguistic equality in language education. It will first discuss the claims of raciolinguistic ideologies, and then provide examples (from a classroom practice) of how the so-called "racialized subjects" enact their quiescent capacity as social and political being in subverting identities in the perceived dominant language (i.e. English) as a way of doing infra politics –an instance of grassroots politics. In so doing, the article argues that the racialized subjects are not submissive language users, but are actively engaged themselves in resisting raciolinguistic ideologies.

Keywords: *(Anti) Racism, Language Education, Monolingualism, Raciolinguistic Ideologies, Racialized Subjects, Infra Politics*

INTRODUCTION

The notion of (anti) racism in language education and applied linguistics in general has hitherto been feverishly elevated in the fields. This elevation emanates from the recent pronouncements that language education has been besieged by "nationalist and raciolinguistic ideologies of monolingualism" (Li, 2021, p. 2) and by "abyssal thinking and raciolinguistic ideologies" (García ,Flores, Seltzerc, Li, Otheguya & Rosa, 2021, p. 206). It is raciolinguistic ideologies and the dominance of monolingualism in language education that have been alleged to perpetuate, and even to further the hegemony of White supremacy and empire, eventually giving rise to racial inequalities and racial hierarchies in language education practices. To counter these ideologies, scholars have so far exhorted that antiracist movement is imperative to be enacted, so that "applied linguistics can ever be disentangled from and even actually work against White supremacy and empire" (Motha, 2020, p. 129). Nonetheless, how the enactment of this antiracist movement can be realized in real educational practices has yet to be explored further.

This article will first discuss the most recent claims of raciolinguistic ideologies in language education, and then argue that its fervent pronouncements, along with the implicit declaration of antiracist movement in the fields needs to be taken seriously if we are to create a utilitarian language teaching practice, and to promote linguistic justice and equality. It will then provide an example (from

a classroom setting) of how a multilingual speaker enacts their quiescent capacity as social and political being in subverting identities in the perceived dominant language (i.e. English) as a way of doing infra politics (Scott, 1990) –an instance of grassroots politics in covertly opposing the imposition of the English-only-policy.

CLAIMS OF RACIOLINGUISTIC IDEOLOGIES IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Originally theorized by Flores and Rosa (2015), raciolinguistic ideologies signify the idea of predominant language ideology that attempt to racialize students of color and to assimilate their linguistic practices into this ideology. Raciolinguistic ideologies, they further affirm, are still prevalent in educational contexts especially in U.S. classrooms where language diversity exists. In an effort to critique and complement the limited insights of the proposed additive (as opposed to subtractive) approaches to language learning which places a high value to "the appropriateness-based model of language education" (Flores & Rosa 2015, p. 155), Flores and Rosa employed the framework of raciolinguistic ideologies to further explicate the effects of the model on the language- minoritized students. They argue, however, that the model "not only marginalizes the linguistic practices of language-minoritized communities but is also premised on the false

assumption that modifying the linguistic practices of racialized speaking subjects is key to eliminating racial hierarchies" (Flores & Rosa, 2015, p. 155).

Borrowing the notion of raciolinguistic ideologies to observe the teaching of academic English in the U.K. classroom setting, Li (2021) found that the ideologies persist in the classroom. Students are linguistically marginalized and racialized as their proficiency in academic English is ascribed to their racial identity. In his case, "a British-born Chinese cannot claim to be a native-speaker of English because English is owned by a different race" (Li, 2021, p. 6). In learning academic English, this linguistic stigmatization and subjugation often renders language learners incompetent.

Further reverberating the prominence of raciolinguistic ideologies to the forefront of language education and applied linguistic scholarship, scholars of color such as Kubota (2020) and Motha (2020) amongst others are probably the leading forces who have vehemently critically voiced these dominant ideologies widespread in applied linguistics as well as in language education. Kubota (2020), for example, alerts us of the insidious presence of what she calls "epistemological racism" in knowledge production, which can "produce and maintain racial hierarchies and inequalities of different academic knowledges, further impacting the institutional status of racialized scholars" (p. 715). In a similar vein, Motha (2020) brings the issue of racism in applied linguistics to the fore, posing a

rhetorical question as the title of her article "Is an Antiracist and Decolonizing Applied Linguistics Possible? In it, she points out that we applied linguists tend to become complicit and intimate with White supremacy, which "materializes in many configurations" (Motha, 2020, p.129). Motha's message is that racism has been part of applied linguistics, wittingly or otherwise. It is embedded in the field, and masquerades itself under neutral and innocuous language practices. However, she envisions that an antiracist energy to resist racism in the field is possible, though "it is not a natural progression in our profession" (Motha, 2020, p. 132).

Most recently, García, et.al.(2021), who call themselves "members of racialized bilingual groups" (p. 206), vehemently declare their manifesto that confront the prevailing grip of raciolinguistic ideologies and abyssal thinking in language education for racialized bilinguals. As racializes bilingual scholars, the themselves experienced linguistic ostracism which render them as incompetent in the mastery of the English language, let alone claiming ownership of the language in spite of the fact some of them were born in the U.S. and became immigrants in the U.S. and the U.K. since childhood. Combating raciolinguistic ideologies in language education, they beg to differ in construing the ideas of language, bilingualism, education of racialized bilingualism, and pedagogical practices. In essence, the message conveyed in the manifesto by these scholars of color is that these ideas need to be

revolutionized in light of the socio-historical and cultural vantage points of "the epistemology of the Global South" (Sousa Santos, 2014).

The above claims over raciolinguistic ideologies undergirded racism in language education and applied linguistics are indicative that racism in its various forms, including epistemological racism, has long been part of the field, and that it is not dissociable with the academic practices we applied linguists do in the profession. For all the scholars mentioned above, the challenges language education specialists and applied linguists are facing today is to confront raciolinguistic ideologies, along with its Euro-American centric orientation to knowledge system, as well as academic practices, by enacting antiracist practices (see Kubota & Lin, 2009 for further discussion of race, culture and identity in second language education). In essence, what the scholars call for is clearly the enactment of antiracist applied linguistic movement. The intellectual concerns about the lingering prominence of raciolinguistic ideologies raised by the above scholars are certainly very opportune, given that "the hegemonic forces in our fields keep themselves "alive and kicking" through various aspects of English language education…" (Kumaravadivelu, 2016, p. 72) [quotation marks in original]. Keeping this in mind, it is incumbent upon us to resist these "hegemonic forces" by encouraging educational practices that do justice to multilingual teachers and students. This exhortation

certainly goes to the very heart with the spirit of linguistic justice and linguistic equality envisioned by the scholars of color.

Despite laudable, outspoken voices against raciolinguistic ideologies do not explicitly accentuate the potential of the performative power of language users in appropriating and even in resisting these ideologies. As such, within the hegemonic grip of nationalist and raciolinguistic ideologies in language education, these voices will likely to be a voice in the wilderness. What we need to do is to further unpack language users' performative power in confronting the dominant language ideology. In doing so, we can better appreciate language users' resourcefulness in practicing language in a contact situation. The sections that follow discuss the notion of infra politics as a strategy of covert resistance. An illustration of doing this politics from a classroom context is provided.

INFRA POLITICS AS A COVERT RESISTANCE

Grassroots politics is often performed by lay people in their attempt to resist the dominant discourses, and to create oppositional and alternative discourses and identities. These people often do this by using covert, yet creative discourses that may not at all be congenial to the desire of the dominant discourse communities. Parodying, joking, speaking behind the back, and satirizing the dominant discourses, among others are such forms of creative

oppositional discourses. In most contexts of language use, these forms are carried out on the sly, and are hidden from the publics' eyes. It thus represents the "infra politics" of underlife behaviors (Scott, 1990). It also constitutes a "micropolitics", in that it "is not very conspicuous in the impact it has on wider social life" (Canagarajah, 2004, p. 134). Social media like Facebook and Twitter have been considered as cozy and safe sites to create and establish alternative identities. Through these media, it is also deemed more effective to subvert those in authority and have power. It is important to note that critical voices established in the safe sites may not always take a linguistic form, but are also manifested through such practices as pictorial parodies, satires and jokes, the use of which are facilitated and disseminated by social media. Studies on sociology scholarship have demonstrated that voicing one's critical thoughts on hidden sites free from surveillance is a common strategy adopted by the oppressed to protect and preserve their identities and rights. Through this surveillance-free space, they can not only celebrate freedom to opine, but can also display a critical attitude against any effort to undermine their identities. Performed clandestinely, this micropolitics can have performative power in confronting dominant conventions and discourses, especially if done by a mobilizing mass.

In his study of students' opposition to dominant conventions and discourses framed under the concept of subversive identities,

Canagarajah (2004) argues that oppositional strategies can be carried out in a space called "safe house", which he defines as "sites that are free from surveillance, especially by authority figures…" (p. 121). This safe house has been contextualized to encompass the following:

> In the classroom: asides between students, passing of notes, small group interactions, peer activities, marginalia in textbooks and notebooks, transition from one teacher to another, before classes begin, after classes are officially over. Outside the classroom: the canteen, library, dorms, playgrounds, and computer labs.
>
> In cyberspace: e-mail, online discussions/chat.
>
> (Canagarajah, 2004, p. 121)

Drawing on this model of safe house, Canagarajah narrated how African-American students and Tamil students studying academic writing and English for general academic purposes, respectively creatively developed convoluted, mixed identities and discourses in opposition to the dominant discourse on which they are imposed to adopt. He also found that safe houses have proven effective for showing covert resistance, as they allow the students to create alternative identities that may go against the grains to what has been determined in the objectives of the schooling. The alternative discourses and identities developed in the safe houses are considered

useful rather than harmful, as they exhibit creative and critical learning strategies taking place outside the classroom wall.

However, covert resistance can also take place in the classroom during the class interaction, as can been seen in the example in the next section. While there may be consequences for being reprimanded by the school supervisor for being not complying with the English-only policy mandated by the school, the teacher took the risks of being adamantly mixed English with other languages.

Thus, relating the notion of infra politics to English language pedagogy, we can view it as a covert form of resistance where both teachers and students, under the pressure of the imposition of the English-only-policy in their school contexts, exhibit their resistance toward the use of English. That is, they show their oppositional behavior toward such a policy, albeit often carried out covertly. This oppositional behavior by no means carries a negative weight if we contextualize it from the both teachers' and students' socio-political contexts. By contrast, it can be productive and provide a critical edge to appropriating English as a dominant language, in that it can function as "pedagogical alternatives for the periphery' (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 185). No less important, infra politics seen as a covert resistance in classroom context can also serve as "the strategies students display while negotiating texts, discourses, and codes in the classroom", which can eventually "provide useful hints

for the development of a critical pedagogy that addresses the specific challenges they confront in learning English (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 185).

DOING INFRA POLITICS AS A GRASSROOTS POLITCS: AN EXAMPLE

This section demonstrates the possibility of deracializing and English as a dominant language in language education practices in a non-native English speaking country, Indonesia. Drawing on the idea of Scott's (1990) ''infra politics' as representing a grassroots politics, I provide an example of a classroom interaction where an Indonesian teacher from a Javanese ethnicity (one of the largest ethnicities in Indonesia) deracialized English by meshing Javanese – his native language –with English and Indonesian when interacting with students.

Consider, for example, the following instance of an enactment of infra politics from a classroom site. In the excerpt below a teacher deracializes English by bringing and infusing his own identity as a speaker from a Javanese ethnicity when interacting with his students. Teaching the Simple Past Tense in English, the teacher meshes different linguistic codes (English, Javanese dialect, and Indonesian) to demonstrate his creativity in shuttling among these three languages. With the strong imposition of the English-only-policy (as a mandated macro-centric policy) in most schools in

Indonesia, the teacher as a multilingual speaker is able to surreptitiously enact his agentive capacity to appropriate and deracialize English, so as to suit the communicative goal of teaching English in the local context. In a sense, this is a strategic way for the teacher to reconstruct his invested identity in a dominant language use imposed on him by the school (see also Mutiara, 2020 for a study on identity construction by Indonesian students in a school setting). Now consider the following excerpt where a teacher explains the Simple past tense to the students:

Teacher : Good morning students.

Students: : Good morning, Sir. We learn today the Simple Past Tense, Okay. **Sing ngerti tense iki sopo? [Who knows about this tense?].** This tense uses past tense verb, or **kata kerjo lampau [verb used for past event]. Perhatikan dulu contoh kalimat ini yo [observe the following example in the sentence]**. This sentence uses the verb "ate", **bentuk lampau dari eat [the past form of the verb "eat"]. Wis ngerti yo? [Do you understand now?]**

Student A : Understand Sir.

In the excerpt above, the teacher begins by checking student's understanding about the Simple Past Tense using the Javanese language – **Sing ngerti tense iki sopo? [Who knows about this tense?]**, and then briefly explains the tense in the English language. To ensure himself that the students understand his explanation, he resorted again to the Javanese language, **kata kerjo lampau [verb used for past event].** He goes on to explain the tense in the Indonesian language, **Perhatikan dulu contoh kalimat ini yo [observe the following example in the sentence, okay],** mixing it with the English sentence **"**This sentence uses the verb "ate"'" and providing its equivalent in Indonesian. After this explanation, the teacher rechecks the students' understanding using Javanese expression, **Wis ngerti yo? [Do you understand now?]**. The creative meshing of these different linguistic codes exemplifies a covert oppositional behavior in a formal classroom interaction to resist the English-only-policy imposed by his institution. The teacher might feel that by shuttling these different linguistic codes, he can make his explanation intelligible to the students, and thus can make learners easily grasp the form and function of the tense.

The example above is indeed a strategic grassroots politics performed through a specific territoriality (i.e. from the perspective of Javanese dialects), which may be disruptive in its expression, spontaneous in its emergence, and out of sync with the demands of the established conventions of Western discourse. The oppositional

behavior for resorting to one's cultural, ideological and discursive traditions, rather than sorely conforming to institutional culture and norms should not be viewed as dysfunctional, because educational research has found that such underlife behavior is pedagogically valuable (Canagajah, 1999).

The teacher's initiative to mesh different codes provides evidence that local teacher is able to creatively devise strategies of appropriating discourse so as to suit the communicative needs and educational traditions of the students. He creates a space for forming a pedagogical alternative that is congenial to the needs of the students in the periphery. It is interesting that the teachers' well-intentioned purpose to make the explanation easily understood by the learners emboldened him to mesh languages in the formal classroom interaction, rather than in the safe house which is free from a surveillance. Above all, the teacher also has proven himself a resourceful language user capable of enacting their quiescent capacity as social and political being in subverting identities in the perceived dominant language (i.e. English) as a way of doing infra politics. In the context of appropriating discourses as demonstrated above, Canagarajah (1999) convincingly argues that it is this appropriation strategy that "makes periphery subjects linguistically competent for the culturally hybrid post-modern world they confront" (p. 197).

The meshing of different linguistic codes in the example above also demonstrates a covert appropriation taking place in a "contact zone", which is defined by Pratt (1991) as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today (p. 34). As Sugiharto (2021) has recently argued, contact zone offers an important perspective for language learning as a site of struggle amid different power positioning. As related to language education, contact zone is the space where language norms and conventions are continuously reconstructed and renegotiated as language users dynamically interact with each other in 'highly asymmetrical relations of power'.

CONCLUSION

The example shown above is indeed a strategic horizontal mobilization of the grassroots politics conducted through certain territoriality (i.e. from the perspective of Javanese dialects), which is disruptive in its expression, and spontaneous in its emergence. One may argue that the deliberate meshing of codes from different languages may deviate the standard norms imposed and desired by the educational institutions. However, such a practice of language meshing may generate educational benefits for both the teachers and students in facilitating learning, in that the teaching and learning

process can be effectively carried out in classroom. This is due to the fact that the functionality of the meshed codes in a meaning-making process far outweighs the perceived deviance of language norms. Furthermore, language crossing practices show language users' criticality and creativity which can eventually enhance and facilitate language learning processes in a meaningful way.

In addition, we should lose sight of the fact that every language user, be they teachers, students, and lay people at large, can enact their agentive capacity to gain functionality through different resources (verbal and non-verbal) in certain communicative settings. Thus, in the educational context, it seems judicious that rather than view them as "racialized subjects" who are grappling with such notion of raciolinguistic ideologies, racial inequalities and hierarchies, both the classroom teacher and the students are themselves resourceful language users who are capable of enacting their quiescent capacity as social and political being in subverting identities in the perceived dominant language (i.e. English) as a way of doing infra politics. It is now high time to shift our view of language teachers and learners from "racialized" language users who always painstakingly struggle to confront and combat linguistic inequalities to a perspective of "resourceful" language users who "have both good access to a range of linguistic resources and are good at shifting between styles, discourses, registers and genres (Pennycook, 2014, p.1).

REFERENCES

Canagarajah, S. (1999). *Resisting linguistic imperialism in English teaching.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Canagarajah, S. (2004). 'Subversive identities, pedagogical safe houses, and critical learning,' in B. Norton and K. Toohey (Eds.): *Critical pedagogies and language learning* (pp, 116-137.Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Flores, N. & Rosa. J. (2015). Undoing Appropriateness: Raciolinguistic Ideologies and Language Diversity in Education. *Harvard Education Review*, 85(2), 149–71.

García, O., Flores, N., Seltzer, K., Wei, L., Otheguy, R., & Rosa, J. (2021). Rejecting abyssal thinking in the language and education of racialized bilinguals: A manifesto. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 18(3), 203-228. // doi.org/ 10.1080/15427587.2021.1935957.

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

Kubota, R. (2020). Confronting epistemological racism, decolonizing scholarly knowledge: Race and gender in applied linguistics, *Applied Linguistics*, 41(5), 712-732. https://doi:10.1093/applin/amz033.

Kubota, R. & A. Lin, (Eds.). (2009). *Race, culture, and identity in second language education: Exploring critically engaged practice*. New York: Routledge.

Kumaravadivelu, B. (2014). The decolonial option in English teaching: Can the subaltern act?, *TESOL Quarterly*, 51 (1), 66-85. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.202.

Li, W. (2021). Translanguaging as a political stance. *ELT Journal* (online version). //doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccab083.

Motha, S. (2020). 'Is an antiracist and decolonizing applied linguistics possible?,' *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 40:128–133. https:// doi:10.1017/S0267190520000100.

Mutiara, R. (2020). Identity construction of English language education department students, *Edulanguage: Journal of English Language Education*, 3(1), 1-16. https://doi.org/10.20414/edulangue.v3i1.1441.

Pennycook, A. (2014). Principled polycentrism and resourceful speakers. *The Journal of ASIA TEFL*, 4(1), 1-19.

Pratt, L.M. (1991). Arts of the contact zone. *Profession*, 91, 33-40.

Scott, J.C. (1990). *Domination and the art of resistance*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Yale University Press.

Santos, B. S. de (2014). *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against epistemicide.* Routledge.

Sugiharto, S. (2021). A Sociolinguistics of mobility, mundane translinguistic practices, and speakers' resourcefulness: Implications for ELT. *Edulanguage: Journal of English Language Education*, 4(2), 157-167. https://doi.org/10.20414/ edulangue. v4i2.4289