



Artigos/Articles

The place of race in the English Language classroom¹

Glenda Cristina Valim de Melo²

RESUMO

Quando se pensa na prática tradicional do ensino de uma língua estrangeira, é possível observar uma preocupação geral com o código incorporado nas práticas sociais. Nas escolas de idiomas, o foco está nas chamadas quatro habilidades e/ou gramática. Nas escolas públicas e privadas, isso depende das prescrições do Ministério da Educação. Nos cursos de graduação em idiomas, os alunos são treinados para ensinar espanhol, inglês, português e suas respectivas literaturas. Estudantes são expostos(os) a metodologias, gêneros textuais, teorias de aprendizagem, conceitos linguísticos, livros didáticos, TICs, etc. No entanto, quando se sai desses ambientes educacionais e se envolve em tarefas, em uma variedade de situações complexas em sala de aula, se depara com os alunos e seus corpos sexualizados, racializados e abordados em termos de gênero; e mesmo assim, há um entendimento subjacente de que, em uma sala de aula de idiomas, não há espaço para raça, gênero ou sexualidade. Proponho repensar o papel que as questões raciais desempenham na sala de aula de inglês, tomando como ponto de partida as ideias de Butler (1997) – baseadas na teoria dos atos de fala performativos de Austin (1962/1990) e também de Derrida (1972/1988) – e no entendimento de que fazemos coisas com palavras. Portanto, compreendo que o entendimento de que as salas de aula de idiomas, também, são locais onde questões relacionadas à raça devem ser questionadas e contestadas. É a questão que abordo em uma avaliação crítica do lugar da raça na sala de aula de inglês.

Palavras-Chave: língua como ação, raça, sala de aula, língua inglesa

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²Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro – UFRJ. ORCID. Email:glendamelo09@letras.ufrj.br

ABSTRACT

When we think of the traditional teaching practice of a foreign language, we observe a general concern with the code embedded in social practices. In language schools, the focus is on the so-called four abilities and/or grammar. In public and private schools, this depends on the prescriptions coming from the Ministry of Education. In Language Graduation Courses, undergraduate students are being trained to teach Spanish, English, Portuguese and their corresponding literatures. Students are exposed to methodologies, textual genres, learning theories, language concepts, textbooks, ICTs, etc. However, when we leave these educational settings and engage in our tasks in a variety of complex classroom situations, we face students and their sexualized, racialized, gender-addressed bodies; and even then, there is an underlying understanding that, in a language classroom, there is no room for race, gender, or sexuality. We propose a rethinking of the role race issues play in the English language classroom, taking as point of departure Butler's ideas (1997) – based on Austin's (1962/1990) and also Derrida's (1972/1988) performative speech acts theory, and on the understanding that we do things with words. Therefore, we support an understanding that language classrooms are also places where issues related to race must be questioned and contested. It is the issue we will address here, in a critical assessment of the place of race in the English language classroom.

Keywords: language as action, race, English language, classroom.

1. Introduction

Considering the perspective of Reflexive Modernity³ (Giddens, 1991), we are situated in a socio-historical context that refers to the transformation of the current world, to reflexivity about ourselves, and to the reinvention of contemporary life. Thus, we are faced with the plurality of social life and with an element of transgression observed in diverse contexts. To transgress would be to enter territories considered forbidden and "...to think of what shouldn't be thought, do what shouldn't be done" (Pennycook, 2006:74). In blogs and social networks, for example, the so-called minorities⁴ tell their stories, exercise their citizenship and select the struggles they believe are worth engaging in according

³ For the same period of reflexivity of ourselves, of the questioning of the great narratives, etc. Bauman (2001) uses the term Recent Modernity and Rampton (2006), Late Modernity.

⁴ The term minority in this article is used to refer to those who do not have equal opportunities of access and guaranteed equal rights in the social world. For more information on the black population as a minority, consult: <http://www.slideshare.net/laeserieufrj/relatrio-2009-2010>.

to their socio-historical contexts and experiences. This way, the online environment can contribute to give visibility to ebony female, transsexual, transgender bodies, etc., since “Modernity has silenced the diversity of human experiences of sociability for the benefit of a unique identity project: white, male and heterosexual” (Moita Lopes, 2006:132).

In this moment of fluidity and vertigo, uncertainty and reflexivity about ourselves, we follow several protests on/offline in which many people struggle to have access to basic rights, such as legalised gay marriage, the possibility of undergoing a name change for transgender people, abortion rights for women who do not wish to proceed with a pregnancy, to name but a few. On the other hand, we have senators and representatives secretly approving projects that may restrict rights acquired in the past. In this context of turbulence, we specifically look at teaching issues involving race and language. While on the web we see inflamed debates and discussions about race, in language classrooms we observe a silence on this issue. In undergraduate courses in Languages, curricula and course programs are directed towards the construction and linguistic, literary and pedagogical education of pre-service teachers whose careers are bound for the classroom. Thus, they are trained to teach Spanish, English, Portuguese, etc. Topics related to methodologies, textual genres, learning theories, language concepts, textbook use, ICTs, etc. are studied in these courses, but there is no discussion on how to approach or treat the suffering constructed in and through language (Bakhtin, 1981), which becomes action at the moment of enunciation, marking both bodies and social practices.

When we leave the training spaces and engage in our daily tasks in a variety of complex classrooms contexts, we realize that we were not taught how to deal with gendered, sexualized, racialized students whose bodies are ignored, in many cases, lest we miss the main point of teaching which is teaching the target language. There is, therefore, an idea that the English language classroom is not a place where we can discuss topics such as race, gender, sexuality, among others. These classrooms do not become places of (de/co) construction of actors and their social practices involving such issues, even if we have prescriptions such as those present in the National Curricular Parameters

(PCNs), in the case of public-school education (elementary and secondary school), which suggest transversal themes as relevant for the development of a sense of citizenship in students.

Thus, when we are silent and when we silence others on the previously mentioned themes in educational settings and/or our language classrooms, what actions are we performing? Who are those whose bodies we are discursively and performatively constructing as abject? Based on this perspective, in this article, we aim at reflecting on the place of race in the English language classroom and we assume Bronckart's ideas (2007: 20) that argue in favour of studying social actors integrated with other areas of knowledge, that is, to develop an "integrated science of the human centred on the dynamics that shape language practices". This perspective is also shared by Transgressive Applied Linguistics which, in the words of Moita Lopes (2006: 14), would establish a dialogue "... with theories that are crossing the field of social sciences and humanities" or as suggested by Pennycook (2006: 67), is "a form of antidisiplinary knowledge, a way of thinking and doing that is always questioning".

In addition, we rely on the concept of language as performance, in alignment with Austin's (1960 [1990]) and Derrida's (1972 [1988]) theories, as well as on the discursive, social, historical and performative character of language construction, intersected with race, gender and sexuality (Butler, 2003, 2004; Barnard, 2004, Sommerville, 2000). In this sense, we first approach language as action; then, we briefly discuss language teaching; after that, we discuss race in the light of queer theories; and lastly, we discuss the place of race in the English language classroom.

2. Doing things with words

In this article, we start from the theoretical assumption that language is action, as we are basing ourselves on the concept of performative speech acts introduced by (Austin (1960 [1990]) and Derrida (1972 [1988])). In Austin's first conferences, speech acts were understood to be either constative or performative. The former make descriptions, and the latter indicate "that when

the utterance is issued, an action is taking place, consequently being considered a mere equivalent to saying something” (Austin, 1960 [1990]: 25). This way, Austin focuses his studies on everyday language, turning, therefore, to social life and breaking with the structuralist paradigm of language. The researcher also presents some special conditions for the performative speech acts to take place, such as:

- the author [of such act] must be in a position to do the performative speech act;
- the author must have the intention of doing the performative speech acts enunciated;
- and the author must not break the commitment enunciated; in other words, the author must not say “welcome” only to mistreat the guest.

Austin (1960 [1990]) later reformulates his own theory and begins to view all speech acts as performative. Thus, when we enunciate something, an action is performed, and we are not just describing or stating something. According to Rajagopalan (2010: 249), Austin proposes to address the question of “how to do things with words”. The words themselves, in all their materiality and historicity, are under his scrutiny. In the reinterpretation of the performative speech acts done by Derrida (1972 [1988]), he emphasizes the idea that all speech acts are performative, but disagrees with the special conditions and the pre-speech intention proposed by Austin. For Derrida, the actions are performed when saying takes place and there would be no special conditions for this; he also emphasizes that there would be no intention outside of language. The scholar also contributed with the aforementioned theory by showing that the performative speech acts are sedimented, naturalized and become true through iterability and citationality. The researcher states that even the etiolations, indicated as non-performative by Austin, are performative speech acts.

In alignment with this post-structuralist paradigm, which is anchored in the previously mentioned authors, Butler (1997: 8) says that “we do things with language, produce effects with language, and we do things to language, but

language is also the thing that we do”. Therefore, from the moment we work in our teaching tasks with an overarching performative conception of language, we also understand that teaching a language goes beyond description and communication, as we will see below.

3. Some Thoughts on Language Teaching

When we think of language teaching, we will find institutions and teachers who still conceive and work with language as a system and/or a structure. By this token, there would only be standard English to be learned, and all other forms of English use throughout the world, that is, the “Englishes” or “global English” as Moita Lopes (2008) calls it, are just erased and only one imperial and hegemonic English language prevails. According to Rocha (2013:85),

such hegemonies of language teaching are guided by language views quite distant from the performative one. In Brazil, people generally mock the sentence “The book is on the table”, the ultimate icon for a kind of decontextualized, aseptic, associative and focused exclusively on code English teaching, placing the rules of language use on an ontological level prior to the practices. According to this perspective, the topics to be discussed should favour the presentation of linguistic structures, often seeking to present “the culture” of a country speaking the target language through the selected theme.

Furthermore, according to Kalva and Ferreira (2011:166), language teaching is not simple. On the contrary, it is beyond the work of “... making the student learn words, grammar and phonetics”. The authors also add that the language learning process “... is not always a harmonious process; many people feel invaded in their national identities when they are learning a new language, especially English”. This conflict could be caused because even though globalization brings people and cultures together, it also provides a circulation of

diverse information and also, according to Kumaravadivelu (2006), the desire to maintain their cultural and linguistic heritage.

According to Moita Lopes (2005), language education, especially English teaching and learning, can contribute to the construction of critical social subjects and provide access to varied information in this globalized and very semiotized world, disseminated by screens of many technological tools. If we take into consideration, according to Milton Santos (2000), that everything goes through discourse, it is possible to say that the teaching of English language is important because:

the discourses that circulate on the Internet and in most international channels, not to mention the ones coming from the research areas, finance, business, conferences, world sporting events, etc., are, primarily built in English, even those that are produced in countries where English is not spoken as a first language (Moita Lopes, 2005: 6).

In a concept of language in which the focus is placed on the code, the objective of English classes is to teach and learn the language as a native speaker; texts dealing with gender, race, sexuality, social class and disability, situations experienced daily in educational institutions, are erased, silenced and/or used to reinforce the teaching of structure and/or skills, and also to naturalize hegemonic and stereotyped discourses of race without contesting them. After all, questioning and shaking the crystallized discourses of the aforementioned themes is outside the 'language learning' proposal. Thus, when we do not deal with or question the stereotypes of race, gender, etc. in our language classes, according to the performative conception of language, we are doing things to the themes mentioned, as well as to the people belonging to the so-called minorities.

According to Ferreira (2013), black students have access to language teaching through teaching material, specifically the textbook, in which racial representativeness focuses on classic stereotypes about black people:

For black students, materials like the one analysed in this work, without the critical thinking of English language teachers, function as a determination, creating in them a desire for whitening, because their identities are not seen as positive. Their identities are represented in all social segments in a stereotyped manner, as shown by this study. Propagating studies and research on ethnic-racial issues, both in the educational field as well as in applied linguistics, is to assume the place of black people in society and to understand that this work should be promoted in Brazilian schools (Ferreira; Camargo, 2014:198).

On the other hand, many teachers were not prepared and there are few who are being prepared to deconstruct these stereotypes that hurt and that become sedimented through language. In classrooms inhabited by diverse, conflicted and fragmented people, we observe the naturalization of discourses that are reinforced and become normalized, bringing suffering to people involved in work done in schools. We emphasize that these discourses are repeated and propagated in different situations and on a variety of media. In relation to the classrooms, according to Mastrella (2010: 114),

what do they say about who we are, teachers and learners of foreign languages? At the same time, what do they fail to say? These are questions that bring an important consequence to the place called classroom, which then becomes a space for the construction of identities, encompassing discourses that dictate how subjects and the processes of teaching and learning languages should be. This means that the classroom, as a place inhabited by fragmented identities, is not a neutral space of pedagogical transaction, but a place of defined hierarchies.

In other words, in the process of teaching and learning languages, in Reflexive Modernity, we must think of what theories dictate, how learning occurs, and also of discursive, performative, historical and social co-construction of participants in the aforementioned processes (students, teachers, etc.). Furthermore, it is relevant to think of what we do with language in our language classes and in the teaching materials we adopt.

In the performative perspective of language, when teaching English, we are acting in social life, co-building people and social practices. In the classroom and through English teaching, we crystallize concepts regarding language, teaching, teachers, students, etc.; we naturalize discourses of race, gender, sexuality, social class, among others. In this sense, when teaching English, we are also doing things with and to the English language, but a language is also what we make of it. Therefore, reflecting on the performative perspective of language allows us to rethink, deconstruct and reinvent our teaching tasks, theories and the teaching of English itself.

4. Race and queer theories

Queer theories aim to question crystallized norms, whether they have to do with race, gender, sexuality, social class, disability, etc. (Sommerville, 2000; Sullivan, 2003; Butler, 2004; Barnard, 2004; Louro, 2004, Wilchins, 2004). Such theories also seek to reflect on a post-identity policy, devoid of stability and normalization. Following Melo and Moita Lopes (2013), who are anchored in Sullivan (2003), Wilchins, (2004) and Loxley (2007), we understand that queer theories are based on:

- the Foucauldian notion of power, exercised in micro-relationships;
- Austin's proposal of performative speech acts ([1962], 1990);
- the concepts of iterability and citationality proposed by Derrida ([1972], 1988), in his reinterpretation of Austin's performative speech acts;

- and finally, on Derrida's deconstruction perspective ([1972], 1988), which seeks to deconstruct the binarisms with which the Western tradition operates in Modernity.

To think of race in the light of queer theories is to examine the grounded and normalized race discourses on this issue operating in Brazil, contesting them and understanding race as a discursive, historical, cultural and performative construction. As for the cited discourses, according to Melo; Moita Lopes (2014: 545), it is important to

focus on discourses of slavery, abolition, race science, racial democracy (Sodré, 1999; Munanga, 1986; Telles, 2003; Henrique, 2007) and their semantic effects on social practices, thus contesting the normalizing speeches about race that aim only to disqualify and inferiorize black women as social subjects. They have historically and continuously been propagated by the media and other institutions, have been assimilated and reproduced by Brazilian society, and their discursive effects are perceptible in social practices”.

In other words, it is important to consider that the discourses about black women and men mentioned above are built through the iterability and citationality of performative speech acts. The repetition of such performative speech acts constructs and naturalizes black women as bad, inferior, abject. They are thought to be like animals, skilled for household chores that require strength, but are never considered appropriate for intellectual activities. That reiteration can be observed in traditional and digital media, in schools and churches, among other spaces. If we take into consideration Blommaert's (2006) studies, speeches/texts travel and gain new meanings in each new context, and based on Butler (1997), we can say that, on this journey, they carry historical meanings. When looking at some comments in social media networks, such as Facebook, we encounter racial discourses that point to religious speeches from centuries ago that were used to justify black slavery.

In the case of discourses hinging on notions of racial democracy, we observe an ideology that places the country as an example of racial miscegenation, in which black, indigenous and white people are cordial with each other and live peacefully and harmoniously in society (Sodré, 1999; Telles, 2003). These discourses, if we consider the performative perspective of language, become true through the repetition of performative speech acts on racial equality, peaceful coexistence, and equal rights. Such performative speech acts were and are repeated and reiterated by the various media, in schools, churches, bars, in the jokes told in the workplace, etc. We take these performative speech acts and we employ them in our conversations, comments, posts and, finally, they become truth marking our bodies.

As an example, we notice that English textbooks have little or no representation of black people in them, often standardizing whitening concepts and a certain beauty standard. An effect of such discourses can be observed when white bodies are preferred to ebony bodies for a job vacancy, when a certain appearance is taken as a requirement for the selection. Black housekeepers are paid lower wages because their bodies are worth less; black bodies always have their qualifications questioned when they occupy places that would not be 'intended for them'. Therefore, the discourse of racial democracy has been repeated over and over through the years, and has become true, with effects such as the obliteration of racism and racial prejudice, also present in language classes.

Another relevant aspect when studying race in light of queer theories is an intersection among performative traits. This intersectionality allows us to understand the complexity in the understanding of people and social practices. Researchers like Sommerville (2000), Barnard (2004) and Wilchins (2004) claim that sexuality and gender cannot be studied without encompassing the racial issue and vice versa. Such scholars claim that some race theorists tend to focus mainly on race; those researchers of sexuality tend to privilege it and gender scholars, in turn, would investigate this category primarily. In light of all this, the hegemony of one of these factors is bound to remain. According to Wilchins (2004), an analysis that contemplates a *single* category in isolation would provide

an incomplete view of the social subject. Thus, if we look only at race, we will not have a vision of the whole, and the same goes whether we consider blacks or non-blacks. It becomes necessary to intersect race, gender, sexuality and other traits, if we are to have more complex analyses of social practices.

A final issue we would like to mention here is that race, as well as gender and sexuality, are fluid concepts; that is, performing discursive acts as women, black, heteronormative, middle class is not the same today as it was 10 years ago. In the 1970s in Brazil, race constructions (that still prevail) were not the same as those found in our social history in 2015. Race is not a rigid performative trait. On the contrary, as black people conquer spaces that are not understood to be theirs, other predicates are attributed to them, including the dark/brunette ones.

As we have argued so far, we understand race as a historical, social, discursive and performative construction. In this sense, according to Melo (2015, p.164) and Melo; Moita Lopes (2013, 2014) “being black, white, yellow, for example, would be the result of the various performative speech acts” to which we were and still are exposed “from birth”. In this sense, the discourses of blackness would allow us, politically, access to ideologies of enhancement of blacks and the fight for rights. On the other hand, they also essentialize a single discursive, hegemonic performance for black people, erasing other possibilities of non-hegemonic identity performances.

Broaching the racial issue in a Brazilian context is still seen as a delicate and complex subject because, in common sense, we come across many discourses which state that we are just biological beings and that race/skin colour announces who we are, the rights and the opportunities that we can or should have access to, in addition to the social places we can (must) occupy. Furthermore, based on what Butler (2004) tells us about the patrolling of gender, we could say that the same also occurs with race, that has been patrolled for centuries. This can be observed, for example, when black people enter spaces that are not seen as appropriate for them. The system that acts through multiple semiotic resources would come into effect by placing these abject bodies in their places, through well-defined bodily discursive performances. In Brazil, this

naturalized system seems veiled in some circumstances, but, if analysed in detail, it becomes explicit in many situations.

5. The place of race in English language classroom

In this article, in order to address the place of race in the English language classroom as well as what we do with language, we bring the thoughts of Venn (2000) and Santos (2004) regarding the need to give voice to those who were erased in Modernity, understood here according to Hall (2006:12), “as a postmodern subject, conceptualized as not having a fixed, essential or permanent identity”, with contradictory identities, in different contexts and moments, without a coherent self and reinvented and co-constructed socio-culturally by the other, through language and history.

In this sense, even though the implementation of Law No. 10.639 has been building a place for the local histories and customs of various black bodies to become visible (Melo, Rocha, Melgaço Jr, 2013), this space seems non-existent when we think about the teaching action and the language classroom, specifically, the teaching of the English language in its various contexts. It then becomes

... important to discuss, since pre-service training, how racialization and sexualization processes are related to schooling. Highlighting this issue can mean to bring bodies, desires and affections back to the scene erased by a modernist tradition that separates body and mind. According to such traditional school understanding, classrooms would not be places of production (and standardization) of bodies, but the territory of aseptic construction of minds (Moita Lopes, 2008), (Melo, Rocha, Melgaço Jr, 2013: 240).

Preta's report, for example, signals what commonly happens in the classrooms of various educational institutions with different black children and adolescents:

when I started going to school, I realized the cruel pain of racism. Only those who are black will understand the meaning of a nickname at school (stinky black girl, *Bombril* hair, monkey, naughty...). Knowing that you are sworn at because of the colour of your skin. The pain of racism is a wound that only hurts when we touch it. So, it is easy to understand why many people prefer not to talk about what they suffer. How painful this awakening is. (Preta, 2012, in Melo; Moita Lopes, 2014: 558).

In addition, she reports the unpreparedness of teachers in dealing with a suffering also built by language and whose action is through language. As mentioned earlier, this can occur when we minimize an offense, such as when one student calls the other “monkey” or “coal”, and the teacher states that “we are all equal”, but in social practices this is not how our identities are constructed:

At first we sought the teacher's help. And she does not often judge the racism suffered by a child as relevant” (Preta, 2012, In Melo; Moita Lopes, 2014: 558).

Starting from the principle of language as action and from what we do with it, and also from the concept of race as a discursive, performative, cultural and historical construction, even with performative speech acts that value black people in a positive way, we still find images in English language textbooks of black people which contribute to the shaping and crystallization of stereotyped discourses concerning this race.

In alignment to Ferreira; Camargo (2014), the research carried out by Silva (2011)—analysing some textbooks indicated only one English textbook that proposed ethnic and racial diversity. This could be noticed in the book *English Unlimited*, elementary level, by Cambridge. According to Ferreira and Camargo (2014), most didactic English material signals a discursive and performative construction that is racist, classist and sexist, also marked by the ideology of whitening as it “...prioritizes whites over blacks” (p.180). For the authors, in this

material, suggested by the National Program of Didactic Book (PNLD), there is an idea of a homogeneous population that does not know how to deal with these differences. In the language classroom, these teaching materials, through semiotic resources, crystallize the discourses and societal roles designated for black bodies.

In this sense, for the citizenship education of students, if we use didactic resources that only briefly discuss racial issues or even worse, silence about them, what are we doing with language in the classroom? In the words of Nénis, an English teacher at an institute of languages:

The material I use brings possibilities, but I believe they are few. The teaching methodology followed where I work takes a practical approach, making the vocabulary to be contextualized in a more routine way, focused on professional interactions, and the information exchanged is understood as transactional, useful for work and professional development, which makes it a little difficult to address the racial issue in detail (Nénis, 2014, in Melo, 2015).

We often silence the conflicts of gender, sexuality, race, social class, disability, etc. that come up in educational institutions and we rarely see the suffering that such silence can bring to people who interact in these spaces. There are situations when, trying to mitigate conflicts, we say that we are all equal and that differences must be ignored or erased. These are only some examples of several situations in which we minimize the pain caused by the lack of discussion of such performative traits in language classes. And this can happen when we base ourselves on the structuralist language concept in which language is not seen as a relevant element in people's social construction.

6. Final Considerations

Within the performative perspective of language or in the framework of language as action, we are aware that when we speak, something is performed; so, we can reflect on the suffering we cause even in English language classes.

Beyond teaching with a focus merely on communication and structure, we can better prepare young people, adults and children to deal with the racial issue, which is so complex in Brazil, a country marked by slavery and black deprecation discourses, besides an erasure of the indigenous bodies who are constructed as abject through language, culture and history.

If we are more aware of the discourses that we sediment and of the prejudices that we crystallize, albeit without noticing, we have the possibility to deconstruct them in the classroom, questioning and contesting them. Thus, race also has its place in an English classroom. According to hooks (1994), by teaching English we can transgress, break barriers and insert racialized, gendered and sexualized bodies in our discourse as active classroom participants.

From the perspective of language as action, the things we do with words and/or language directly marks the person's body and social life. When we make it possible for a student from the periphery, from the countryside, in short, from underprivileged places to study English, we are opening up and creating opportunities for him or her to do things with English and also for English to do things in their lives which we are unaware of. An education for citizenship is responsible for the inclusion of the so-called minorities, offering them the possibility of reinventing themselves and of building paths beyond violence and drug dealing. If we want to contribute to this process, the place of race is also in our English language classroom. When we are aware that we do things with language, we participate in the world as social actors and no longer as abject bodies, because we help, even locally, to co-build social life and people.

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