

“I didn’t know I could say my teacher was a sexist or a racist”: Critical Discussions about Discrimination in the Classroom

by Danielle Burrell-Kim

Summary: This article offers one example of how critical pedagogy can be used to address bias, discrimination, and oppressive language ideologies through student-led discussions to help students be aware of their rights as students and to prepare them with the tools they need to advocate for themselves within their educational institution.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, bias, discrimination, oppressive language ideologies, advocacy

Introduction

“I didn’t know I could say my teacher was a sexist or a racist.”

Irina (Burrell-Kim, 2020, p. 71)

Irina’s statement has stuck with me long after I interviewed her as part of my Master’s thesis research. Irina was one of five participants in my study in which I explored how speakers of English as a second language experienced oppressive language ideologies in their mainstream college courses (Burrell-Kim, 2020). Language ideologies are beliefs about language and language users. These beliefs are often not built on empirical evidence and extend to beliefs about attributes, personality, or personal value of language users, often resulting in discriminatory and inequitable treatment (Curzan, 2014; Holliday, 2015; Lippi-Green, 2012). However, as I and other researchers (e.g. Lee & Rice, 2007) have found, there is still a discrepancy between the number of students who experience discrimination and the few that report it. In this paper, I will explore the implications of this for educators, as well as share one lesson plan I use to help increase students’ awareness of their rights.

One day during an interview, Irina and I were discussing some of the blatant discrimination she had faced in her classes. She recalled her instructor making “jokes” about communism directed at her due to her country of origin and later discouraging her from writing about feminist topics in class. That is when she said, “I didn’t know I could say my teacher was a sexist or a racist”. I was initially alarmed; our college has a strong diversity committee with proactive staff. Our students walk past student services every day where they can report discrimination

or talk to an inclusivity counselor. And yet, I soon found that none of my participants knew they could report discrimination, how to report it, or what even qualified as discrimination. In fact, despite experiencing discrimination, inequitable language ideologies, and racism and neo-racism, many participants reproduced or normalized the oppressive ideologies that disadvantaged them. In part, this occurred by denigrating their own language competencies as well as regarding speakers of English as a first language as inherently linguistically superior to them. Even though they described encounters with oppressive language ideologies in their mainstream courses as overwhelmingly negative and often unfair, they did not take action to resist them (Burrell-Kim, 2020). This is what inspired me to create a lesson plan to explore what discrimination is and what students can do if they experience it in their courses.

Anti-Racism and the Need to Address Discrimination

Discrimination thrives through naturalization. Foucault (as cited in Luke, 2018) describes naturalization as the process through which the status quo is established and maintained within society as an unquestioned norm. When norms are not questioned, they are able to thrive, and those that are disadvantaged by said norms may even come to adopt and reproduce these ideologies (Luke, 2018).

If we truly wish to dismantle the status quo, we must address discriminatory practices that have become normalized. This lesson aims to do exactly that by bringing discrimination, inequitable practices, and students’ rights to the forefront of conversation for students to explore. In particular, I aim to address issues of inequitable language

ideologies, racism and neo-racism, or discrimination based on cultural difference rather than race (Holliday, 2015). While blatant racism and other forms of discrimination are often easy for people to identify, students are less likely to experience their classmates or instructors using slurs or other forms of direct discrimination. However, implicit discrimination and neo-racism, which often is veiled through false facts, “jokes”, or what is framed as polite discourses (Holliday, 2015), require deeper examination.

The Lesson: What is Discrimination?

I first taught this lesson with high-level English for Academic Purposes students ranging from their early twenties to middle-age, from a variety of countries. This was part of a program for immigrant and refugee students, and the course was designed to prepare them, many of whom had never gone to college, to transition into college-level classes. Thus, it was built around critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and discussed critical issues such as the history of race in the education system, learning differences, and other issues of equity.

I first reached out to the diversity committee and inclusion officers at my college to collect information about what options students have if they ever face discrimination there. This is likely to be different at each institution, and I encourage you to familiarize yourself with your institution’s policies and processes.

Prior to introducing this lesson, we had completed our unit on the history of race and desegregation in the education system. Thus, the students had discussed examples of explicit discrimination. Therefore, the warm-up questions (see Appendix A) served to reactivate their prior knowledge and build on it.

As shown in Appendix A, I created a list of scenarios built around a critical feminist understanding of discrimination and bias, using examples from my thesis participants, my own experience, and reports from other students. As these students were transitioning into college courses in the next term, the scenarios describe incidents in non-ESL college courses. They range from very explicit acts of discrimination like “A teacher makes a comment about women not being able to study as well as men” to more complex instances which would require students to investigate further, such as “A teacher gives your friend a higher grade on an assignment, and you don’t know why.” The issues touched on include racism, neo-racism, sexism, classism, and oppressive language ideologies. The list can be expanded and adjusted to fit your context and students as needed.

After discussing the warm-up questions, I had students independently select whether they believed each scenario was a form of discrimination/bias or not. I always let my students talk among themselves if they need to clarify

the meaning of anything, but I encouraged them to make their own decisions about the scenarios. Once everyone was finished, I opened up the class to discussion. If you have a large class, you may want to have them discuss the answers in small groups before holding an all-class discussion.

I asked the students if they thought each scenario was a form of discrimination or not and let them discuss it among themselves fully before offering my perspective on whether if the scenario is or is not discrimination. At times, I would provide them with clarification over the scenario or ask leading questions to prompt deeper thinking. In the end, I discussed my own rationalizations, built on critical scholarship, of how each scenario does or does not qualify as discrimination as well as what they might need to do if it is unclear if the scenario is bias motivated or not (see Appendix B). This is significant because I want students to be able to use these examples to identify any other forms of discrimination in the future. However, it is important to note that students’ experiences and perspectives should take the forefront of this discussion. The goal is to expand their understanding of their rights, and their experiences must not be discredited.

Finally, I described the process of reporting discrimination at the college. For me, it was important to be thorough and clear to students about exactly what would happen if they reported discrimination. For many students, like Irina, they may be unaware of their rights as students, the presence of human resources on their campus, or the extent of their freedom of speech; I found my students were shocked to discover their instructors would not be immediately notified if they reported them, and many admitted they thought their grades would suffer in such a case. The goal for this portion of the lesson was to remove any uncertainties or fear surrounding the reporting process; I want my students to know they are safe and welcome to talk to student services at any time.

Each time I teach this lesson, I find very few of my students are aware of their rights, and none of them know they can report discrimination. I was amazed to see how this lesson opened up the classroom to many other important discussions. Many students expressed relief, knowing that mistreatment they had previously experienced at work and in other contexts was not a normal or encouraged behavior in college. Additionally, some students began to question their rights in their workplace and explore ways they can advocate for themselves and others there. Most of all, I find a critical understanding of language and language ideologies can be transformative to students as they recognize they do not have to speak ‘perfectly’ to be respected as legitimate speakers of English and that their first languages are important parts of their culture and identity, worthy of respect. If we are to foster equitable and inclusive environments in our

educational institutions, we must work to reinforce this sense of pride and agency in our students in a way that extends outside of our classroom walls. In part, this must

be done by explicitly addressing the biases and oppressive language ideologies embedded within and promoted through educational institutions.

Appendix A

1. What is a bias?
 - a. Can you think of an example of a bias?
 - b. We have talked a lot about racism and inequity in education. For example, racism is when someone discriminates because of another person's race. What are other reasons people discriminate?
 - c. Are you familiar with these words: racism, sexism, ageism, ableism, classism, and homophobia?
2. Do you know what you can do if a teacher treats you with a bias (or discriminates against you)?
Would you feel comfortable reporting discrimination to someone? Why or why not?
3. Discrimination is not always direct or clear. Below is a list of things some students might experience in college class. Do you think these are a type of discrimination that should be reported? Write "Y" for yes, or "N" for no.

Situation	Yes/No
1. A teacher makes a comment about women not being able to study as well as men.	
2. A teacher does not try to pronounce students' names right, even after being corrected several times.	
3. A teacher asks you to do or write something you are not comfortable with for religious reasons (Example: A teacher says you cannot capitalize "God" in an essay, but you feel more comfortable capitalizing it.)	
4. A teacher gives your friend a higher grade on an assignment, and you don't know why.	
5. A teacher says you cannot use your first language in their class.	
6. A teacher makes jokes using stereotypes about race, gender, religion, age, sexuality, class (socioeconomic status), or other factors.	
7. A teacher grades heavily based on grammatical details in an unrelated class. (Example: A teachers grades students on correct comma use in a Psychology class.)	
8. Students in your class will not work with someone because they are a different race or gender.	

4. Compare your answers with another student and discuss why you chose your answers. If you wrote 'No' on any of the examples, why? And what would you do instead in that situation?

Appendix B

Suggested “Answer” Key*

1. Yes. This belief reflects a sexist exclusion of women from education and is unsupported by empirical evidence (Butler, 2006).
2. Unclear. The instructor should always try their best to get names right. If they struggle with pronunciation but try, that is not discrimination. However, refusing to attempt to say a student’s name, urging them to choose an English name or nickname, or expressing negativity regarding their name are forms of cultural disbelief or the denigration of non-Western cultures, languages, and people (Holliday, 2015).
3. Yes. Students have a right to religious freedom, including the language they use when describing religious topics.
4. Unclear. The student should ask the teacher first. Grading should be clear and transparent. If there is no justification for a grade difference, the student may want to consult student services.
5. Yes. Enforcing English-only spaces, especially outside of the English language classroom, violates students’ rights to their own language and expresses a standardized language ideology which valorizes English as the only legitimate language (Bucholtz, 2010; Lippi-Green, 2012).
6. Yes. Implicit prejudice is integral to maintaining discriminatory ideologies (Holliday, 2015). Hyperbole and humor are often used to mask racist discourses while maintaining that there is some truth in the statement (Ferré, 2014).
7. Yes. Grading heavily on grammar outside of grammar courses reflects oppressive language ideologies such as standardized language ideology and prescriptivism. These ideologies assert language must be ‘perfect’ to be legitimate, and often result in grading bias against English as a Second Language speakers (Bucholtz, 2010; Burrell-Kim, 2020; Curzan, 2014; Lippi-Green, 2012).
8. Yes. Students also have rights regarding how their classmates treat them. If they experience discrimination or harassment from classmates, students should consult their instructor and/or student services.

**It is important to note that many of the possible explanations provided are not answers so much as perspectives built on critical, feminist scholarship on equity, discrimination, and language ideologies. Many of the scenarios are purposely unclear, as acts of discrimination such as microaggressions and internal bias are also unclear. Students should always seek out student services if they suspect they may have experienced discrimination or inequitable teaching practices.*

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