

Configuration of Racial Identities of Learners of English

Configuración de identidades raciales de aprendientes de inglés

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Racial identity, as well as other social identities, is intrinsically related to language learning. Nevertheless, this relationship has been taken for granted. Despite research done in the area, not a lot has centred explicitly on finding the connections between race and language learning. This article addresses that point in an attempt to shed light specifically on English language learning and teaching. We used a qualitative research methodology to analyse oral and written narratives that were produced by participants telling their experience as English language learners. This article underscores the results that relate language learners' racial experiences as a crucial factor in the configuration of their identity as well as the economic, social, and cultural factors involved.


Keywords: English language learning, English language learners, race, racial identity

La identidad racial, como otras categorías sociales, está intrínsecamente relacionada con el aprendizaje de idiomas. Sin embargo, esta relación se ha dado por sentado. A pesar de las investigaciones realizadas, no mucho se ha centrado explícitamente en encontrar conexiones entre la raza y el aprendizaje de idiomas. Este artículo aborda ese punto en un intento por iluminar el aprendizaje y la enseñanza del idioma inglés. Se utilizó una metodología de investigación cualitativa para analizar las narraciones orales y escritas, producidas por participantes aprendices de inglés, sobre su experiencia. Este artículo resalta los resultados que relacionan las experiencias raciales de los estudiantes con los idiomas como un factor crucial en la configuración de su identidad, así como los factores económicos, sociales y culturales involucrados.

Palabras clave: aprendientes de inglés, aprendizaje del inglés, identidad racial, raza

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Introduction

Learning a foreign language implies a commitment to the foreign culture and the language itself; however, language learners cannot separate language from identity since, as Norton (2013) says, language is intrinsic in the identity of the individual. In this sense, the interaction with others allows learners to establish their self-identifications, configuring identities as a discursive process (Davies & Harré, 1990; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012; Harré et al., 2009), which implies taking one side or another through sharing with others.

Hence, the use of another language does not only involve communication with native speakers, but also the organization of meanings about who the learners are and how they are related to the social world (Norton, 2013). Thus, racial identity is implicit in second language learning due to the connections that coexist in language and identity (Bonilla-Medina, 2018). Those ideas relate language learning to identity construction by means of the tensions that can arise about who the speakers of a determined language are or what it means to become its user.

In the following article, we focus on the way English language learners configure their racial identity through the process of learning the language. In order to develop this study, we formulated the following research questions: How do the processes of learning English as a foreign language in the Colombian context relate to the construction of the racial identity of the learners? What relationships can be established between the meanings that learners give to the learning of a particular foreign language and the construction of their racial identities?

In doing so, we use a narrative approach where we collected life stories from 10 participants who were learning English in the Colombian context. In these stories, they expressed their thoughts about their processes of learning and the changes that they had experience along the way, and they related racial experi-

ences. We expanded the information through in-depth interviews where we tried to direct the conversation toward identity and English learning. In this manner, the analysis made on those instruments was useful for us to determine categories that were linked to the theory and the research question. Consequently, we identified three categories: (a) The Construction of the Learners' Imaginary Based on Global Whiteness, (b) Temporary Identities Subsidised by English Whiteness, and (c) Learners' Racial Identity Constructions Fighting and Negotiating Structural Racism Reinforced by English. All these categories reflected the complexities in terms of identity configuration in the process of learning and language and how race was imbricated in such a process.

Theoretical Basis

Race and Second Language Teaching Background

In the field of second or foreign language teaching and learning in the country, studies addressing race are rather few and they indirectly relate racial categories as fixed, and singularised in reference to majorities and minorities. Usma et al. (2018) is one of the examples whose reflection develops a political agenda towards highlighting indigenous identities as a community affected by the way linguistics policies in the country are planned and mandated. With the same goal but from a different perspective, Clavijo (2017) pinpoints characteristics of community pedagogies to teach English as a suitable approach to rescue the values and principles of indigenous communities. Others, such as Agudelo (2007), propose innovative pedagogical models to teach English incorporating intercultural perspectives that balance both foreign language curiosity with interest in local autochthonous indigenous knowledge. In this line of thought, these and other studies particularly relate to indigenous and Afro-Colombians as the centre of attention. Race referring to racial identities that do not fit in these categories appear not to be addressed in these

studies. It appears that race categories are exclusive of indigenous or Afro-Colombian communities so there is an assumption that “others” are not racialised or affected by racial structures. In agreement with critical race theory (CRT; Delgado & Stefancic, 2000) and more specifically, whiteness theory (Bonnett, 2000; Clarke & Garner, 2009; Telles & Flores, 2013), one of the arguments in this study is that individuals, whatever their origin or socially constructed race category, are immersed in a race system which constitutes their identity, and this construction usually comes to provide privileges or disadvantages. From this perspective, language is taken as a relevant factor involved in racialised practices and discourses produced by racial structures which need to be explored in the context of language learning.

The previous studies are instances of research that have started to emerge in the country in regard to the relations between race and foreign language learning; nevertheless, those studies also attempt to define racial identity as an unalterable category. Stating the view that racial identities, as well as other type of identities, are not fixed or unchangeable (Charles, 2019; Carbado & Gulati, 2003; Yosso, 2005), one presents the cited studies which show that there is a need to explore what Thesen (1997) coined as “transition identities.” That is, those identities that seem to be non-racialised as opposed to those where emphasis is given to racial categories (such an indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities in the Colombian context). In this case, we also want to refer to language as a marker of racialised discourses that may shape language learners’ racial identity despite their origin, skin colour, or phenotype. In fact, those racialised discourses and practices may grant privileges as well as mask disadvantages to language learners who are part of a race-structured world. Those practices are referred to here as constitutions of racialised experiences which are generated by the general race system (centred in whiteness). In this vein, analysing the way in which language learning has impacted learners’

identity would be a path that is a contribution to the studies initiated in this area.

Checking the arena of racial identity and the learning of a second language, conclusions lead one to say that these types of studies have been more popular in the USA (Norton, 1997; Thesen, 1997), England (Leung et al., 1997) and Australia and their major interests have revolved around the role of language itself rather than its effects on racial identity. In this study, the main purpose is precisely to examine that latter area.

Premises to Conceptualising Race in the Analysis of Language Learning

There are important theoretical underpinnings that were part of the approach given to this study. First of all, race is a social construction (Alexander & Knowles, 2005; Du Bois, 2001; Runge-Peña & Muñoz-Gaviria, 2005), therefore, this underlines the idea that race is created and reinforced in social practice. In other words, race is not real, however, it is perceived as such (Chadderton, 2009). In this manner, thoughts surrounding the idea of race are also created, produced, and reproduced in social practice (Banton, 2002; Bernasconi, 2001; Lott, 2001). Underscoring this thinking is significant because it explains how social tags, such as the ones created in racial categories, are powerful as to maintain discriminatory conditions towards individuals or groups while social practices sustain those conditions (Banton, 2002). In this respect, race is problematised in order to understand it in practices to see how it may contribute to unequal relationships.

Critical Race Theory: Whiteness as a Lens to foreign Language Learning and Identity

We used CRT to have a theoretical framework backed on a critical, historical, and structural viewpoint to analyse race in the learning of a language. It was used with the purpose of understanding how race tags play a role in the realisation of most social practices.

Furthermore, CRT helped us to challenge circumstances in which racial categories interacting with language learning are used to marginalise individuals or social groups (Carbado & Gulati, 2003; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). According to CRT theorists, uncovering discrimination in a system that has taken practices for granted has been their major goal (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Gillborn, 2006, 2010; Leonardo, 2002). That is to say, CRT is committed to combating subtler forms of racism, especially those practices that have become accepted, unquestioned, and normalised. Although CRT is soundly important in identifying features that have allowed the reproduction of unperceived discriminatory practices, it is necessary to say that determining differences based on skin colour in Colombia would be rather difficult (Koopman, 2012). Therefore, this research used “whiteness” as a theory which attempts to envisage practices that go beyond skin colour (Bonnett, 2000; Clarke & Gardner, 2009; King, 1991). In this regard, whiteness is not a way to label subjects with certain skin colour, but it is a cognitive dimension that is displayed in discourses that have been embedded in social practices and that situate some in a racial, social, economic, political, and cultural hierarchical position.

Whiteness, as a theory, resonates with this study because it looks to explain racial structures that shape the identities of individuals apart from their conventionally assigned race tags. It is a theory that coincides with the analytical marker of “whiteness device” (*dispositivo de blancura*) as explained by Castro-Gómez (2000) and Mignolo (2000, 2005) who, from a postcolonial perspective, have argued that Latin-American countries have been colonised not only historically and economically, but also symbolically. In this vein, these authors assert that after colonisation, social, economic, and cultural structures remained latent and they became common sense to people of this territory subjecting them to different levels: the knowledge level (coloniality of knowledge), the political level (coloniality of power), and

the subject level (coloniality of being; Granados-Beltrán, 2016). In turn, this constructed a common sense that has become a regime of truth (Said, 1976) that has been a platform for a whiteness cognitive device. That is, a psychological instance that maintains human beings organised and divided in racial categories.

Whiteness theory has been focused on as going beyond the racial structures as a socio-political and economic system to scrutinise more deeply the symbolic dimension of race and derived constructs of a race hierarchy. In this manner, the “whiteness device” of post colonialists and a debate for a whiteness unconsciousness in CRT are interwoven and they come to be useful to explain what happens in English language learning in regard to conceptions of racial identity, self-identification, and the consequences that those ideas bring about.

Method

This study was carried out in Bogota, Colombia. The methodology used in this project was narrative-oriented. In this context, written life stories and in-depth interviews were collected from 10 intermediate-advanced English language learners (see Table 1) who told about their English learning process and related racial experiences. Most participants were Colombians, except for one Taiwanese woman (Maya), and they learned English for personal purposes. To choose participants we focused on a variety of socio-economic and physical aspects that could lead us to obtain rich data from the participants’ experiences.

Narratives, considered as a form of construction of social reality (Somers, 1994; Spector-Mersel, 2010), favour the creation of meanings about social phenomena (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012) and facilitate access to the realities that individuals construct. In this view, data were analysed through the lenses of our theoretical framework and emerging themes were grouped in order to try to find relationships with the learners’ meanings of their experiences.

Table 1. Participants' Information

Pseudonym	Age Group	Gender
Damian	20–25	Male
Charlie	20–25	Male
Connie	25–30	Female
Manuela	40–45	Female
Louise	20–25	Female
Jean Pierre	20–25	Male
Johns	20–25	Male
Pola	25–30	Female
Edwin	40–45	Male
Maya	25–30	Female

Results

The analysis of the narratives developed by the participants let us see that the learners' experiences as speakers of a foreign language are usually fraught with certain ideals or expectations around that language and its native speakers. Those experiences, and the ones proper of the learning activity, are the ones that we want to highlight for the analysis of racial identity construction. What is clear here is that most of the participants started learning English with the interest of traveling around the world and interacting with diverse cultures. However, this desire has some nuances that learners are usually unconscious about and that, from the point of view of race, must be dismantled. As researchers, we consider that this exercise would contribute to bringing a new lens to language learning and that, by learning from these experiences, language learning could be addressed to more responsible, equitable practices.

Three are the emergent categories. The first category—The Construction of the Learners' Imaginary Based on Global Whiteness—describes how language learners constitute themselves by constructing imaginaries which usually come to them in discriminatory discourses of global whiteness where English is subsidiary. The second category—Temporary Identities Subsidised by English Whiteness—is related to the way

learners consciously and unconsciously take advantage of racial structures enhanced by English. In doing this, learners experience social mobility, but without being aware that those gains are temporary and that they also reproduce subtle discriminatory practices. And the third category—Learners' Racial Identity Constructions Fighting and Negotiating Structural Racism Reinforced by English—aims to describe learners' identity construction shaped by structural racism in English learning practices as well as other practices that learners develop in order to fight and resist injustice caused by other racial structures.

The Construction of the Learners' Imaginary Based on Global Whiteness

This category is defined by the symbolic power that extends from whiteness to a global level by imperceptible means, and which builds the learners' imaginaries of desire about language and what it means constructing their identity. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001), English global recognition has been greatly enhanced by pop culture. That is, the media, technology, music, films, and so on, have helped strengthen the status of English as the language of business as well as increase the perceived prestige and power of this language. In this line of thought, English, as well as its command, has gained more importance and prestige over other languages. In other words, having knowledge of English builds a coloniality of being in the learners' imaginaries where this language becomes the ideal that aligns with that of the ideal native speaker (Leung et al., 1997).

This idealisation of English is subtle if we follow what Delgado and Stefancic (2001) claim: "whiteness [represented in English] is often associated with innocence and goodness" (p. 75) which clearly become very attractive for receivers (learners). That is the case of Maya, a Taiwanese woman, who learns English in the Colombian context and who asserted that her interest in the language increased through films. Thus, the mass

media appear to influence the way she sees the culture of the language and herself. In the following excerpt, we asked Maya if she had a preference for any variety of English. She answered:

I would say the British accent is always very cool . . . it sounds very cool . . . England centuries movies which are really fun, like *Pride and Prejudice* or like, I would say, *Harry Potter* . . . that British accent . . . although, I can't understand them but it's really cool, how they speaking that way yeah. [sic]

Maya's taste for the English accent directly related to what she has seen in films, unveils that those media discourses have instilled in her an imaginary of the foreign language that is full of fantasy. Indeed, media appear here to have a big role in furthering the prestige of a given accent, in this case, the English one. These are aspects that construct an imaginary that reinforces dominant ideologies. Quijano (as cited in Castro-Gómez, 2000) refers to this created desire for others' culture as a derivation of whiteness that colonization has left in the mindset of the colonized countries' population. Intelligibility, which is a very relevant element in Maya's learning process, is sacrificed by her view, as long as the accent sounds "cool." In this sense, the coloniality of being, spread by media, usually seduces foreign language learners rather than oppresses by means of those propagated discourses of goodness and superiority that English language has.

In Jean Pierre's narrative, this power of English comes via other means and affects differently the way he constructs his identity as an English learner. Although he appears to be aware of the imperialism of the English language that governs academic production (a coloniality of knowledge), this recognition does not lead him to take an active role as a learner (coloniality of power) because he thinks in the end there is no other choice but to assume a subaltern position and accept that the idea that language is superior at the global level.

Today English produces knowledge, then that generates, like a linguistic or idiomatic monopoly . . . it detracts other languages that also give opportunities . . . if you look for . . . like scientific research or . . . academic writings, most of them are going to appear in English. And many times, it's even written by people who don't speak English as a native language, . . . the language of science is English." [sic]

As seen, Jean Pierre suggests that for someone to aspire to scientific production, English is indispensable. Behind the participant's words there is the idea that, nowadays, scientific knowledge is exclusively produced in English. By asserting that "the language of science is English" Jean Pierre promotes the belief (or imaginary) that, in the scientific arena, this language is superior to all other existing languages. In this vein, English is hiding discriminatory discourses that connect learners to white supremacy since English is a synonym of whiteness: bringing ideas of white power, privilege, and taken-for-granted benefit (Clarke & Garner, 2009). Thus, English, as well as whiteness, becomes a membership where a person who possesses it is automatically benefited with the privileges of the dominant race (McIntosh, 2004).

This imaginary of English language based on global whiteness is transformed in Charlie as an unconscious feature of identity construction. This is argued because, he claims he identifies with the English culture to the point that he becomes detached from his own Colombian culture, music, and language.

Look, first I don't feel identified living in this country . . . there are cultural issues that I don't feel identified with. [I prefer to be in contact with] English most of the time, in the YouTube videos, the movies, and literature. [sic]

As seen, global whiteness spread through English is a symbolic power that influences learners' identity construction, heavily accommodating to racialised discourses of blind acceptability to whiteness. As reflected in the participants, apparent innocent discourses spread

whiteness subtly and individuals accept these discourses consciously and unconsciously but also perpetuating the estrangement of selves and causing what for Charlie is a detachment of his own culture, his identity.

Temporary Identities Subsidised by English Whiteness

As related in the previous category, whiteness represented in English supports the construction of a racial identity which is subordinated to a stereotypical environment established by social convention. In this vein, we can say those stereotypes in English also provide economic opportunities for people who learn this language. This category is then, related to the learners' construction of their identity favoured by the cultural and economic dimensions present in the English language ideas. This dimension works similarly to what race theorists have called white privilege. In this sense, the category means that learners experience a shifting of their (racial) identities as they go along their path of learning the language. English language learners are aware of the language's privileged status which, according to them, grants them access to better jobs, schools, occupations, and various economic opportunities (Telles & Flores, 2013), and they seem to use this knowledge strategically to modify social status. However, as seen in the data, this racialised experience is usually temporary, and does not really transcend learners' life project and keep them subaltern (Spivak, 1988). This is why we refer to these racial identities as temporary or transitional, following Thesen (1997).

Edwin, one of our participants who was in police service as part of the government's mandatory rule for men in Colombia, appeared to construct this transitional identity that granted him access to the privileges attached to English. He was promoted in police internal ranks thanks to his previous knowledge of English.

A captain arrived and, we started to speak in English so, he said: "WHAT ARE YOU DOING, at this time here? Wasting yourself, nooo, go tomorrow for tourism!" Then,

the next day [the captain] made me a letter and he sent me for the tourism speciality. The tourism police is one of the best workspaces they have because there, they accompany the tourists who come and, [diplomats], people from abroad come. [sic]

As Edwin relates in this brief story, the opportunity to speak in English to a superior police officer allowed him to be moved to a better position in his police career. Thus, English worked as a provider of opportunities which, in this case, had to do with the chance of obtaining a better position in society (Vela, 2012; Wade, 1995). In other words, Edwin takes advantage of English white privilege to escalate to a higher status that at that moment was provided for him.

From this perspective, Edwin was able to be part of a select group in which, not only did he obtain prestige at a social level, but he also managed to place himself in a higher level in terms of employment. Those are benefits provided for Edwin because of the whiteness that the language brings. Edwin claims that due to his proficiency in English, he had the opportunity to interact with foreign diplomats, which also allowed him to look like someone from a superior social position.

In this way, English as a means of whiteness became a type of "property" for him from which he obtained benefits that according to Harris (1995, as cited in DeCuir & Dixson, 2004) are "the right of possession, the right to use, and the right to disposition, the right to transfer, the right of use and enjoyment" (p. 28).

However, as we named in our category, those benefits do not last long. As seen in Edwin's description, English proficiency allowed him to use the whiteness of English to enjoy social advantages at a certain moment of his mandatory military service. Nonetheless, this did not appear to be a long-lasting advantage since it worked in favour of the rich (white) foreign diplomats visiting the country rather than changing Edwin's socio-economic position. This is something that CRT has called "interest convergence," which is, white's social

sensitivity for others working for the white benefit (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

As seen, English as well as whiteness works in this learner's identity as a kind of property which gives him privilege. Privilege that is social and economic, and yet, it is also temporary because it is provided according to the needs of traditional privileged English speakers who come to the Colombian context rather than new English speakers such as Edwin.

Pola, a future teacher of English, is another participant who narrates in her story how her identity was shifting during her learning of the language and how she strategically used whiteness through English as socio-economic advantage. This was represented in how, thanks to a trip she made to the United States, she managed to get a job easily back in Colombia.

I arrived from the USA in August and in October I already had a job, and...even though I didn't have certified work experience and I didn't have an international exam, then I think...that can be seen to be like an advantage. There are many people who go to work in different things such as in a call center or, well, I don't know, in other jobs . . . or tourist guide and they earn the same as what they earn as teachers or even a little more. [*sic*]

Pola's gain can be seen as white privilege as it was provided to her as a property that she could use to obtain a job. This white privilege is even beyond the language itself, as it is also related to the idea of what living the experience in a foreign country such as the USA means. By asserting to have had experience abroad, she realised she was easily hired without any certification by a company and started to earn good money. However, this is also described here as a temporary identity because there are hidden discriminatory practices involved. She does not take into account that this privilege comprehends non-professional jobs that may not maintain social

benefits for long (Mignolo, 2000). That is why she even disdains her own future profession as a teacher by establishing a comparative view on the wages each job may provide. Self-discriminatory identity is what comes to her as a professional. Accordingly, it can be affirmed that Pola's identity started shifting when she took advantage of whiteness at that moment, however, in the long term, this would not assure the brilliant opportunities she devised.

The shifting of identity in Pola's case uses the advantages of speaking English but mainly of having had an experience abroad. This experience positioned her above the other applicants for the same job revealing how the power of English impacts various fields of the learner's social practice. One of these fields has to do with the difference in employment opportunities one has when using this language. This power equated in these terms is a device that facilitates the acquisition of economic status in society (Castro-Gómez, 2000). That is, as a commodity that one possesses. For that reason, the language learner, as stated by Zentella (1995), may potentially come to be part of a society that creates stereotypes, labelling those who do not speak English as coming from deplorable socio-economic backgrounds, or as people who do not deserve to enjoy corporate employment opportunities.

In summary, the experiences of English language learners let us see this situation critically and affirm that, even though economic and cultural benefits were obtained, thanks to English, there are two main factors to consider: First, that benefits are not long-lasting because they have limits mediated by interests which usually do not impact the economy of peripheral populations and the economy of the so-called third world countries (Usma et al., 2018); and second, that this shifting of identity may bring about subtle discriminatory discourses addressed to those who are not associated with the language speakers.

Learners' Racial Identity Constructions Fighting and Negotiating Structural Racism Reinforced by English

This category attempts to describe learners' identity construction shaped by structural racism in the English learning process and the practices that learners develop in order to fight and resist injustice caused by racial structures. First of all, it is necessary to refer to structural racism which, from the view of CRT, is related to racism embedded in institutions shaping people's practices and identities and converting discrimination into common sense (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000). Structural racism is then developed through a set of values, attitudes, symbols, and practices that produce and reproduce stereotypes that usually place a group of people over another (Mamani, 2020). In the case of English language learners, their physical characteristics or their identity as bilingual speakers of Colombian origin are aspects that usually link them to structural racism and consequently contribute to shaping their identity along their learning route.

Manuela, for example, is a self-identified Afro-Colombian English learner and teacher. Her personal narrative reveals how, despite becoming a competent professional who has been recognised as good teacher and language speaker, she has been overtly attacked because of her skin colour, even by her colleagues. This case represents one of the most visible recognised racist experiences shaping a learner's identity as a result of structural racism based on skin colour. Moreover, as Mamani (2020) says, structural racism contributes to normalising practices that usually give privilege to a group of people and excludes another not only on the basis of phenotype, but also nationality, culture, religion, place of living, class, or gender. Therefore, intersections of race with categories such as class or gender also play a key role in this category.

That English is racialised and produces structural racism is not unknown to various participants in this

study. For example, Louise touches several times upon the prevalence of racist linguistic policies disseminated by the government in our country:

I think that "Colombia Bilingüe," is a program that discriminates a lot; why? First, because it creates standards in which only certain social wealthy groups are favoured, and...there are not resources for that, and those are creating stereotypes of...that is, of a political content that is behind those standards" [sic]

Nevertheless, when the structural racism involved in those policies becomes a practice affecting people's identity, it is usually accepted and unquestioned. In Connie's narrative, it is evident how, as part of the normalization of those practices, her identity as a teacher was racialised, that is, she felt discriminated against and undervalued as a Colombian English language teacher. A school where she used to work required teachers to have international experience to keep being part of the staff. Such pressure fostered discrimination among the teacher staff.

Connie: When I was working in a school, well, one of the requirements of the school was that, as teachers, we had to have an experience abroad studying or living.

Researcher: And what happened if a teacher could not go?

c: Well, they gave you some time, and afterwards, they didn't hire you anymore.

r: And how long did they give you?

c: Me? No...I worked there for a year and a half and the year after, I had the chance to travel and I left.

r: Did you know about any teacher who had been given time limit if that experience was not achieved?

c: No, most of them had travelled and, I travelled, and other three teachers were going to travel too, to the United States, hmm with an organisation that used to take teachers to teach Spanish in the USA? Well, I don't remember.

r: And those teachers travelled because the school helped them to do so? or they did it by their own means?

c: No! not at all, nothing, everything was to keep our job when we came back.

r: And did they wait for you?

c: Oh yes, but none came back...I mean, WE didn't come back.

r: Was that written anywhere or it was just what happened in the school?

c: No, really, it was not written, when the...the language boss gave us feedback, she would always, told us what we had to do if we wanted to keep on working there. [sic]

Structural racism lived in the school as reported by Connie here is embedded not only in the way school institutional policies work to increase the English level of teachers, but it is also seen in how the practices around those policies reproduce those racist attitudes by the teachers themselves. Despite that, apparently, the institutional policy was not officially written anywhere, and the teachers themselves contributed to the social pressure over those teachers who have not had the experience abroad. In Connie's narrative it is clear that the school culture was represented not only in policies, but in teachers' practices sustained in a racist system that privileged centralisation of English nativeness. Such attitudes pushed her to have an experience abroad and to transform her identity to become a "good teacher" in the school's eyes.

Following Gillborn (2006), this structural racism has wider implications in teachers' identity that transcends the symbolic dimension represented in that social prestige achieved by the native speaker experience, and goes to the economic dimension for teachers to fulfil this need as a matter of preserving their jobs. Obviously, the economic conditions were not given for these teachers to comply with the school's needs because, as Connie said, teachers were not economically supported, that is, "everything was to keep [their] job when [they went] back". Hence, racism is not only symbolic, but also economic and this would certainly contribute to constructing a racialised identity as a teacher in what

Louise noted as "standards in which only certain social wealthy groups are favoured." That is, only the ones who have the economic possibilities would have access to travel, and therefore, keep their job. In Colombia, a country where the economy is weak, it is not strange that those opportunities are limited because of factors such as family or personal needs. Therefore, teachers may represent another group that ends up losing their jobs and being slammed by racism intersected with socio-economic conditions.

Notwithstanding the difficulties mediated by structural racism, learners who, in this case, are also teachers, construct their identities with capacities to negotiate with those structural conditions in multiple and incommensurable ways. Connie particularly accounts for her persistence to try to travel and achieve, not only because of that symbolic power of a native speaker her school demands, but also in order to gain certain social mobility that would allow her to avoid going back to her former school, as she reported in the excerpt. Further in the interview, she also relates how that desire of fighting the social conditions in which she seemed to be encapsulated, empowered her to fight hard.

Researcher: And do you think that learning the language in the British context as a Latin American has advantages?

Connie: As a Latin American? well, of course, there are differences, in the educative area, for example, Latin American people have to pay more in terms of education. While, obviously Britons have, they have their bursaries. Of course, it is much more difficult for a Colombian person. To study abroad in that sense, well...many times has to do with preferences. Well, those preferences for the native speaker hmm, well, that is. [sic]

As seen in the excerpt, Connie's narrative shows that, to overcome those barriers imposed by racial structures, she was involved in an economic and symbolic investment (Bourdieu, 1986). In other words, acceptance of asymmetric relationships between an

English native and Latin American student led her to pay more money for her education while she also perceived native British were even provided with bursaries to do so. Moreover, she accounts for white supremacy which was the symbolism of a native speaker she had to face to be able to achieve her dreams. She says, “it is much more difficult for a Colombian person.” To study abroad, “many times has to do with preferences. Well, those preferences for the native speaker.” What she calls “preferences” is really whiteness which, echoing McIntosh (2004), works here as a commodity bringing benefit to the ones who possess it and that she, as a Latin American, did not. These factors forced her to make other skills stand out and through them increase her hope to overcome the racial barriers that framed her Colombian identity. We can see that in the following excerpt:

Researcher: How did you reach the experience to work as an English teacher over there if you already realised that it was that difficult for a Latin American?

Connie: I finished my language program, I had experience teaching in Colombia, I got an A+ in my training course, I was outstanding in my practicum with college students, I prepared excellent material, I delivered very good lessons, the feedback from my students was always really good. [sic]

This is evidence of the participant’s fights against racial structures in which there is an awareness process of a racialisation of her identity as a Latin American that involved her in an unjust system and which she found as the motivation to fight harder to overcome it.

Finally, other testimonies showed how English as a whiteness device (Castro-Gómez, 2000) seemed to be used strategically by participants as a resource to negotiate and fight against other racial structures that shaped their identity based on phenotype. A significant example was presented by Manuela in her life history when she talks about the poor socioeconomic circumstances she had to live as an emigrant from

Quibdó, moving first to Medellín, and then to Bogotá. She emphasised how she felt social conditions were always more difficult for an Afro-Colombian family like hers. In her hometown she felt it was not that demanding while the attitude of people in Medellín and Bogotá towards them always shaped them as “different”; a feeling that usually came associated with estrangement and disdain. In her narrative, she explained that phenotypical racial structures played in her favour once when she was given the opportunity to work as a marketing assistant in a shop: “We were 100 candidates and only 10 were chosen, and I was picked in that bunch because they said they required to have a white blond, a brown, and black girl to serve as the publicity for their products.”

Unfortunately, with time, she realised that the job conditions were poor. She was assigned full-time work and that meant working 12 hours a day from Monday to Sunday and earning the minimum wage. Then, she decided to start another type of investment by enrolling in the university to achieve a career as an English teacher, so she used English as a whiteness device strategically to fight the given social conditions on her racialised identity as a black woman. In her view, this new decision would always be better than staying and enduring the racialised conditions to which she was submitted at the shop. Then, Manuela’s story tells that race was always crucial in her life as a black person and being an English language learner provided whiteness as an opportunity to cope with her phenotypical racialisation.

Conclusions

The development of this article helps one to understand that racial identity and English learning maintain power relations, which are worthy of being addressed in research so new understandings of language learning are visualised. The direction taken from this study aimed to address the complexities of language learning that usually involves hidden discriminatory practices affecting identities. This study reveals the preponderance of

hierarchical discourses that classify groups and provide advantages and disadvantages to different people under different circumstances. We think that understanding those relations may be a way to illuminate areas in language learning to find clues for developing more socially sensitive practices.

Specifically, in the findings of this study, it has been seen how learners' identity is shaped by being involved in a sentiment of attraction to the language and speakers that is usually transmitted unconsciously through media. Through this construction, it is shown that this imaginary of English and its speakers not only affects learners' perception of the foreign culture, but also affects the image that they have of themselves. Having in mind these affections, learners also appear to model and shift their identity according to the characteristics that are provided with by the environment and social conditions. That was evident as learners accommodate to major discourses of English as success but ignore the discriminatory practices that are subtle and keep them as subaltern. Finally, those experiences presented by learners here reveal that, despite the constant reproduction of racist practices, they also sometimes offer learners tools to develop strategies to overcome such racial barriers.

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