

TESOL educators can contribute to the fight-back against racial discrimination and hatred: A personal view from Britain

Li Wei

Institute of Education, University College London

Correspondence

Li Wei, Institute of Education, University College London.

Email: li.wei@ucl.ac.uk

A few years ago in pre-Covid time, a Chinese student in an MA in TESOL programme at a British university contacted the marketing and recruitment office to request assistance with her dissertation project that aimed to critique the marketization of UK higher education. She was asked to provide further information about her project, which she did. Upon realising that the student wasn't simply interested in the marketing of the programme that she was in but of all programmes in different subjects and seeing words such as *neoliberalism* and *decolonization* in her proposal, the office emailed the staff in charge of the MA to query the appropriateness of the student's choice of such "a politically charged topic" for a dissertation in TESOL, pointing out that the marketing strategy was commercially sensitive and could not be disclosed to students, especially international students, because some of the strategies—for example, restrictions of students from certain countries for certain programmes—might affect relationships with those countries as a whole.

There are so many things I can say about this scenario: the non-/mis-understanding of what a TESOL MA programme is about; the idea that international students should not be involved in any politically and ideologically charged debate; and the apparent policy that students from certain countries should be restricted from taking certain programmes, for whatever reason. But as an applied linguist and, more relevantly here, as a scholar with roots in China, it is the way Chinese students are perceived and positioned in British higher education institutions that concerns me more. I have been present at many meetings where conflicting discourses regarding Chinese students are heard: on the one hand British universities are desperately trying to recruit more international students because of the high fees they pay. And there is a common recognition that the Chinese in particular are keen customers in the British higher education market. On the other, there are frequent complaints from staff and university administrators that there are too many Chinese students, taking over entire programmes in some places. Such discourses have become rather mundane over time. I used to feel uneasy when I heard discussions of this kind. But with time I stopped paying much attention to them. Until Covid that is.

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2021 The Authors. *TESOL Journal* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of TESOL International Association

The pandemic has changed the rhetoric significantly, but again full of contradictions: British universities have lost a huge amount of revenue from international students, especially from Chinese students who are the largest in number in terms of nationality. At the same time, however, anti-Chinese rhetoric is fierce and much more open than before. People talk about barring Chinese students from taking “sensitive” subjects including biomedical, computer, and data sciences and technologies, because, they claim, the Chinese students are sponsored by the state to steal technological secrets for the Chinese government. Racial abuse of Chinese people on social media is commonplace; Chinese students have been sent pictures of dead bats through social media and told to eat them. Physical assaults on Chinese-looking people have also been much more frequent. In addition, there are reports that academics who have research links with universities in China are asked to sign declarations to prevent so-called security breaches in case they leaked sensitive information to their Chinese colleagues. Some universities have replaced ethnic Chinese staff in their international and student recruitment offices with non-Chinese staff because of “priority changes.”

These changes have made the work of critical applied linguists more relevant. I strongly believe that it is the responsibility of TESOL educators to develop our students’ political awareness and analytical skills to enable them to interrogate policies and practices with particular regard to the marketization of higher education, the experiences of international students including any discrimination they have experienced, and the rhetoric toward different nations and cultures and the implications of the rhetoric for students of different nationalities. TESOL education cannot avoid politically and ideologically charged topics; it is an inherently political field. We need to put equity and social justice at the heart of the agenda for TESOL education and empower our students with the skills and tools to fight against prejudice and discrimination.

It must be pointed out that the current anti-China rhetoric, led by Trump and exacerbated by Covid, not only affects the large number of Chinese students from China in British universities. It has also impacted hugely on the British Chinese families and communities who have been in the United Kingdom for generations. Recent events in Britain such as the Windrush scandal and the controversy surrounding the toppling of the slave trader Edward Colston’s statue in Bristol show that Britain has a very long way to go in facing up its colonial past. But unlike the Black and Jewish communities in Britain, there is little recognition of the history of racial discrimination against the Chinese in the country. As a researcher with a specific interest in multilingualism and migration, I have been struck by the indifference towards the prejudices and stereotypes about the British Chinese people. On the seemingly positive side, they are generally regarded as hardworking and family-oriented. Their children, the British-born Chinese, are usually high achievers in schools. Unlike their counterparts in the United States, however, there is not a model minority discourse around the Chinese in Britain. They are generally seen to be uninterested in participating in British society, preferring to remain in their ethnic clique and minding their own business. This is emphatically untrue because the British Chinese, along with other ethnic minority communities, made huge sacrifices during the Second World War fighting on the front line, and in postwar Britain have contributed very significantly to the economic development of the country. Worse, the Chinese are perceived as physically weak, eating weird stuff, and speaking “ugly” languages. What we must remind ourselves is that these stereotypes do lead to racial discrimination in ordinary times and racial hatred at times of crisis.

During Covid, real cultural differences in practices such as face covering showed. The Chinese in Britain, along with other East Asians in particular, were much more ready and willing to wear face masks in public from the very beginning. But instead of seeing it as a healthy practice, there have been

numerous incidents where the Chinese and Chinese-looking people wearing masks got spat or swore at on the street, because they were assumed to carry the virus. Chinese shops, restaurants, and take-aways were attacked. British Chinese schoolchildren and university students were told to self-isolate for no obvious reason.

Can TESOL education help countries like Britain to face their colonial past and tackle racial prejudice and discrimination within? The answer is yes. Let's start with the globalization of the English language. The expansion of TESOL is clearly a result of the globalization process. And globalization, especially economic globalization, has been embraced by many as a wonderful thing. Yet, globalization, including economic globalization, isn't exactly new, though of course it has been accelerating since the mid-20th century, greatly aided by modern transport systems and information technologies. Globalization has its dark side, both past and present. The spread of the English language across the globe is closely connected with Britain's colonial past. It has had a detrimental impact on other languages and their speakers. English still enjoys high prestige nowadays. It promises educational and economic advancement and access to knowledge and information. Numerous studies have shown that people all over the world regard English as the most desirable language to learn and use, and English-medium education is a high-profit commodity (Coleman, Hultgren, Wei, Tsui, & Shaw, 2018). Not knowing English or even speaking English with a foreign accent can bring shame and real disadvantage. TESOL educators need to bear in mind the sociopolitical history of English as an international language when they implement the curriculum, design the syllabus, and plan the pedagogy. In particular, we should ask ourselves the question: what is the role of English in the community or society that we are teaching, and what is the relationship between English and other languages in the community?

Most of the pedagogical approaches in TESOL are products of history, whether it is grammar-translation, or communicative, or task-based, and we need to be very aware of the historical context when we choose a particular pedagogy. Putting equity and social justice at the heart of TESOL education means that we have to interrogate what led to the perceived pecking order of different languages and recognise the negative impact of the global spread of English on other languages (O'Regan, 2021). Only when we recognise that all languages matter, and by implication all languages in which the knowledge system is constructed matter, can we begin to tackle linguistic xenophobia and racio-linguistic ideologies and practices.

I end this short piece with another personal story. An ethnic Chinese student from Thailand told me his experience of studying in Britain: The Chinese have been described as "Jews of the East" because of the persecution they suffered in Southeast Asian countries in particular: they are not allowed to hold office in certain government-sponsored organisations; Chinese children go to segregated schools; and in certain countries, they are not even allowed to keep their Chinese names. Britain, with its long, extensive, and complicated connections with the majority of Southeast Asian countries, somehow seems to pay no attention to the plight of the Chinese from its former colonies and other countries. This particular student had been constantly mocked for his English accent and "teased" by many as gay because his speech and manner were deemed too feminine. He was very upset and sought advice from the student counselling service of the university. But he was told that he should change the way he speaks and "man up." He said to me, "If someone mocked a Jewish person or a Black person, they would be called a racist, right? Why when I get mocked, even abused, nobody seems to care. Worse, they actually think I'm the problem!" This is the kind of reality the Chinese people are facing in Britain on a daily basis. Racism comes in different shapes and guises. Some people suffer more than others, and in very different ways. There is a very long way to go for us all to fight against racial discrimination and hatred.

THE AUTHOR

Li Wei is Director and Dean of the UCL Institute of Education and Chair of Applied Linguistics. His research covers many different areas of bilingualism and multilingualism. He is Editor of the *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* and *Applied Linguistics Review*. He is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences, UK and a Member of Academia Europaea.

REFERENCES

- Coleman, J., Hultgren, K., Li, W., Tsui, C.-F. C., & Shaw, P. (2018). Forum on English-medium instruction. *TESOL Quarterly*, 52, 701–720. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.469>
- O'Regan, J. (2021). *Global English and political economy*. Routledge.

How to cite this article: Wei, L. (2021). TESOL educators can contribute to the fight-back against racial discrimination and hatred: A personal view from Britain. *TESOL Journal*, 00e1–4. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.618>

