

Hidden racism

By Linda Ward, Canada

Introduction

“Racism in Canada is subtle; implicit. That is racism is usually hidden...At the same time these views exist beside public beliefs which underlie assumptions that racism does not exist in Canada” (Madibbo, 2006, p. 142). Racism involves discrimination, segregation, exclusion and power imbalances and a complex mix of race, gender, religion, culture, and language. It is rooted in history and creates the *other* in society reinforcing our differences and causing fear. Racism is a social construct that is easy to define but not always easy to see.

Newcomers come to Canada expecting their new country to be multicultural with acceptance of diverse cultures, religions, languages, and experience. For many newcomers, this may not be the case. This may be especially true for learners in the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program, as they may not recognize the subtle ways that racism affects their new lives in Canada (Vang & Chang, 2019).

For example, over the past decades, many newcomers have enrolled in specific LINC classes to learn language for Canadian workplaces. Even with these classes, newcomers have faced many challenges finding employment in their areas of education and experience. Employers report that the barrier to employment for new immigrants and refugees is the lack of Canadian experience (Reitz, 2007). Is this hidden racism?

Racism in Canada

Current racism in Canada can be linked to past federal government language policy. The work of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (B & B Commission) (1963–1969) in the 1960s created a bilingual framework within which a multicultural policy was created. With the creation of the Official Languages Act (1969), English and French were made the official languages of Canada. In response to presentations to the B & B Commission from other ethnic groups, the Multicultural Act (1988) was created to recognize diverse ethnic groups in Canada. But for these other ethnic groups, this Act created a hierarchy,



where English and French languages were dominant and other languages secondary. The dominant languages—English and French—received official government status and funding for both language and culture. Other languages received only recognition and a much smaller amount of funding for cultural activities. While the Official Languages Act signalled that people lived in a bilingual country of English and French, the Multicultural Act indicated that all people in Canada could maintain their cultures, with no clear place for other languages. In addition, these two Acts imply that culture and language are separate and for most people this is not the case. Language and culture are deeply tied (Haque, 2012).

When we look at the racism in the context of the LINC program, we need to examine racism within an institution. This type of racism “includes institutional policies and practices which operate to sustain the disadvantages of racialized groups” (Madibbo, 2006, p. 30). By examining the policies and practices of the LINC program, we can begin to see the subtle racism embedded in these policies and practices.

Subtle racism in LINC policies

The objective of the LINC program as stated by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) is to “help improve newcomers’ official language abilities and help newcomers acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to integrate into Canadian society” (Ministry of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship, 2020, p. 21). In this context what does *integration* mean? According to government documents, integration is defined as “a process of mutual adjustment by both newcomers and society. Newcomers are expected to understand and respect basic Canadian values, and Canadians are expected to understand and respect the cultural differences newcomers bring to Canada. Rather than expecting newcomers to abandon their own cultural heritage, the emphasis is on finding ways to integrate differences in a pluralistic society” (CIC, 2001, p. 4). But does Canada really respect newcomers and adjust to their needs, or is integration a unidirectional and forceful requirement where only newcomers are expected to adjust to Canadian ways?

According to a review of policy statements, immigration debates, and academic writings, Li (2003) found that instead of acceptance of differences, newcomers are expected to mould to Canadian values and expectations. In these documents, Canadian values were written as a singular set of values and implied was that Canadian values were values of the white settlers. Highlighted in these documents was that differences in values became more visible as more people from non-white, non-European countries immigrated to Canada. Concerns were raised about how these *differences* would alter Canadian values. Newcomers who continued to follow their own language, social, and cultural practices were considered detrimental to Canadian values. For all newcomers, successful integration was seen when newcomers would quickly and smoothly adopt Canadian values in both workplaces and communities. All this shows a power imbalance with newcomers expected to conform rather than collaborate on a process of *mutual adjustment* (Li, 2003).



How do LINC teachers interpret *integration* in the classroom? In Interviews with LINC teachers, they reported that curriculum documents do not specifically address integration. Because of this lack of definition, teachers had a diverse understanding of what integration means. This diverse understanding led to teachers not addressing integration consistently or not addressing it at all (Haque, 2017).

How do teachers define Canadian values and Canadian society? Research with LINC teachers, administrators, and learners found that defining one Canadian society was very difficult. They recognized that there were diverse cultures in Canadian society and that multiculturalism was a value of Canadian society, but for many teachers, highlighting diverse cultures meant only celebrations of food and festivals. Pötzsch (2017) highlights that these superficial discussions of differences put these cultures at risks for being seen as *add-ons*. Non-white immigrant groups are seen as both *different* and *additional*. This view once more reinforces that non-white immigrant groups are the *others* and raises questions for both teachers trying to explain and learners trying to understand who *belongs* in Canadian society and what it takes to belong (Pötzsch, 2017).

Subtle racism in LINC practices—Teaching and assessment tools

Canadian citizenship programs and guides

What aspects of citizenship are important for newcomers, teachers, and administrators? In an analysis of citizenship study guides, published over the last 20 years, Gulliver (2018) found no information on racism. He drew two conclusions. The first is that racism is not just hidden, but it is denied, and denial of racism is often the most important indicator of racism. The second is that newcomers' traditions and values are presented as negative and Canadian values as positive. In another study, Fleming (2010) reported a wide gap between the way newcomers to Canada and national assessment and curriculum documents conceptualize Canadian citizenship. For newcomers, Canadian citizenship means "human rights, multicultural policy, and the obligations of being citizens" (p. 589); while in the assessment guides and documents, Canadian citizenship means conforming to the Canadian standards of behavior. These definitions put Canadian culture in a higher position than the cultures of adult language learners and subtly diverges from the claims of multicultural policy statements. In further review, Fleming's (2010) analysis found that the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLBs), include only three language descriptors that contain the elements of Canadian citizenship. Fleming (2010) criticized curriculum and assessment documents for placing adult language learners in a deficit position where they are considered as "relatively powerless, passive, and atomized recipients of programming designed to normalize them into a dominant culture" (p. 589).



A challenge with the citizenship programs is that most citizenship tasks are postponed until learners reach a high level of language proficiency. This means that learners can only start studying for citizenship and learning about Canadian citizenship when the learners are in higher levels of language classes. Fleming (2010) interprets this as a further sign of the power imbalances in LINC classes where the institution decides when a learner is ready to prepare for citizenship and not based on the learner's knowledge or interest.

Lesson plans

In a review of lesson plans in a curriculum document, Baker (2021) found that learners were subtly identified as *the others* in Canadian society. In a series of lessons on pragmatics, lesson plans used *we* to describe teachers such as *we, in Canada...* and *you* to describe the learners. Implied in this use of *we* and *you* is that the teacher presents the correct, Canadian way of speaking and the learner's way of speaking is the *other*. The lesson plans identify a Canadian way of speaking which the learner must adapt to to be accepted in Canadian society. In reality, the ways of speaking are as individual as each of us. There are many ways to say the same thing and in many cases no one way is right. In addition, the language in the lesson plans puts the learner as responsible for negotiating, using constructive criticism, being polite, remaining calm, respecting other, and maintaining good relationships. There is no discussion that all these tasks are the responsibility of both speakers or how to respond to a speaker if they do not use these practises. Even though the lesson plans provide scenarios where the learner faces racism, it is the learner's responsibility to know how to manage these situations not the Canadian speaker. "Regardless of how other Canadian interlocutor (speakers) behave, learners of this unit are taught to remain calm, passive and maintain peaceful relationships" (Baker, 2021, p. 86).

ESL teacher training programs

In teacher training programs, there is little information on teaching about racism or support for how to teach about racism. Suraweera (2020) reviewed TESL Ontario accredited teacher training program curricula to look at how racism and antiracism were presented. She also held focus groups and interviews with TESL trainers, curriculum developers, and program coordinators to see what race, gender, and class-related problems practitioners observed and experienced. She found that curriculum material, classroom activities, and course outlines provided definitions and some information on cultural diversity, but there were no ideas on how racism could be addressed through teaching, learning, assessment, or classroom management. Suraweera felt that teaching modules on socio-cultural issues focused on culture to avoid the discomfort of race-related discussion. Although teachers shared examples of both overt and hidden racism from their personal lives and as teachers, they reported difficulties addressing racism in the classroom.



The teachers' personal experiences and awareness of racism, and not the material provided for teacher training, influenced how the teachers felt about using an anti-racism curriculum (Suraweera, 2020).

Strategies to address hidden racism

Strategies to address hidden racism in the language learning classroom need to shift the focus from a teacher/learner style to focus on language as emergent and dynamic where teacher and learner build a collaborative relationship to examine language use and power imbalances (Baker, 2021). This involves engaging the learners in dialogue, critical examination of existing materials, and multimodal teaching strategies.

Baker (2021) suggests using scenarios and case studies in current lesson plans and curriculum and to discuss racism. One case study identified in a curriculum document is:

In a listening task, learners are presented with the story of a racialized Canadian woman who was offended when an interlocutor (speaker) questioned her fluency in English. The story is quickly dismissed as an amusing anecdote and learners are only asked to retell the story (a comprehension task) with no further discussion. (p. 86)

This specific scenario could easily be followed up by a discussion of personal experiences of racism faced by newcomers.

Baker (2021) also suggests teachers and learners critically examine case studies and scenarios to explore who is blamed for miscommunications. In one example from a curriculum document:

In this lesson, students are asked to complete a role play in pairs, where one student plays a manager and the other plays an assistant. The assistant is required to clarify and confirm instructions—and students take turns playing the assistant role. Instructions to the student playing the assistant are worded: 'As the assistant you must use strategies to clarify and confirm the instructions.' That the assistant—and not the manager—would be responsible for miscommunication is representative of a broader theme running throughout: Those with less power are responsible for miscommunication. The 'assistant' or the language learner, rather than the 'manager' or native speaker interlocutor are responsabilized to reduce the likelihood of miscommunication. (pp. 85–86)

In this example, discussion could acknowledge that responsibility for respectful communication is the responsibility of both speakers (Baker, 2021).

As discussed earlier, teachers in TESL training programs are not given strategies or resources to examine racism; consequently, teachers may not have the resources to introduce the topic of racism in the LINC classroom. One way



to introduce this topic is to use authentic examples of both past and present incidences of racism in Canada. Using newspaper articles, radio clips, or podcasts on the marginalization of Indigenous people in Canada may challenge learners' perceptions of Canada as a tolerant and unbiased country and encourage learners to look at incidents of racism in their own lives in Canada (Pötzsch, 2017).

Multi-modal strategies to engage learners may provide an opportunity in the classroom to discuss racism. Burgess and Rowsell (2020) used artifacts, images, and collages to read, write, and listen around language and culture and to dive deeply into the lived experience of immigrant and refugee learners. Using these multi-modal strategies, teachers could pay attention to incidents of racism or deliberately use these strategies to discuss racism and how it affects the learners' lives in Canada (Burgess & Roswell, 2020).

Portillo et al. (2022) suggest being aware of cultural differences in the use of language to help identify hidden racism. They give the example of how a Latin X learner called his black friend a word in English which is an expletive, but for Spanish speaking learners means black guy. As other learners in the class started to use this word more generally for all black people, the teachers used this opportunity to discuss how this word has a different history and meaning in the context of North America (Portillo et al., 2022).

LINC administrators can address racism with policy and organizational changes. One LINC program (Pötzsch, 2017) created a policy on mandatory intercultural training for both their own staff as well as the staff in partner organizations. To support the intercultural training, a centre for intercultural education was created. Efforts were also made to hire staff with diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds that reflect their learners' backgrounds (Pötzsch, 2017).

TESL Ontario teacher training programs could add antiracism strategies to their programs. Teachers, administrators, and students, in Suraweera's (2020) study, recommended adding activities to reflect on personal biases, case studies, and scenarios with hidden and overt racism. In addition, they suggested adding critical theory to the theory course and anti-racist approaches in the socio-cultural modules (Suraweera, 2020).

Conclusion

"Confronting racism and oppression requires disruptive knowledge, knowledge which resists the desire to essentialize and close one off from learning more" (Pötzsch, 2017 p. 57). Confronting hidden racism is even more challenging in that it is difficult for both teachers and learners to recognize. Although it may not be explicitly stated in CLB and PBLA documents, LINC teachers have a mandate, as outlined by the purpose of the LINC program, to help their learners integrate into Canadian society. Racism, although it may be hidden, is a part of living in Canada for many newcomers. LINC teachers can provide a safe place for



their learners to share insights into the lives they live in Canada. Together, LINC teachers and newcomers can critically examine LINC policy, curriculum, and practices to identify hidden racism and reduce the differences we see in others.

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Author Bio



Linda Ward is currently a masters student in Languages and Literacy at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. For the past 5 years, she had taught English as a Second Language with adult learners in private language schools and in the LINC program.