

An anthropological approach to diversity in ELT

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Abstract

This paper presents a discussion of the racial barrier to diversity, equity, and inclusion in the context of English Language Teaching. Although diversity is welcomed in ESL classrooms, giving all the students and teachers equal opportunities to participate and keeping all of them equally engaged is not necessarily an easy task when it comes to a formidable barrier called *race*. To achieve this aim, one perspective ESL employers, teachers, and students can adopt to reduce racial bias is an anthropological approach, which this paper is attempting to promote.

Survival of the fittest

When the sociologist Herbert Spencer coined the phrase *survival of the fittest* in 1864, he had no idea how his misconception of Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution would arouse such a bitter controversy in the 20th century with dire repercussions in our present day.

In *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1839/2004), where Darwin's discoveries on the Galapagos Islands are documented, Darwin mentions that at first, he suspected that all the diverse-looking birds he saw there were new types and exotic. However, after further investigation he came to the reasonable conclusion that every single one of the bird types belonged to the same species: the finch. For him, this was the case of natural selection, which means one species had naturally been selected and modified within a confined space for different purposes. So, natural selection is the mechanism through which change takes place (Fleck, 2020).



In this case, the final result is a different finch for every island, each *adapted* for survival in that particular region, but they are all finches with only different adaptations to their immediate surroundings. Therefore, it would be wrong to say that any one population is better or worse than the other one due to the fact that if they are misplaced, they will not be as functional.

Being superior

In his third book, *The Descent of Man* (1871/2004), Darwin applied all he had learned from finches to human beings. Just as each finch made necessary adaptive traits to survive in its specific environment, without any one of them being *superior* or *inferior* to the other one, human diversity is not a marker of *superior* or *inferior* societies.

Human beings have adapted in much the same way. Phenotype, or physical characteristic, is simply the pure chance of location and climate. For example, people with white skin have been less exposed to the sun. Scientifically speaking, if this process is repeated for thousands of years, melanin or the natural skin pigment is reduced and instead different traits that are more useful for that specific environment are developed (Fleck, 2020). Conversely, people who have dwelled in a region with regular exposure to the sun, have darker skin because melanin is naturally developed to protect their skin against the ultraviolet radiation. Also, “skin colour varies as much within races as across them” (Lamey, 2019).

Similarly, our cultures are the result of our adaptations to our immediate surroundings and not due to a linear progression from primitive to advanced. We have changed simply because we have lived in different regions of the world due to migration over the past 100,000 years (Fleck, 2020). This is plenty of time for any population to establish their unique culture and for their outward appearances to change due to interaction with different climates. In other words, it is *circumstance* that makes a culture into what it is. Not biology.

Race

Given this logic, race is not biological. Race is not rooted in our genes. Although, as the geneticist Reich says, some traits are influenced by genetic variations, human populations are remarkably similar to each other from a genetic point of view (2018). For Hardimon, “Asian, white, and black racial groups exhibit different patterns of skin colour and hair texture because they descend from different populations that originated in Asia, Europe, and Africa, respectively. Hardimon calls this the *minimalist* concept of race. It sees race as biologically real but trivial” (Lamey, 2019).

According to the anthropologist Ashley Montagu, race is a social concept (Reich, 2018). We know this because the science of genetics has not discovered a *superior race* chromosome. If it had, and if people of



different nations originated from different species, humans for the last 100,000 years, since the beginning of migration from Africa, would not have been able to interbreed. Thus, it would be fundamentally wrong to consider one nation *superior* because of its technological advances and material wealth due to the fact that it has been the circumstance of that specific nation and not the biological *race* that has led to such adaptation. With the circumstance having the upper hand, and not the *race*, another nation, that could be considered less *sophisticated* out of prejudice, might have progressed in art and literature instead. Interestingly, both nations are still at the same level of evolution with only different *adaptive traits*.

Diversity in the ELT market

Embracing these adaptive traits in Canadian ESL careers, rather than dehumanization, we can build a nation that enjoys substantial benefits from diverse skills and adaptation. However, this is only possible by being anthropologically aware of the fact that *race* is not based in our genes, and it is the circumstance that makes humans develop certain physical features and specific cultures. Knowing this fact, we human beings can put aside an unreasonable dislike and distrust of people who are different from us in some way and focus more on diversity, equity, and inclusion. As educators, with proper education, we can avoid closing our eyes to race prejudice and promote a humanistic and humanitarian approach.

Race and bias in the 21st century

The reason some of us are still biased in the 21st century and think that one *race* is *superior* to another is because of the wrong way the earlier western anthropologists observed the nations. These anthropologists, unfortunately, observed and judged the non-Western societies and their cultures through a Western lens and Western cultural norms. This method resulted in dismissing people from those countries as *outsiders*. It is easy to imagine how a child born in the West can easily adopt racist attitudes because of being overexposed to such false information in the media. Therefore, as the evolutionary biologist Richard Lewontin has mentioned, “human racial classification is of no social value and is positively destructive of human relations” (Lamey, 2019).

Social interaction

However, through the media, we can encourage interaction. The good news is our brain is plastic. This means that the brain can “physically be molded based on social interactions” (Fleck, 2020, p. 131). If this is the case, the same media that has misled many year after year can change brains by encouraging proper unbiased interactions. Undoubtedly, through the tool of social interaction, employers, ESL teachers, and students can enormously benefit from *effective communication* in order to promote inclusion and engagement in the diverse classroom of the 21st century and keep in mind that “racism is cunning and able to take on new shapes” (Lamey, 2019).



Conclusion

To encourage diversity, equity, and inclusion in ESL careers, employers, ESL teachers, and students must not involve visible physical appearance. What they need to do is relevant reading of a given country's daily reality. They need to observe a culture from the perspective of the people of that culture and stop judging them with Western *moral* norms. This way, they can learn to respect fundamental cultural differences. With a non-Western lens, they can also learn that the evil acts individual people commit are not reflections of all citizens of a given country. In a multicultural learning environment, we all need to maintain standards of taste and decency.

References

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Author Bio

Mostafa Kosari is an OCELT who has been teaching English for over 20 years. Starting to learn English at age 10 in Iran, he got highly interested in the English language and decided to pursue his college education in this field. He received his BA in Translation and his MA in English Language and Literature. Mostafa is experienced in teaching EFL, ESL, EAP, and test preparation courses. When he is not teaching English, he enjoys reading novels and articles, bike riding, and playing the piano.