

A Critical Discourse Analysis of an Online Teaching Community

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Introduction

The concept of race in the Japan has been deeply impacted by western notions of race (Yamashiro, 2013). Historically, this meant that Blacks were viewed as racially and culturally inferior, which was the dominant attitude towards African Americans in the United States and Europe during the late 19th century. For example, racist views towards Blacks were evident in how they were described by Japanese delegates after returning to Japan from the United States in the late 1800s “the faces of these natives are black as if painted with ink and resemble those of monkeys...According to the Americans, they are the incarnation of apes” (Wagatsuma & Yoneyama, 1980, p. 64). While attitudes of racial superiority are not commonplace in modern Japan (Yamashiro, 2013), racist views that are rooted in American and European imperialism still linger. This has negative consequences towards minorities in Japan, specifically when it comes to English language teaching (ELT) as American Whites have become linked with native speakers of English “*gaikoku* [foreign countries] = Amerika = *eigo* (English) = *hakujin* (Whites)” (Sekiguchi, 2002, p. 202). Consequently, when Japanese are faced with a non-White English teacher, this creates “serious disconnections in the minds of Japanese students when they meet with a native- speaker (e.g. a Japanese-American) who does not conform to this image” (Toh, 2015, p. 173). In short, current working conditions in Japan concerning ELT have been impacted by racial practices in the United States, which have important implications for non-White English language teachers in the country.

Citing Guinier (2004), racial literacy is defined by Rogers and Mosley (2008) as “an interactive process in which the framework of race is used as a lens to explore social and legal practices, explicating the relationship between race and power, and examining mitigating variables such as gender, class, and geography” (p. 108). Rolón-Dow et al.

(2021) offer a similar definition, while also adding economics and politics as two more variables that are influenced by race. Based on these explanations, racial literacy can be described as a dynamic concept involving a set of semiotic tools that can be used to describe and interpret practices that relate to race. As noted by Rolón-Dow et al. (2021), teachers often do not have a sufficient understanding of how race impacts their students and subsequently their teaching, particularly among White teachers who may have little to no exposure to the experiences and views of minoritized groups. Therefore, racial literacy can be used to bridge this gap by providing teachers with the necessary tools to better navigate a world where race has a tremendous impact on education and other key aspects of life.

Mullet (2018) describes critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a transdisciplinary framework that is exemplified by several key features including its recognition that power relations impact discourses, problem-oriented focus, emphasis that discourses are context-dependent, as well as an acknowledgement that language is never neutral. Due to its transdisciplinary nature and its focus on the connection between language and power, CDA has become one of the most widely used frameworks to analyze racial literacy, particularly in the context of teachers and teacher education. Using CDA, Rogers and Mosley (2008) examined how racial literacy was exhibited in a teacher education book club. They found that the book club was a vehicle for the pre-service teachers to support and challenge existing understandings of racial literacy. In a similar study, Mosley and Rogers (2011) utilized CDA to better understand what and how White pre-service teachers talk about in the context of race, racism, and anti-racism. Their findings revealed that although the teachers' discussions did not lead to consensus regarding racial literacy, the talks did help them to evolve from their original social positions. Through a CDA-based analysis of literacy events involving a White pre-service teacher and a young, Black student, Wetzel and Rogers (2015) found that critical language awareness could support the development of racial literacy among teachers and students. In a recent study, Wetzel et al. (2021) examined how disruptions in professional settings could build deeper understandings of racial literacy among pre-service teachers. Results from their study indicated that disruptions have the potential to support racial literacy, thereby highlighting their significance in teacher coaching and other professional contexts. In contrast to the previous studies which were all conducted in in-person settings, Howrey (2018) investigated pre-service teachers' interactions in an online discussion board. The researcher concluded that the teachers' views towards

Mexican immigrants evolved through these internet-based discussions. While these CDA-based studies shed light on how racial literacies can be developed through critical discussion, only one of them was conducted in an online setting. This is counter to the ubiquity of online communication in modern society. Another underexplored area in CDA as well as ELT research is Reddit, a social media service focused on interest-based online communities. Even though it is one of the most trafficked sites in the world (Statista, 2021), it has received much less attention in language learning and teaching literature compared to other social networks (Isbell, 2018). Given these gaps in the literature, the present research project seeks to examine how the topic of race is discussed through the lens of racial literacy and CDA in a teaching-focused subreddit. Specifically, addresses the following research question: How is the topic of race manifested and discussed in a teaching-focused subreddit?

Method

Data Collection

The data set used in this paper comes from a subreddit called r/teachinginjapan. A subreddit is an online community within Reddit, a popular social networking service. I chose to analyze data from this online community for several reasons. First, it relates to my primary research interest, namely, computer-assisted language learning and teaching. Additionally, I have been a member of this community for approximately two years, so I am familiar with the goals and interests of the subreddit. Lastly, I have noticed that the topic of race has been brought up in the online community in various posts during my time as a member; thus, I thought it would be suitable for this assignment.

At the time of writing, r/teachinginjapan had over 31,000 members. The online community describes itself as a “space for teachers to discuss various aspects of their jobs and industry in greater depth than other forums provide” (Reddit, n.d.). The subreddit has a list of rules which are featured predominantly on the community’s page such as posts need be focused on teaching in Japan, basic online etiquette is required, and post titles should be specific. The data analyzed in this paper comes from a post entitled “Concerns about my race in the classroom.” This post was chosen as it specifically related to the topic of race. In short, the original poster (OP) stated that he was an American of Chinese descent who was soon to arrive in Japan to teach. However, he was concerned that his Chinese ethnicity and appearance would cause

problems in the country given the pandemic. The post was made on February 21, 2020 and had 17 comments, which indicates a moderate level of activity within the community. This practice of discourse analysis will center on this post as well as select comments made in response to the post.

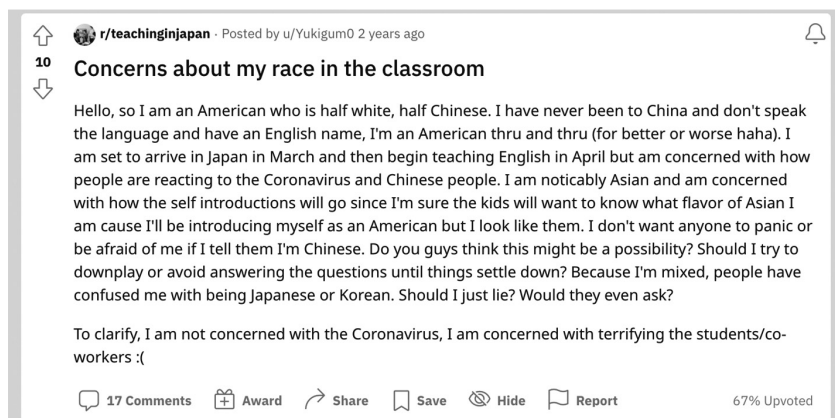
Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted with the support of Atlas.ti, a popular qualitative data analysis software. All member-created text from the designated subreddit post was copied and pasted into a Word document, which was subsequently imported into the software for analysis. A recursive approach to coding of the data was undertaken, i.e., the data was carefully read and re-read in order to look for themes related to race talk and genres of race.

Findings

Through my discourse analysis of the target subreddit post, it was evident that racial labeling was a common social practice among the members of this online community. As Figure 1 shows, the OP had dual racial identities, namely, he identified as being “half white, half Chinese.”

Figure 1. Screenshot of subreddit post by the OP



Not only was racial labeling found in the OP's message, but as shown below, the majority of the comments indicated the racial identities of the members or their

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acquaintances. These findings reveal that race was frequently manifested in the members' statements regarding their own racial identity or that of others. This suggests that the members of the online community held a common sense view of race as equivalent to ethnicity or other biological features.

Commenter 2: [I'm] Half Japanese/Half Chinese with full Chinese name...

Commenter 3: For what it's worth, I'm Korean American and introduced myself as from America...

Commenter 4: In my case, I'm Canadian born Vietnamese...

Commenter 6: A friend and classmate of mine in grad school is Taiwanese with a noticeable [sic] non-native accent.

Commenter 8: About a quarter of the ALTs [assistant language teachers] at my company are of Asian or mixed Asian descent.

Commenter 10: I have a friend here in Japan who is mixed American caucasian and Japanese and he gets the "hafu" [mixed race] comments.

Commenter 12: I'm half Chinese, it never usually comes up.

One genre of race that was featured in the subreddit post was ranking, which is the description of an implicit or explicit hierarchy based on race. For instance, the OP states in his post that he is "concerned with how people are reacting to the Coronavirus and Chinese people...I don't want anyone to panic or be afraid of me if I tell them I'm Chinese." This statement clearly shows that the OP perceives his Chinese background as being a potential source of fear among his future Japanese students. In addition to this statement, the commenters' responses below are full of implicit negative connotations regarding Chinese.

Commenter 2: People can assume I'm Chinese, mostly in tourist areas, but I don't speak Chinese so it's not a problem.

Commenter 4: I haven't faced any discrimination yet but Japan and Vietnam might not have the same dark history as China and Japan.

Commenter 5: What if you mention that you've never been to China as part of your introduction? "I'm half Chinese but I have NEVER been to China." maybe add "but I'd LOVE to visit someday" putting a positive spin on China amidst these current fears.

Commenter 2 states that because they do not speak the Chinese language, they have had no issues regarding their background. What is telling here is the assumption that if the commenter did in fact speak the Chinese language, that could pose problems for them in the country. In other words, the Chinese language, and in extension, Chinese people, are at a lower racial hierarchy than Japanese or non-Japanese languages which have a higher social status, namely, English. In the statement by Commenter 4, they note that their Vietnamese background may be the reason why they have not had any issues with discrimination. However, the commenter also points out how the relationship between Vietnam and Japan is much different compared to that of China and Japan, noting their “dark history.” While speculative, I think it is safe to assume that this commenter was referring to Japan’s colonial past and invasion of China in the early 1990s. What is interesting in this case is that China is still at a lower hierarchy in this scenario, even though it was not the aggressor during this dark period of Asian history. Commenter 5 provides advice to the OP, telling him to tell his students that he has never been to China as a way to alleviate their fears. Not only is this another instance of ranking, as China is implied as a bad place to visit, but it is also an example of placializing, i.e., creating an equivalency between a racialized people (Chinese) with a place (the country of China). It is also worth noting how this commenter tries to put “a positive spin” on the recommendation by also advising the OP to say he wants to visit China in the future. Yet, had the OP said this comment, it is likely that the teacher’s students would still leave with a negative connotation of China and Chinese people.

A final genre of race that I identified was colorblindness. Reed and Phillips (2013) state that colorblindness “assume[s] that race no longer constitutes a significant category of analysis” (p. 130). As one can see in the passages below, the commenters ignored or downplayed the role of the OP’s race in Japan.

Commenter 6: Work hard and it won’t matter at all.

Commenter 7: Totally agree. Don’t believe the hype kids, the absolute % of Japanese who are racist jerks is no greater than in your home country. 90% or so of people anywhere are good people, and they’ll treat you fairly.

Commenter 9: The teachers will ask, but it probably won’t be a huge deal.

Commenter 11: It doesn’t matter. Just don’t mention your race.

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Commenters 6 and 11 state that the OP's ancestry will not matter at all. In other words, they believe that racial identity is not an important factor in life as long as a person is a good and capable worker. These statements have notions of meritocracy in which hard work always pay off. However, it is evident that meritocracy is just a myth when it comes to both education (Liu, 2011) and the workplace (van Dijk et al., 2020). Commenter 7 and 9 have a slightly different take. Commenter 7 asserts that 90% of people are "good," and thus Japanese people are likely to treat the OP in a fair manner. In this assumption, 10% of people are not "good," which indicates that Commenter 7 believes there is a small chance one's racial identity could be an issue. Similarly, Commenter 9 claims that the OP's Chinese background "won't be a huge deal." In this comment, there is an indication that the OP's race may cause minor issues, but those problems will not materially affect his well-being. To put it another way, Commenter 7 and 9 believe that racial background is a small but ultimately trivial factor in society. However, research shows that race, in a common sense view of the word, has a profound effect on education (Grossman & Porche, 2014), health care (Lillie-Blanton et al., 2000), criminal justice (Hagen et al., 2005) among other aspects of everyday life.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to better understand how race was portrayed and talked about in a teaching-focused subreddit. To this end, I adopted a discourse analysis approach in my discourse analysis. Results from the analysis reveals three primary findings. First, race was most often manifested in the members' statements regarding their own racial identity or the racial identity of others. In addition, there is a perceived racial hierarchy in Japan with Chinese below most, if not all, other groups. Finally, colorblindness is a common reaction among teachers in Japan when responding to racially charged issues.

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Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which race is discussed in an online community on Reddit, a social networking service made up of interest-based virtual communities. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study explores how discussions of racial literacy, power, and language are exhibited in this online community. Previous studies have highlighted CDA's effectiveness in analyzing how racial literacy can develop through structured dialogue, particularly within teacher education. However, few studies have utilized online platforms to explore racial literacy in teacher communities despite the rise in digital communication. This paper addresses this gap by examining discussions on a subreddit or online community that focuses on the Japanese teaching context. Findings from the analysis indicate three main themes related to racial identity and perceptions toward race. The study's results suggest that racial literacy and awareness are shaped by these discussions and that CDA can effectively highlight the complexities of racial identity and discourse in online teaching communities

