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"Translanguaging and Language Policy in the Global South"

Interview

Learning from Ryuko Kubota: Applied Linguistics, Race, Identity, and Critical Approaches

Aprendendo com Ryuko Kubota: linguística aplicada, raça, identidade e abordagens críticas

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ABSTRACT: Since the 1990s Ryuko Kubota has extensively researched race, identity, and critical approaches to teacher development in the area of Applied Linguistics (AL). More recently, her last publications include the relevance of translanguaging and ongoing work with the Sister Scholars. As the result of our interest in Kubota's extremely significant discussions, in this interview, Kubota points out the challenges AL has faced in the last years, as well as the complexities of working in the Global North. Besides, she provides compelling insights in antiracist pedagogy and the role of Freire in English language teaching.

KEYWORDS: Applied Linguistics, race, identity, critical approaches

RESUMO: Desde os anos 1990, Ryuko Kubota tem pesquisado temas relacionados à raça, identidade e abordagens críticas de formação de professores na área de Linguística Aplicada (LA). Recentemente, sua produção inclui a relevância da translinguagem e seu trabalho contínuo com as Sister Scholars. Nesta entrevista, fruto do nosso interesse nas discussões propostas pela pesquisadora, Kubota discute os desafios que a LA tem enfrentado nos últimos anos, bem como as complexidades de se trabalhar no Norte Global. Ademais, a estudiosa fornece contribuições valiosas sobre uma pedagogia antirracista e o papel do educador Paulo Freire no ensino de língua inglesa.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Linguística Aplicada, raça, identidade, abordagens críticas

Introduction

As professors and researchers in the area of Applied Linguistics (AL), we are constantly expanding our reading repertoires as well as developing our academic and professional networks. Therefore, it is undeniable that our references are influenced by scholars who provide insightful and thought-provoking issues, which is the case of our interviewee, professor Ryuko Kubota.

Currently a professor in the Department of Language and Literacy Education in the Faculty of Education, she has been working at the University of British Columbia since 2009. Before that, Dr. Kubota has also worked as an English teacher with high school students in Japan and as a professor at the Monterey Institute of International Studies and at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, both in the United States.

In addition, her research focuses on race and antiracism, language, and critical approaches to teacher development. Some of her publications include: "Exploring lived experiences of Black female English teachers in South Korea: Understanding traveling intersectionality and subjectivities" (2022, co-authored by Younjoo Seo), "Critical antiracist pedagogy of English as an additional language" (2021), "Neoliberal paradoxes of language learning: Xenophobia and international communication" (2016), "Race and language learning in multicultural Canada: Toward critical antiracism" (2015), *Race, culture, and identities in second language education: Exploring critically engaged practice* (2009, co-edited with Angel Lin), "Critical approaches to culture and pedagogy in foreign language contexts" (2003), just to name a few.

Our first contact with her happened in 2020/21, however, due to the COVID-19 outbreak and its severe outcomes in our professional and personal lives, this interview only happened at the beginning of 2022. During the one-hour online meeting, she kindly shared her critical stances on AL, and her current views on antiracist pedagogy, not to mention her most recent works.

We strongly believe that this productive dialogue may not only enlighten AL professors, researchers, and students' perspectives but also encourage us all to consider the setting up of sisterhoods in our academic lives.

Q: The area of Applied Linguistics has faced many challenges throughout the years and, as a result, it has resignified many concepts. As a researcher, which concepts have you resignified as well?

RK: I can see many changes in critical scholarship over the years, especially because, for some time now, previously at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill and currently at UBC, I have been teaching a course on culture and politics in second language education, which deals with various critical issues in second language education. Over the years I have changed some topics in my course because what was considered critical 20 years ago may no longer be deemed critical today, right? However, I still deal with issues of linguistic diversity. When deciding which topics I should include in the syllabus, I consider my students, who are mostly M. Ed. and MA students and a few Ph.D. students. For Master's students, who are currently teaching or have been teaching in their home countries and because we have a lot of international students, particularly from Asia, I feel critical issues such as linguistic diversity still need to be addressed in daily teaching.

Linguistic diversity includes concepts such as World English, English as a *lingua franca*, and more recently, translanguaging. For example, World Englishes have been discussed since the 1980s, so it has a long history. However, in the actual teaching contexts, particularly in the context of English as a foreign language, there is still a very strong emphasis on teaching standardized English, coming from the US, the UK, and Canada. Well, I still think that linguistic diversity, in its goal to problematize linguistic normativity, native-speaker norm, standardized English norm, and other language norms, for example, is important and a very current topic.

Other topics, such as race, racialization, and racism, became popular a little bit more recently compared to World Englishes. Issues of race have been addressed since the mid-2000s, particularly when Andy Curtis and Mary Romney published, in 2006, an edited book entitled *Color, race, and English language teaching* and I guest-edited with Angel Lin a special issue on Race and TESOL for *TESOL Quarterly*. In addition, we have Suhanthie Motha's *Race, empire, and English language teaching: Creating responsible and ethical anti-racist practice* (2014), in which she illuminated issues of race during focus group discussions between her and English teachers in the United States. Another important publication that I co-edited with Angel Lin in 2009 is *Race, culture, and identities in second language education*. There has been, as you see, a series of books and other publications since the 2000s and this number has been increasing. More recently, there is a special forum on anti-Asian racism published in *TESOL Journal* which discusses the problems that became prevalent since the breakout of COVID-19 in 2019 and 2020.

Suhanthie Motha is another scholar who has extensively published on race and racism and English language teaching. Uju Anya, a Black professor at Carnegie Mellon University in the United States, has researched and written about African-American students of Portuguese studying in Brazil reclaiming their racial identity as Portuguese second-language speakers.

Wenhao Diao, a Chinese scholar, also has some publications that touch upon issues of race for study-abroad American students in China. I'm guest-editing a special issue on racialized teaching of English in Asian contexts for *Language, Culture and Curriculum,* in which there'll be some articles on issues of race and teaching English in Korea, Thailand, and Japan. Despite being about English language teaching in Asia, the articles are relevant to teaching in other languages and geographical contexts.

Q: I was wondering if in Asian educational contexts, including in Japan, English language educators have some space for bringing those critical issues into their classes and into the curriculum in general or if it is something specific to the academic space.

RK: I think very little is done in primary and secondary education partly because of the lack of teaching materials and teacher education. In general, the discourse of race, racialization, and racism is not really prevalent in society and in education. I would say that there are very few teachers who address these issues in their daily teaching contexts. This can also be said regarding university spaces. There has been a lot of interest in issues of race among professional organizations. JALT (Japan Association for Language Teaching), for instance, is a TESOL affiliate association whose teachers or members are mostly native speakers of English. It has many regional chapters and two publications, *The Language Teacher* and *JALT Journal*. *JALT Journal* is having a special issue on race and native speakerism in English language teaching. In January 2021, JALT Kyoto Chapter held a special forum on race and native speakerism. As you can see, these native English-

speaking teachers in Japan are interested in these critical perspectives. In addition, there's Korea TESOL in South Korea. Again, Korea TESOL is a TESOL affiliate, similar to JALT, so most of the teachers are native teachers of English. They will have a conference in the next months and I will give a keynote speech about issues of race. The theme for the conference this year is *More Than Words: teaching for a better world*. They are obviously interested in something beyond language understood as a structure.

Q: Issues of race, ethnicity, and identity have been emerging more frequently in the language teaching area. What do you think are the impacts and implications of taking them into consideration in the ELT classroom? And what is the role of the English teacher in this context?

RK: Again, it's something beyond language *per se.* Recently, I'm more interested in looking at language users rather than language or linguistic features in language teaching. This is because language teaching and learning are for developing skills of communication which happens between people. Actually, you can say that communication happens between a person and a machine these days, but machines are tools that mediate communication between people. I believe people are the ones who are actually communicating through the medium of technology, text, other objects, and materials, so I think communication still is an in-person activity and, when it comes to in-person activity, you usually see the other person. Sometimes you don't see the person if you are talking on the phone or you're just corresponding by e-mail, but, in this case, you even know who the other person is by the name and guess where the person is from, their gender, race, and ethnicity. It means that, in communicating, we all need to think about how we, as human beings, negotiate identities with each other.

When talking about identity, we should be aware of multiple categories: gender, nationality, race, sexuality, social class, social status, personalities, etc. In short, we communicate in different ways. Take social status, for instance, communicating with the president of the University is different from communicating with a friend. We do take into consideration the social status, as well as race, gender, and so forth. Still, if we have a prejudice against a certain racialized group, nationality, gender, or sexual orientation, then we cannot have a collegial, open communication with the other person as human beings. I think we need to recognize the uniqueness of a language user, rather than paying attention only to what kind of language, pronunciation, and grammar we use.

For example, I was talking to a former student from Korea who finished her Master's thesis and returned to Korea to teach. Our discussion was about the importance of addressing race in the classroom and she said something interesting. She is familiar with antiracism because she was involved in various activities in Canada, so she tried to implement some antiracist activities in her English classes in secondary school. In one of the activities, she showed a video clip regarding fair housing[1]: In this awareness-raising video about housing discrimination, a white man calls various landlords using different accents: Chinese accent, Black accent, and Latino accent. All the replies are "it's rented". At the end, when he speaks with a standardized English accent, we can hear from him: "Oh really, is it available? It's wonderful!". My former student showed this video to her classroom to argue that accent discrimination was inappropriate. But, contrary to her expectations, her students said: "Well, this video really tells us how important it is to speak stan-

[1] Entitled *Accents*, this video is used as a pedagogic tool to talk about discrimination against different ethnicities in their search for housing and was collaboratively produced by the AD Council, HUD and the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84k2iM30vbY. Accessed on: 12 Apr. 2022.

dardized English." As you can see, this normative discourse is deeply ingrained in students' minds. That led to another discussion of language users. In this video, the white man is making calls with different accents, but in real situations, people of color speak in various accents. So, a question is, if a person like me learns to speak a standardized American accent and goes to America, will they be treated equally as white native speakers of English? I don't think so. You can see how anti-Asian racism works. In short, race really impacts how we communicate; when we interact with someone, racial prejudice comes into play. Speaking perfect English does not make you a perfect English speaker who can equally communicate with white people, so I pay attention to the *language user* and how our identity categories impact our communication.

Q: In your 2019 interview with Perla Villegas Torres and Diana Stukan, you claim the relevance of sharing research results with our colleagues. As a researcher living in the Global North, how do you see yourself inhabiting this complex space, in other words, being a critical race scholar within a majorly hegemonic place?

RK: That's a great question! To me, I always need to remind myself as a privileged scholar in the Global North, even though I come from a gendered and racialized background. I am privileged to be a professor at a prestigious university in the Global North, so my task is to use the power to promote social justice, antiracism, and equity in our classrooms, in our institutions, as well as in our academic field. I believe it is important to always think of a praxis that is committed to reflection and action for transformation. Reflection is essential since transformation does not happen through just reading and writing, but by reflecting on my own privilege and on the impact of my research on other people, my students, and my readers. These actions may improve and change the way I operate. If it doesn't work or if it hurts others, maybe I need to make a change and then take an action. In this way, writing is an action, but then I increasingly feel that writing to academic scholars is just discussing these issues in the bubble and I think we need to go beyond: Talk to other people and disseminate our scholarly knowledge to the general public, students, parents, and policymakers.

Q: What about the dissemination of investigations from the Global South? Is research from the Global South read and cited in the Global North? How do you deal with such demands?

RK: That's a big question. I think some journal editors are aware of the gap between Global South and Global North in terms of publication. Some of them are already addressing this issue. For instance, the new editor of the journal *Language, Culture and Curriculum* was mentioning to me, who am part of the editorial board, how this underrepresentation persists. That is, with a stronger call for universities and journals to adapt to the demands posed by globalization, such as internationalization, we realized research from the Global South has continued to be marginalized. Upon noticing this problem, collaborative endeavors have been initiated in this specific journal. I hope that it is able to contribute to this concern and to the efforts being made into becoming a more inclusive space.

However, there are challenges. The question is: How can we operationalize this? One complication is that the sole inclusion of authors from the Global South in the Global North journals can become a colonial endeavor. In addition, for research from the Global South to be accepted, it needs to comply with the theoretical and methodological frameworks developed by the Global North. This type of solution ends

up with a spread of the frameworks of the Global North, which is again problematic. We must reclaim the perspectives and frameworks or theories from the Global South.

One possible way that comes to my mind is to collaborate with journals in the Global South and promote article exchange. Even if we do this, however, we may not be able to pluralize research and methodology. As I came to realize, even journals in the Global South follow the Eurocentric frameworks of reference and methodology.

I have yet two examples of the complex nature of any endeavor that attempts to pluralize academia. I wrote a paper on decolonizing second language writing. It is widely known that second language writing is a space that is still highly governed by standardized English (following a European norm). In oral interactions, certain levels of pronunciation, grammar, and so forth that do not follow the native norm can be allowed – you can understand and be understood. But when it comes to academic writing, the norm is enforced more strictly, hindering our attempts to go beyond the standardized, Eurocentric norm of English.

As to research, as I mentioned earlier, Eurocentric theories and methodology are expected and employed. Concerning the former, we can see theories from the Global South, Southern theory, Decolonization and Decoloniality being employed here and there. Nonetheless, when it comes to research methodology, particularly when you have empirical research or data-based research, what kind of methodology can you use? In this respect, I haven't really encountered innovative methodology coming from the Global South, except for Indigenous methodologies.

J: I agree with you that it is really, really difficult for us, as academics, to research in different ways, beyond the European scientific knowledge, criteria, and methodology, the pattern that informs our frames of reference. We often find many challenges when we attempt to pluralize and validate other types of knowledge, as well as to accept other ways of knowing, being, and existing. Despite these difficulties, I find other knowledges to be also of utmost importance and needed for different uses, according to different criteria. In Brazil, I see a few movements trying to question and pluralize academia. They are certainly localized, but I think they exist and are willing to change the scenario.

D: We are constantly in this exercise of trying to fit the standard of European or North American research because we want to be accepted into Ph.D. programs, we want to have our papers accepted and published; on the other hand, we feel guilty because we are being colonized. We want to start something different, we want to start doing research with other people in different ways, but they are not legitimized. They will be published in our bubble here in the Global South, they will not be read or spread in the way we wish they would... Again, there is another bubble...

J: I think that we, Brazilian scholars and applied linguists, have somehow been trying to challenge this colonial mode of knowledge production by writing with and citing Indigenous and Quilombola scholars, for instance. We also have been trying to do collaborative research and to acknowledge teachers' perspectives and experiences as much valid and important as researchers'. This, we think, responds to Boaventura de Sousa Santos's (2018) call for non-extractivist forms of research, to the claim alternative cosmologies have made towards working with, learning from and with them, recognizing other knowledges, bodies, and ways of experiencing the world as valid and fundamental to the life on this planet. However, it cannot be denied,

in the case of collaborative research, for instance, that the researcher is still the one to obtain the degree and/or the honors, benefiting a lot even from the critical research s/he conducts... So, we still face many difficulties in trying to challenge that... our colonial modes of being and knowing are extremely hard to be questioned and truly altered. It is a long, difficult, complex way to walk...

RK: It's just so difficult... I don't have any clear solution, but I think that being aware of the problem is the first step. If we are not aware, how do we avoid becoming complicit with the Eurocentric norm?

J: We are all complicit in colonial harm, so identifying this fact is an important step to imagine and act towards different ways of existing, I think.

Q: How, in your opinion, can decolonial scholarship contribute to educational issues and to ELT in its endeavor to question Eurocentrism and fight the consequences capitalism and racism place upon oppressed peoples?

RK: How do we define decolonial scholarship? If defined in a broad sense, we could integrate some earlier work on issues of increased awareness of diversity. Nonetheless, I think issues of power are at the core of decolonial projects, especially the knowledge produced in the Global South in its complex relations with the knowledge produced in the Global North.

As we discussed, ELT is undeniably tied with the Eurocentric notion of language and language users. Therefore, in this sense, decolonial scholarship usually benefits transformation of ELT research, once it invites us to go beyond a white native-speaker norm, problematizing both the notions of standardized language and native speakers. In addition, when we consider questions such as: How do we actually conceptualize the power dynamics of languages and language users? How can we resist such oppressive power? How can we transform these power relations?, we are able to clearly see the contributions decolonial scholarship can offer to ELT.

In a similar vein, how can we disseminate that perspective to teachers and students? How can we actually communicate our decolonial efforts and decolonial ways of knowing and thinking to practitioners? As you can see, this is a circular logic and a very challenging one.

I am certain we could write and publish a lot, but as we discussed, the people who are actually interested and are going to have access to such texts are already in our bubble. Then, I wonder how we can go beyond that bubble and reach teachers in the classroom, teacher educators, and policymakers. For policymakers, for instance, the economic component is a very important one when we consider language teaching, particularly English as a global language.

One example to illustrate this conversation is a recent debate, promoted by the Tokyo Board of Education, around implementing a test of speaking English as a high school entrance exam in Japan. Given that senior high school is not compulsory, students are supposed to take an entrance exam to access it – and here the speaking test comes. It works in the following way: Students record their voices on a tablet to respond to tasks, and the recordings are assessed by evaluators in the Philippines.

In response, an advocacy group emerged to protest against this plan. Among many complex issues, the group has problematized economic inequity that may follow if this test is conducted. Once you

have this kind of large-scale test, it is certain that parents will want their children to practice for the test and send them to private language institutes. The costs of this additional training are significant and only wealthy families can afford them, resulting in an economic gap among students. In addition, the development of the test is outsourced to a private company that also provides test training. You can see how language teaching and testing are hugely linked to capitalism. In the end, I think we need to critically understand how our profession is promoting capitalism and consequently economic gaps among groups of people.

Q: As a follow-up question, do you think there is a difference between critical research and decolonial research?

RK: That's an interesting question! I am no specialist in decolonization or decoloniality, but when I read coloniality theory it's still very abstract and theoretical to me. I mean, I don't see the praxis element. In this sense, I believe critical pedagogy is more about praxis, about taking an action. I may be wrong, though... As much as I appreciate and recognize decolonial scholarship as being very important to transforming our conceptualization of power, knowledge, and so forth, I still miss the decolonial praxis. That goes back to the issue of methodology. When we conduct research, what kind of methodology do we use from decolonial perspectives? That part is an action to me. On the other hand, critical race theory, for instance, promotes counter-storytelling as a methodology, so it has a vision of methodological transformation to really question conventional ways of doing research. Still, this methodology is not totally revolutionary...

Q: Given the difficult times we are facing, both because of the pandemics and the implications for our classes nowadays, and the extremist forms of government many countries are experiencing, like Brazil, what's the importance of Freire's theory in your research and in the ELT area?

RK: That is something that I always wonder not just about Freire's theory, but critical approaches to education and language education. This growing surge of right-wing politics and conservatism in many societies is really against what we have been promoting in our scholarship. That tells me that what we do doesn't really reach out to the general public, including teachers and students. Certainly, the general public's reaction is resistance to our liberal approach, but I'm very concerned about the huge gap between what we're saying in our conferences and publications and what's happening in the outside world. Again, how do we bridge that gap? What are more effective ways of encouraging people to think differently, for human rights, equity, diversity, inclusion, and antiracism?

J: It is very hard indeed. We tend to think that we should start from somewhere. Questioning is important and an essential step toward change. We have to question ourselves and look at our contexts with more care and love, but also with some hope in Freire's sense, that is, meaning that we can act from where we are, in our very classes. Then, maybe, those students will be encouraged and, aware of the spaces of power they occupy, try to transform their own contexts. That is one hope...

RK: I just started to participate in this advocacy group against the speaking test that I mentioned earlier, and I see a lot of energy coming from it. I get e-mails every day with long messages in Japanese, about the

justification or rationale for speaking against that test. As an applied linguist, I feel I can contribute to that discussion from a scholarly point of view. I actually reached out to Professor Keiko Koda, who is a specialist in second language reading, because within that speaking test, there is a long segment of oral reading or reading sentences out loud.

As it is a speaking test, I wondered if there was any relationship between reading aloud and speaking. Professor Koda commented that a correlation may exist between reading aloud and speaking because both involve knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and so forth. However, no causal relationship exists that confirmed if one could read English aloud well, they could speak English well. Thus, this test item may not have validity as a speaking test because it doesn't really test what speaking entails.

J: Sometimes social movements and other forms of acting are more effective if we want to see something being done in the short run. Maybe what we do in our classrooms will have some effect in the long run, don't you think?

RK: Yeah, but I think these small activities are very important as well because issues keep happening constantly, so we need to keep fighting against... But sometimes we can take advantage of the system and use it in our favor. For instance, we are offering a new program for teacher education for secondary school English teachers. Our vision is to gather between twenty and thirty secondary school English teachers from different parts of the world and have them in Canada to participate in a professional development course for three weeks. In this project, we plan to address various relevant issues, including critical ones. After the course is finished in Canada, they will go back to their contexts and continue to work with their peers online for three more months, which can allow them to interact with each other, learn, collaborate, and share knowledge and experiences. They can further become leaders of critical teaching in local contexts.

Q: Heading towards the end of our interview, can you briefly comment on the collective Sister Scholars[2], since it has proved to be a different, effective, and alternative way that you and your colleagues found to resist discrimination in academia?

RK: In the article "Strategies for sisterhood in the language education academy", published in 2021 by the *Journal of Language Education and Identity,* we talked about the story of our friendship and sisterhood. It has been almost twenty years since we became Sister Scholars. Since then, being women of color (except for one of us, who is a white woman, our ally), we have collaboratively written pieces of research, presented at conferences, but also have found in one another a great space for support and encouragement. You see, as women in academia, we have to face many obstacles; if you are a woman of color in North America, this is particularly harder. Since we go through many difficulties, and sometimes certain daily problems cannot be talked about with our family members or with our colleagues at our institutions, it is really meaningful to have a group of women scholars who can support each other. No matter what the topics are – private,

[2] The Sister Scholars are a collective composed by Rachel Grant, College of Staten Island, City University of New York; Ryuko Kubota, University of British Columbia; Angel Lin, Simon Fraser University; Suhanthie Motha, University of Washington; Gertrude Tinker Sachs, Georgia State University; Stephanie Vandrick, University of San Francisco; and Shelley Wong, recently retired from George Mason University. Together, they work towards creative ways of resisting race and gender discrimination in academia and in language education.

family, or professional issues – we know we can count on one another, and this has been really emotionally supportive. We certainly have differences in opinions sometimes, but we are really committed to supporting each other as a group and this makes a great difference. I really encourage you to form a group!

Conclusion

In this interview, we reflected upon the relevance and urgency, especially nowadays, of considering critical issues in our daily lives as citizens, students, educators, and workers in general. Rather than dealing with linguistic aspects in the language classroom as its only and ultimate goal, Professor Kubota argued about the importance of going beyond them and listening to students' needs and experiences in order to gesture towards more significant and productive learning. This *beyond*, she implies, has to do with the transformation of the neoliberal society in which we live, marked by inequalities, racism, and successive attempts to deny the diversity and heterogeneity of the other(ed).

Occupying a complex space of a racialized Asian female scholar in a privileged institution, she advises us to engage in an ongoing process of reflection-action-self-reflexivity when in our classrooms and scholarships, so that we build a coalition and are able to go beyond our academic bubbles.

By the end of our encounter, we are reminded of the role teacher educators have in promoting a more critically informed, plural, and culturally rich environment for language teaching. Beyond that, we are invited to problematize the colonial norms the ideology of nativespeakerism poses upon nonnative speakers and the oftentimes economy-centered objectives of language teaching. More than that: we are reminded of how our small actions matter and, despite tiny, they are fundamental steps towards change.

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