

Chapter 4

Spilling the Tea

Stories of Confronting and Addressing Racism in ESOL Classrooms

Manuel De Jesús Gómez Portillo, Ethan Trinh,
and Luis Javier Pentón Herrera

Courageous conversations are defined as honest, open-minded, vulnerable dialogues in which participants commit to engage by listening deeply to better understand each other's perspectives (Singleton, 2015). This chapter highlights how three English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) educators engaged in critical reflective conversations to address racism, cultural misunderstandings, and diversity in their teaching spaces. After a brief introduction, the authors set the stage by employing ethnodramatic, queer conversation (Trinh & Pentón Herrera, 2021; Winkle, 2016) as a framework for their courageous conversation.

Following, the authors share personal stories that occurred in their ESOL classrooms. Specifically, Gómez Portillo (he/him/his) shares a story of how he addressed an incident involving his middle school English learners and a cultural misunderstanding. Trinh (they/them/their) showcases an unsuccessful story of how they were not well prepared to teach refugees to address racism in a high school in the Deep South of the United States. Pentón Herrera (he/him/his) reflects on the necessary conversation he had with his high school newcomers when some of them began to use racist slurs socially and in the classroom. Through the conversations, collaborative reflections around emotions, teacher identity and positionality, and respectful relationships are identified. The chapter ends with final thoughts, where the authors provide recommendations for teachers on how to address racism in their ESOL classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

Current events highlighting racist practices in the United States have amplified the need for educational institutions to provide spaces where antiracist practices are intentionally incorporated. A number of researchers have mentioned self-reflection as a strategy for enhancing antiracist practices in schools, especially in English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classrooms (Bart, 2011; Coney, 2016; Irving, 2014; Kubota & Lin, 2006; Milner, 2007; Trinh, 2021). Bart (2011) and Milner (2007) explain that self-reflection is a process that allows educators to analyze and synthesize opposing ideas, make sense of one's experiences, identify patterns, and create meaning of such experiences and reflections. Further, Coney (2016) elaborates that self-reflection allows teachers to critically reflect on topics such as *diversity*, *racism*, *pedagogy*, and *White privilege*. McMahon (2003) suggests that engaging in self-reflection can result in the creation of a positive and safe classroom climate for students and teachers. Trinh (2021) affirms that critical reflection, despite discomfort with self and students, is significantly important to challenge *Whiteness*, *anti-Blackness*, and *xenophobia* in teaching English to adult language learners. These pioneer publications have shed necessary light on the topic of antiracist practices for ESOL teachers. However, at the time of writing this chapter, as the number of English learners (ELs) in U.S. classrooms continues to increase (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), we found scant publications sharing real-life experiences from teachers about how they confronted racism in their ESOL classrooms with their ELs. Therefore, this chapter highlights how three ESOL educators engaged in self-reflective conversations to address racism, cultural misunderstandings, and diversity in our ESOL teaching and learning spaces.

In the first two sections of this chapter, *Setting the Stage and Racism in ESOL Classrooms*, we reimagine our stories of confronting racism through an ethnodramatic, queer conversation lens (Trinh & Pentón Herrera, 2021; Winkle, 2016). More specifically, in this conversation, Gómez Portillo (he/him/his) shares a story of how he addressed an incident involving his middle school ELs and a cultural misunderstanding; Trinh (they/them/their) showcases an unsuccessful story of how they were not well prepared to teach refugees to address racism in a high school in the Deep South of the United States; and Pentón Herrera (he/him/his) reflects on the necessary conversation he had with his high school newcomers when some of them began to use a racist slur socially and in the classroom. In the third section, *Reflections on Antiracism in ESOL*, we come together to engage in a courageous conversation about the experiences shared. We end the chapter by proposing next steps moving forward to confront and address racism in ESOL classrooms.

As a point of clarification, we choose to use the phrase *courageous conversations* to frame the process of sharing our stories. Singleton (2015) defines *courageous conversations* as honest, open-minded, vulnerable dialogues in which participants commit to engage by listening deeply to better understand each other's perspectives, and by sustaining "the conversation when it gets uncomfortable or diverted" (p. 26). Furthermore, we follow Singleton's four agreements for courageous conversations, including: (1) staying engaged, (2) speaking your truth, (3) experiencing discomfort, and (4) expecting and accepting non-closure (p. 27).

SETTING THE STAGE

It is the end of the week, and three educator-friends are meeting at a local restaurant for some tea. Gómez Portillo is a middle school ESOL teacher, and Trinh and Pentón Herrera are high school ESOL teachers. All three teachers had a stressful week and, as close friends and colleagues, they are excited to meet with each other and talk about it. After initial greetings, the educator-friends began to talk about their workweek.

Gómez Portillo: I had such an *interesting* week . . .

Trinh: Really, what happened?

Gómez Portillo: There was an event when I was teaching my students and we encountered a cultural misunderstanding regarding racism.

Pentón Herrera: Really? Something similar happened to me with my students, but it was about a word that they learned outside of school. It was the first time I heard this word being used by my English learners and it was an uncomfortable situation.

Trinh: Oh, wow! I had such a stressful week as well. One of my students was faced with an overt racist incident and I was not sure how to handle that.

Gómez Portillo: I am so glad we are having tea today and that we are talking about these incidents together.

Soon after, the waiter brought in some tea and snacks. The three teacher-friends thanked the waiter and continued their conversation.

RACISM IN ESOL CLASSROOMS

Gómez Portillo: As I was sharing, it was a very interesting week at school. There was an incident that happened with my students that I had to address regarding racism. And so, it was just very uncomfortable and interesting.

Trinh: How interesting . . . Please share more . . .

Gómez Portillo: Well, the population we teach as ESOL teachers is very diverse with students coming from all over the world. This week, there was an event in my classroom associated with a word commonly used in the Latinx culture to refer to people from Asia. In the Latinx culture, the words *chinito* (for male) or *chinita* (for female) are used to describe anyone from Asia. The literal translation of these words is Chinese or can also be used to describe the shape of the eyes. In our classroom, a couple of my students from Central America called a student from Vietnam *chinita*.

Trinh: Wow . . .

Gómez Portillo: The Vietnamese student got really offended. She was just very angry, almost crying, and asked my students from Central America, “Why are you calling me that? I am not Chinese. I am from Vietnam. That is very mean to me.” She was very offended and the situation made me feel a little bit uncomfortable as a teacher because I had to stop our class and address this situation. Above all, I had to make my students understand that what was happening was a cultural misunderstanding.

Pentón Herrera: So, what did you do? How did you address this situation?

Gómez Portillo: The first thing I did was to stop the class and ask my students what was happening; I was interested in hearing everyone’s perspectives. My students from Central America told me that her classmate from Vietnam was angry because they called her *chinita*. My students from Central America continued by stating that, in their culture, using this term is not offensive and that they did not use it to make her feel bad. I then asked the student from Vietnam if she could share how she was feeling with her classmates. She stated she was very offended because she is not from China, she is from Vietnam, and that when her classmates call her Chinese she feels like they are offending her. She continued by saying, “it’s very rude for them to call me something that I’m not. I’m not from that country.”

Pentón Herrera: I think that in the Latinx culture, we certainly use this and other terms very often and we rarely take into consideration how these terms make people from other cultures feel. I can imagine how difficult and uncomfortable this situation must have been for you as the teacher. How did you deal with it?

Gómez Portillo: I am someone who knows both cultures because I am from El Salvador and I lived in China for eight years. For this reason, I am aware that cultural misunderstandings can happen in heterogeneous classes. As a culturally aware individual, I wanted to continue this conversation and explain the cultural misunderstanding. At the same time, as a teacher, I was worried that stopping my class and deviating from teaching the curriculum was going to affect the academic progress of my students. But I think at that point, I thought it was important to address this cultural misunderstanding because

if I did not address it, it would have just escalated into something bigger. I took this cultural misunderstanding as a teachable moment for myself and my students.

I told my students, “ok, I am stopping our class here today; let’s have this conversation. Let’s hear everyone’s side first, and then let’s talk.” We heard everyone’s side of the story and then we talked about how this term made our students from Vietnam feel. By the end of our conversation, my Central American students apologized to the student from Vietnam and the student from Vietnam was able to have them hear how she was feeling. Without realizing it, by taking this moment to address this cultural misunderstanding, I built the capacity to address a very uncomfortable situation. Now my students from Central America know that they should not be using such a word to describe people from Asia because they each have their own identity and cultures. My students from Central America now understand that Asian people are not a generalization and that the word *chinito* or *chinita* is offensive. On the other hand, my student from Vietnam now understands that her classmates did not mean to offend her and that, unfortunately, this is a common word used among Latinx people.

Trinh: Well, let me tell you, the incident I experienced this week also involved one of my students but, unlike you, I did not stop my class to address this issue. My students are refugees from diverse backgrounds and one of them is a female student who wears a hijab. This student told me that she was walking to school in the morning and then someone told her to go back to where she came from. She could not see who it was but started running fast toward school, and once here, she did not know who to tell. So, she came to our classroom and talked to me. I do not have a lot of experience in these types of situations because I am a novice teacher, and all I tried to do was to calm her. I did not use the moment to teach the whole class but, instead, I talked to her to make sure she was feeling well emotionally.

Thinking back, I realize I did not pause the class to teach about racism and its consequences. When my student told me what had happened to her, I began to wonder how I could use the research and theories I have read about this topic in the classroom. I did not know what to do at the time or how to make the transition from research and theory to practice, so I did what I knew how to do—empathize with my student and calm her down. I feel I may have lost an opportunity to teach my students and our class strategies to protect themselves if they experience a similar situation of overt racism. I feel my week was not successful because I did not use that experience as a teachable moment. However, I feel that I did what I needed to do, which is to connect

with my student at a personal level and remind her that she can always come to talk to me because our classroom is a safe space.

As I share this story with both of you, I am still wondering, how can we, as ESOL teachers, educate our learners about racism?

Pentón Herrera: The thing is that racism is not a topic that people talk about because it is an uncomfortable topic. Even in teacher education programs, we are not taught how to deal with incidents like the one you two experienced with your students. Personally, I think it is important to recognize that reflecting on our teaching and our values gives us the opportunity to continue growing as educators.

Let me share with both of you that I, too, had an uncomfortable situation happen to me this week. As you both know, I teach high school students from Central America who recently arrived in the United States. In our class, we have a student who is Black and the other Spanish-speaking students call him *negro* which translates into *black guy*. The first time I heard the other students call him this term, I asked him about it and my student told me that this is a term of endearment that he likes. In the Latinx culture, calling someone *negro* is acceptable, so after checking with my student to make sure he approved this nickname, I stopped thinking about it. However, as my students began to feel comfortable with English, they started speaking it to greet each other and this week, my students greeted by saying “what’s up my ...” and used the N-word. I just froze when I heard that word and did not know how to react. I just opened my eyes and I said, “No, you cannot say that word.” They replied with “Why not, Mr.? In Spanish we say *negro* and it is acceptable, why can’t we say it in English?”

I felt highly uncomfortable at that moment because I did not know how to explain to my students that, in English, the N-word is unacceptable. I did not want to be one of those teachers who imposes rules without explaining the reason behind them to the students, but I was not prepared to have that conversation because I did not know what to say. I confessed to my students that “I don’t have the answer right now, but when we return tomorrow, I’m going to talk about it in our class.” Telling my students that I did not have the answer was difficult for my pride as a teacher, but I feel it was necessary to let them know that I did not have enough information at that moment and that I was going to prepare myself to talk about it. Reflecting on it now with both of you, I can say that I am glad I confessed to my students that I was not ready to talk about it. I want them to know that it is ok to not know something, but it is our responsibility to learn.

The next day we did have a conversation about the N-word. We talked about why it is acceptable to say this word in Spanish, but not in English.

In our conversation, I explained to my students that the term in English is racially charged; this means that there is a history behind this term in English that is different from the word in Spanish. In our conversation, I was able to teach them about the meaning of words in languages. At that point, we were learning more than just vocabulary, we were learning about languages and how languages work. This conversation was uncomfortable and it required much research and preparation so I could explain, in simple terms, the word and history behind it. I think my students appreciated talking about this topic and they have not used this word again in our classroom.

REFLECTING ON OUR EXPERIENCES

ESOL classrooms welcome learners from all backgrounds who bring with them different, unique perspectives. At times, we may feel unprepared to deal with incidents and events resulting from such rich diversity, as it happened to the three of us in the stories shared in the previous section. However, we learned that engaging in uncomfortable but necessary conversations with our students allowed everyone in the classroom to learn about diversity and diverse points of view. Similarly, through those conversations, two of us—Gómez Portillo and Pentón Herrera—were able to bridge cultural misunderstandings, de-escalate conflicts, and avoid future incidents inside and outside of our classroom whereas Trinh approached the issues at a personal level. As we continued to engage in our discussion and analyze common threads among our stories, we identified three salient themes that may affect how teachers and students approach the topic of racism in ESOL classrooms. These three themes are (1) emotions, (2) teacher identity and positionality, and (3) respectful relationships.

Emotions

In our courageous conversations, we recognized that acts of and encounters with racism naturally engage the emotions of everyone involved. For the recipients of such acts—ELs who are learning the English language and are becoming acquainted with the U.S. society—racism affects how they feel, how they understand their positionality in the U.S. society, and may also influence the relationship they develop with words in the English language. Emotions and emotional well-being are particularly important for immigrant students because studies have found that discrimination and racism have negative effects on the mental health of first-generation immigrants, and it could also lead to affect physical health (see Szaflarski & Bauldry, 2019). Similarly, being the recipient of racism directly affects the self-perceived

image of English learners, of their Native language and culture, and of their image as immigrants in the U.S. society (Pentón Herrera & Trinh, 2021; Trinh & Merino, 2020).

For ESOL teachers, confronting and addressing racism also requires emotional involvement. For example, Gómez Portillo had to engage in an inner negotiation of stopping instruction and going out of the curriculum to address this cultural misunderstanding that could have escalated, possibly resulting in conflict or worse. Trinh, on the other hand, engaged in emotional labor by empathizing with their student and reminding her that she was in a safe space where she could talk and share her emotions. At the same time, Trinh's regrets of not knowing how to deal with this situation or not having the practical skills of turning this incident into a teachable moment reflect their emotional investment in teaching and in supporting the well-being of their students. Lastly, Pentón Herrera felt uncomfortable when he shared with his students that he was not ready to have a conversation about why using the N-word was inappropriate. However, he put his feelings of teacher pride aside, educated himself about the topic, and had an honest conversation with his English learners about why this term was unacceptable. For us, engaging in acts of antiracism required deep understanding, acknowledgment, and self-regulation of our emotions.

Teacher Identity and Positionality

By reflecting deeper on the relationship between racism/antiracism and emotions, we arrived at the conclusion that teacher identity and positionality also play a role in how teachers react to racist events, even if vicariously. We recognize that emotion accompanies identity (Mercer, 2014), which means that our emotions are the result of how we position ourselves and others in a given incident. As such, the way we and other ESOL teachers position themselves and others in society influences how we understand and respond to racism in our practice. The three of us—Gómez Portillo, Trinh, and Pentón Herrera—identify as queer immigrants, non-native English speaker teachers (NNEST) who have been the recipients of discrimination and racism firsthand. As such, we understand these dehumanizing practices of racism as structural issues rather than isolated, personal events. Thus, we know our positioning in U.S. society is contested by those in positions of power, often placing us at the margins of conversations and movements solely because of our identities.

“Should we even talk about discrimination and racism? Do we even have the power, the privilege, or the right to talk about this structural problem when, in fact, we are NNEST in a new society?” These are two questions Pentón Herrera posited in our conversation while we delved into the topic of

teacher identity and positionality. We realized that the three of us feel at times as individuals who were “new” in this society and who, although have been living in the United States for many years, still felt like we are immigrants, or the “other.” As such, we often question if we have the privilege to talk to our students about the structural problems and history of discrimination and racism in the United States. This particular realization is relevant for ESOL teachers and for NNEST because how we position ourselves and how we identify may directly affect our disposition to engage in courageous conversations about discrimination and racism with English learners. In essence, our teacher identities and positionalities are preciously needed in order to initiate and form a meaningful relationship with the students moving forward.

Respectful Relationships

As we came together to share experiences with each other, we actively engaged in the conversation by deeply listening to each other, speaking the truth, and letting our emotions and feelings sit in discomfort. The idea of building a respectful relationship and creating a safe space for the teachers and the students to have courageous conversations is critically needed. Lin and colleagues, who are critical women faculty of color in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) (2004), have urgently asked the teachers to form “situated and dialogic ways of teaching and learning English” (p. 501). We want to continue to emphasize that a courageous conversation needs to start with trust and deep listening to respond critically and empathetically to one another.

Further, in terms of our conversations, we came together to disclose our discomforts without any judgment with the vision of better understanding our lived experiences individually and as a group. Our courageous conversations do not necessarily reflect glorious victories in teaching. Instead, they include acknowledgments of our weaknesses and vulnerabilities which, in our view, provide the best opportunities to learn individually and as a group.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As we conclude this chapter, we would like to reiterate that emotions, teacher identity, and positionality, and respectful relationships are interconnected factors in supporting us to confront and address racism in our ESOL classrooms. Therefore, we propose that teachers explore their own emotions, identities and positionalities, and relationships in their own classrooms with students and colleagues, continuing the courageous conversation we started in this chapter.

In addition, from our conversation, we acknowledge that our TESOL preparation programs did not equip us with the knowledge or practical tools to best address issues of racism in our ESOL classrooms. Therefore, we came to the classroom unprepared on how to tackle such issues. Therefore, we urgently ask TESOL educators to create a safe and critical space where teacher candidates can listen and respond to different perspectives, co-thinking about how to best handle different situations related to racism in ESOL classrooms. Further, a course on antiracism would be tremendously helpful and necessary for ESOL teachers, specifically, as our classrooms often reflect the rich diversity of the world.

REFERENCES

- Bart, M. (2011). Critical reflections add depth and breadth to student learning. *Faculty Focus*. <http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/instructional-design/critical-reflection-adds-depth-and-breadth-to-student-learning/>
- Coney, L. (2016). The first step toward social justice: Teacher reflection. In C. Hastings & L. Jacob (Eds.), *Social justice in English language teaching* (pp. 11–23). TESOL Press.
- Irving, D. (2014). *Waking up White, and finding myself in the story of race*. Elephant Room Press.
- Kubota, R., & Lin, A. (2006). Race and TESOL: Introduction to concepts and theories. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40(3), 471–493. <https://doi.org/10.2307/40264540>
- Lin, A., Grant, R., Kubota, R., Motha, S., Sachs, G. T., Vandrick, S., & Wong, S. (2004). Women faculty of color in TESOL: Theorizing our lived experiences. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38(3), 487–504. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3588350>
- McMahon, B. (2003). Putting the elephant into the refrigerator: Student engagement, critical pedagogy and antiracist education. *McGill Journal of Education*, 38(2), 257–273. <https://mje.mcgill.ca/article/view/8684>
- Mercer, J. (2014). Feeling like a state: Social emotion and identity. *International Theory*, 6(3), 515–535. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1752971914000244>
- Milner, R. (2007). Race, culture, and researcher positionality: Working through dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen. *Educational Researcher*, 36(7), 388–400. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X07309471>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2020). *The condition of education: English language learners in public schools*. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_cgf.pdf
- Pentón Herrera, L. J., & Trinh, E. T. (2021). *Critical storytelling: Multilingual immigrants in the United States*. Brill/Sense. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004446182>
- Pentón Herrera, L. J., Trinh, E. T., & Gómez Portillo, M. D. J. (2021). Cultivating calm and stillness at the doctoral level: A collaborative autoethnography. *Educational Studies*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2021.1947817>

- Singleton, G. E. (2015). *Courageous conversations about race: A field guide for achieving equity in schools* (2nd ed.). Corwin.
- Szaflarski, M., & Bauldry, S. (2019). The effects of perceived discrimination on immigrant and refugee physical and mental health. *Advances in Medical Sociology*, 19, 173–204. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1057-629020190000019009>
- Trinh, E. (2021). What does social justice look like in the United States? Critical reflections of an English language classroom on a field trip. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 23(2), 108–113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2021.1914046>
- Trinh, E., & Merino, L. (2020). Bridge building through a duoethnography: Stories of Nepantleras in a land of liberation. In B. Yazan, R. Jain, & C. Canagarajah (Eds.), *Autoethnographies in ELT: Transnational identities, pedagogies, and practices* (pp. 146–160). Routledge.
- Trinh, E., & Pentón Herrera, L. J. (2021). Writing as an art of rebellion: Scholars of color using literacy to find spaces of identity and belonging in academia. In J. Van Galen & J. Sablan (Eds.), *Amplified voices, intersecting identities: Volume 2. First-Gen PhDs navigating institutional power in early academic careers* (pp. 25–33). Brill/Sense. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004445253_003
- Winkle, C. A. (2016). Walking in the words of “the other” through ethnodramatic readers theater. In C. Hastings & L. Jacob (Eds.), *Social justice in English language teaching* (pp. 201–220). TESOL Press.