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*Research Article*

# Critical Pedagogy and Antiracist Practices in Language Teaching with Spoken Word Poetry

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*Critical antiracist pedagogy rejects institutional and structural aspects of racism, making racial inequality visible and exploring its effects within educational settings. This paper responds to a call for more transparency in critical approaches to language teaching (Kubota, 2014) by exploring the role of the teacher in engaging with divergent worldviews in humanizing ways. To achieve this goal, I present two situations that took place during spoken word poetry curricular activities with multilingual students in an English for Academic (EAP) purposes classroom during COVID-19 to provide a glimpse into the tension-filled realities of engaging in critical work in language teaching. Grounded in critical discourse studies (van Dijk, 2015) analyzing the complexities of emotional dynamics within classroom contexts, this study sheds light on how emotions shape discursive practices and social interactions. Results highlight how reflexivity may function to promote critical awareness of students' reported experiences with racism. This study also indicates the necessity of ongoing professional development for language educators to enhance their ability to navigate dynamics of discomfort when diverse perspectives are brought into productive tension.*

**Keywords**: antiracism; critical discourse studies; critical pedagogy; emotions; spoken word poetry

## 1. INTRODUCTION

> "If you have never been to China then you're so lucky." (Spoken Word Poem by Shah, 23-year-old student from Bangladesh)
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> "I experienced two robberies… They are Black people. Criminal rates in Black people is higher than any other group. That's a fact… I hate [Black people] as a whole race. Because of three people." (Interview with Marcus, 22-year-old student from China)

In this paper, I present two situations that provide a glimpse into the tension-filled realities of engaging in critical work in language teaching. It comes at a time of critical importance as diversity is ever increasing due to globalization, and there is a steady rise of divisiveness among differences (Gilleard & Higgs, 2020). The study takes place in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program which international students attend when they have not yet met the level of English proficiency required for their studies. These programs bring together a dynamic group of learners from around the world with a rich tapestry of identities and emotions. Despite the diversity of students in language programs, mainstream pedagogies in EAP programs tend to be pragmatic in orientation (Benesch, 2009; Canagarajah, 2005) and reinforce monolingual and monocultural

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ideologies (Chang-Bacon & Salerno, 2023). This is particularly problematic since classrooms are emotional spaces where asymmetrical relations of power, frictions, and insecurities are always at play (Pace, 2015; Pace, 2021; Pratt, 1991). Within the dynamic landscape of language classrooms, educators grapple with multifaceted challenges related to addressing tensions, confronting biases, and navigating complex emotional dynamics. Thus, language teaching in EAP programs cannot be simply reduced to transmitting linguistic knowledge; rather, pedagogies should provide possibilities to think differently about language and to critically engage with divergent worldviews and ideologies in humanizing ways (Bartolomé, 1994; del Carmen Salazar, 2013; Freire, 1970).

Spoken word poetry offers a pedagogical avenue for fostering this critical awareness in language classrooms, centering students' lived experiences within the curriculum. Unlike traditional poetry geared towards reading, spoken word poetry prioritizes performance, rhythm, and delivery, enabling students to share their stories and perspectives while fostering community, dialogue, and social change (Bagwell, 2021; Burton, 2023; Burton & Van Viegen, 2021; Davis & Hall, 2020; Fisher, 2007). In a recent synthesis of critical ESL education in Canada, Lau (2022) identifies two intersecting orientations: inclusivity-focused and issue-focused. The spoken word poetry curriculum examined in this study incorporates both orientations. The inclusivity-focused dimension centers minoritized voices, languages, and diverse semiotic resources through translanguaging pedagogy, challenging static language notions and redistributing power. In addition, the issue-focused approach intentionally engages students in learning the language while confronting social assumptions at play within and beyond the classroom. Through students' participation in spoken word poetry activities, this study explores the nuanced intersection of tensions and emotions in language education contexts.

Two situations that took place during spoken word poetry curricular activities with multilingual students in an English for Academic (EAP) purposes classroom during COVID-19 are at the center of this study. The first delves into a thought-provoking dialogue between myself (researcher/teacher) and Marcus (student), as we confront issues of racism, prejudice, and cultural sensitivity in the language classroom. Through candid conversations and reflective engagement, Marcus and I navigate the complexities of racial biases, stereotypes, and power dynamics, shedding light on the transformative potential of critical dialogue and reflexivity in language education. In the second situation, educator Nancy and I grapple with the dilemma of addressing discriminatory generalizations within the classroom, as depicted in Shah's spoken word poem. As we navigate tensions surrounding cultural sensitivity and inclusivity, Nancy and I exemplify the importance of fostering open dialogue and advocating for social justice in language education settings.

Responding to Kubota’s (2014) call for more transparency in critical approaches to language teaching, this study asks two questions:

1. How do educators navigate racially and culturally sensitive topics while encouraging critical awareness of language and stereotypes?
2. How do emotions shape discussions to address racial biases, stereotypes, and discrimination among students and educators?

I situate my work in the relevant literature in language education, specifically existing work related to critical antiracism and emotions. Second, I describe the study, the spoken word poetry curriculum, and my approach to data analysis. Third, I elaborate on two situations that surfaced from the data and discuss their impact in relation to critical language education. This study seeks to explore the lessons learned, implications for practice, and avenues for future research in the realm of tensions and emotions in language teaching and learning engaging in critical work through spoken word poetry.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMING: CRITICAL ANTIRACISM AND EMOTIONS IN MULTILINGUAL LANGUAGE EDUCATION

This study takes a critical approach to language and emotion and is guided by principles and practices of antiracist education. As a "discursive and political practice" (Dei, 2011, p. 17), antiracism involves actively challenging and changing values, structures, and attitudes that perpetuate systemic racism while implementing practices and policies that oppose oppression in all its forms (Blakeney, 2005; Kendi, 2019). Antiracist pedagogy rejects institutional and structural aspects of racism, making racial inequality visible and exploring its effects within educational settings. Language educators who adopt an antiracist pedagogy are committed to addressing power dynamics, promoting critical awareness, and challenging dominant narratives (de Oliveira, 2022; Holden & Smith, 2024; Kubota, 2021). In a study conducted in the French as a Second Language context, Masson and colleagues (2022) argue for the urgency to address race/racism, particularly since racialized power inequalities have been observed to arise across language, culture, and marginalized groups. Research indicates that even when language educators talk about topics such as culture, they are "doing race in a color-blind manner, perpetuating cultural and racial essentialism, incompatibility, and inequalities" (Lee, 2015, p. 90).

More broadly, a rich body of scholarship surrounding critical research and practice in English language teaching has been accumulated over the past 30 years. The first and second waves of this research have addressed a variety of perspectives on language, identity, discourse, power (e.g., Kubota & Lin, 2009; Miller, 2015; Norton, 1997), and most recently, neoliberal capitalism (e.g., Chun, 2017) and emotions (e.g., Ahmed & Morgan, 2022). However, critical approaches to language education are still scarce (Schmier & Grant, 2022). As such, there is a need to foster a disposition and equip educators with the skills needed to engage critical and antiracist pedagogies and to confront the tensions that may arise in classroom practice in an EAP context.

Critical pedagogy and antiracist practices can promote equity and inclusion in language learning contexts (Anya, 2021; López-Gopar, 2019; Starkey & Osler, 2010). Yet, a central question that critical and antiracist approaches to education have not yet sufficiently dealt with is that the solutions to problems often overlook the role that emotions play in shaping our understanding of the world. Emotions are central to everything we do (Anwaruddin, 2016; Prior, 2019). Bhansari (2023) argues for the productive power of emotion in raising critical awareness when navigating (in)justice. However, research on emotions in the field of English language teaching and learning usually positions students' emotions in the binary of positive and negative and links emotions to success or failure of second language learning (Solé, 2016). This cognitive-psychological perspective of emotions in applied linguistics scholarship dates back several decades and addresses a broad range of topics, continuing to influence second language acquisition and language teaching pedagogies today. This study, however, departs from these traditional theorizations of emotions; it is grounded in social theory, specifically Ahmed's (2014) *sociality of emotions*, and critical discourse studies (van Dijk, 2015). Ahmed's (2014) work seeks to "track how emotions circulate between bodies, examining how they 'stick' as well as move" (p. 4). Emotions create the way we relate to one another. They both shape and are shaped by language learning practices and processes. In addition to uncovering how emotions are socially constructed and influenced by discourse, critical discourse studies examine how emotions contribute to the production and maintenance of hegemonic power structures.

The concept of mutual vulnerability as a humanizing pedagogy within the broader framework of critical approaches to teaching and learning (Zinn et al., 2009; Zembylas, 2009) is fundamental to this study because it examines how power is maintained by stereotypes. Central to mutual vulnerability is the pedagogical process that encourages authority figures such as teachers to open themselves up (Zinn et al., 2009). This positioning is particularly difficult because it requires educators to understand how their own power functions to entrench or disrupt dominant norms, roles, emotions and discourses. In a classroom study that examined tensions related to race during critical conversations in an English methods course, Vetter and Schieble (2019) describe the uncertainty teachers experienced about constructive ways to interact with students who told racialized jokes in class. Educational spaces such as EAP classrooms always encompass diverse and competing differences, power relations, desires, fears, goals, and anxieties (Pace, 2015; Pratt, 1991).

In times of increasing divisiveness among people (Gilleard & Higgs, 2020), it is of critical import that educators adopt humanizing approaches to teaching (Bartolomé, 1994; del Carmen Salazar, 2013; Freire, 1970). A humanizing approach to teaching "respects and uses the reality, history, and perspectives of students as an integral part of educational practice… [and includes] teachers' evolving political awareness of their relationship with students as knowers and active participants in their own learning" (Bartolomé, 1994, p. 173). Drawing on students lived realities and experiences as part of an antiracist practice through the medium of spoken word poetry means that educators

have the potential to challenge existing structures, positioning multilingual EAP students in a subject rather than an object position (Bartolomé, 1994). Peercy et al. (2024) describe a number of practices characterizing humanizing pedagogies:

> creating a safe classroom environment for difficult topics; asking uncomfortable questions; mediating and managing challenging conversations; making sure a variety of voices, perspectives, languages, and language varieties are heard in conversations about equity and justice; supporting and also pushing students as they grapple with difficult issues; challenging and questioning perspectives that are not based in equity; and helping repair relationships through restorative practices when there is a conflict in perspectives. (p. 21)

However, Arao and Clemens (2013) argue that rather than an illusion of safety, what is needed is courage in dialogues on issues of social justice in classrooms because teachers cannot guarantee safety for students. They propose the concept of *brave spaces* to replace *safe spaces* and offer a set of five common rules to encourage participants "to be brave in exploring content that pushes them to the edge of their comfort zone to maximize learning" (Arao & Clemens, 2013, p. 143). Those rules are: agree to disagree; do not take things personally; challenge by choice; respect; and no attack. A critical aspect in fostering relational safety in classrooms when fostering brave spaces is reflexivity. In their recent publication, Consoli and Ganassin (2023) broadly define reflexivity as, "sets of dispositions and activities by which researchers locate themselves within the research processes whilst also attending to how their presence, values, beliefs, knowledge, and personal and professional histories shape their research spaces, relationships, and outcomes" (p. 1). This definition can also be applied to teaching. Scholars argue that ongoing reflection and action is needed in critical English language teaching to challenge inequalities (Chan & Coney, 2020; Kubota, 2020). Finally, Holliday (2015) examines the emotional labour involved in negotiating linguistic and cultural differences and highlights the importance of critical reflection in promoting inclusive pedagogical practices.

## 3. RESEARCH DESIGN

This article draws from a broader, qualitative study exploring the dynamics of teaching and learning which engages spoken word poetry with multilingual English language learners in an EAP program in Canada (Burton, 2023). Now the focus is on two situations that occurred during the curricular activities which illuminate the tensions and nuances inherent in critical work and illustrate how emotions inform discursive practices and worldviews. A qualitative approach that addresses the tension-filled realities of engaging in critical work in language teaching is an appropriate methodology for this study because it adequately addresses the research objectives of exploring the lessons learned as well as implication for future practice and research. In this section, I describe the research design of the study, which includes specifics about the research participants, the spoken word curriculum, data sources and analysis.

## 3.1 Research Context and Spoken Word Poetry Curriculum

The broader study (see Burton, 2023) took place in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) class with 15 students at a postsecondary institution in Canada with nearly 3,000 international students from close to 100 countries. Due to the impact of COVID-19, the 12-week class adopted a 40% synchronous and 60% asynchronous model. Of the 72 synchronous hours allocated, 11 hours were dedicated to the spoken word poetry curriculum, conducted online over a span of 7 weeks. The design of this curriculum was a collaborative effort facilitated through a researcher-practitioner relationship (Tian & Shepard-Carey, 2020; Lau & Stille, 2014), involving instructor Nancy and myself, and integrated into the main core instructor's class.

Students engaged with diverse spoken word poetry, spanning themes from racism to love, in online formats. They were prompted to establish personal connections with the spoken word, discern the underlying messages, and offer observations on both the performance and language employed in each presentation. Students also explored features and functions of spoken word poetry as a multimodal (Kress, 2009) and multilingual form of expression, played with rhyme and rhythm, and employed verbal (e.g., stress, volume, tone of voice) and non-verbal cues (e.g., gaze, pause, gesture) to create affective experiences for listeners. Personal storytelling was encouraged, with no obligation to disclose sensitive information. As a culminating task, students crafted and performed their own spoken word pieces. This spoken word curriculum is an emergent and living curriculum (Aoki, 1996; Leggo, 2018) that centers emotions, views students as curious and motivated, and understands learning as dynamic and responsive to student needs. For example, in their spontaneous speaking task students reflected on their process of engaging spoken word poetry, and their foremost request was to share their poems with classmates for the purpose of receiving feedback. The dynamic nature of the curriculum design also included various options for students to express themselves in any language of their choice and engage in tasks to promote metalinguistic awareness.

It was important to Nancy and me that we provide multiple dialogical spaces for students to take responsibility, lead conversations, and reflect upon, explore, challenge, push back, and respond critically and affectively to different texts and topics. We hoped for students to come to a deeper understanding of structures that create and maintain oppression, and to support them in considering their self-implication in the suffering of others. This process meant considering how emotional investments shape the way we view the world (Andreotti, 2016; Anwaruddin, 2016). Nancy and I facilitated rich and complex dialogues about language, culture, identity and (mis)representation. We focused less on the final product, continually reminding ourselves to trust the process. We sat with the discomfort of the unknown and challenged our desire to control the teaching space or force an outcome or product, making language teaching much more humanizing (Peercy et al., 2024; de Carmen Salazar, 2013).

## 3.2 Participant Background Information

This paper recounts two situations involving the students Marcus and Shah, as well as myself and instructor Nancy. While there were other occasions that occurred during the project that evoked affect for the instructor and students, I have selected the following two because they center the collaborative decision-making processes of myself as the researcher/teacher and the students/instructor. Furthermore, due to page limitation, only the encounters involving Marcus and Shah were chosen because they surfaced emotion (Ahmed, 2014) and their emotional impact lingered long after the study had been conducted. Pseudonyms were used as requested by the participants.

Marcus is a 22-year-old man from China, who has been learning English since primary school. He did not have a positive experience learning English grammar in Grade 6 and notes that “even today, I can’t accurately tell the structure of a sentence.” However, English gives him the “opportunity to communicate [and connect] with friends all over the world.” Soon after he came to Canada, he “became unfamiliar with Chinese” and believes his “English is not very good.” He says that learning a new language means learning a new culture. When he first arrived in Canada, he had a hard time making new friends but thought people were “really friendly.” He enjoys taking walks around the lake.

Shah is a 23-year-old man from Bangladesh. He had taken previous language courses at the university: “Before my English was not so good but when I took ESL I improved myself a lot. I can communicate anywhere now. I also took one class at university level and I can understand my professor’s lecture”. Shah is proud of his cultural background but spoke about his experience of being discriminated against due to religious and cultural differences. He is a proud Muslim, who believes we should respect and not judge differences: “we cannot judge anyone by their name, colour and country”. He is very passionate about social justice topics, specifically issues of racism.

Nancy, the instructor, had been teaching ESL for 17 years at the time of the study. She holds a bachelor’s degree in Early Elementary Education and a thesis-based master’s degree in Curriculum and Instruction. Her dissertation explored the metaphors ESL teachers used to conceptualize and position themselves as language teachers. She also completed a TESL program. While Nancy knows some French, she self-identified as a monolingual English speaker. Now, she has a more fluid orientation to language and embraces pedagogical practices that encourage students to leverage their linguistic resources, positioning them as assets.

At the time of the study, I had also spent 17 years teaching ESL, five of those years in South Korea. As both a teacher and a researcher, I prioritize the acknowledgment of emotions as a valid form of knowledge within the classroom. Inspired by Gkonou and Miller (2021), I recognize language teaching as deeply intertwined with emotional experiences. My teaching philosophy centers on embracing students' languages, identities, cultures, and life stories as pivotal elements of the learning journey. However,

I am mindful of the inherent power dynamics present in the EAP classroom, where unequal power structures persist. As a cis-hetero, white, "native" English-speaking woman, I acknowledge my limited understanding of the marginalization experienced by racialized international students. This awareness drives my commitment to fostering inclusivity and equity, prompting ongoing reflection on privilege and providing relevant information for evaluating research (King, 2024).

## 3.3 Ethics Approach and Data Sources

At the end of the first class, the instructor left the online classroom and joined a breakout room while I discussed the details of the research project with the class. Students had two options to provide informed consent for participation: (1) collection of artifacts of their work and classroom observational data, and (2) semi-structured interviews post-semester. They could opt into one, both, or neither. With the instructor still out of the room, I fielded student questions. Finally, in order to collect student email addresses, I asked them to complete a Google Forms survey which provided them with a further opportunity to ask questions about the project that they might not have asked in the group setting. To maintain anonymity, none of the instructors knew who was a participant in the study during the period of data collection.

There were several data sources that informed my analysis, including weekly curriculum planning meetings with the instructor, teacher observations and research journal, student artifacts and online journals, and post-semester semi-structured interviews. Weekly curriculum planning meetings with Nancy were a primary data source for this study. We recorded 19 multimodal Zoom sessions without a set format, totaling 24.5 hours. In these sessions, we explored ideas, questioned assumptions, and consistently asked ourselves, "What is the purpose of this task? What should students learn?" Critical, reflexive dialogue was central, allowing us to reshape thoughts, challenge assumptions, and share vulnerabilities.

The second data source included my classroom observations and a research journal. I had taken detailed notes on activity types, topics and content, student modality (e.g., whether they were engaging in reading, writing, listening, speaking or a combination of modes), discourse interactions and initiations, use of English, linguistic forms, and student participation (including camera and chat functions). The third source of data was student artifacts, which included recorded spoken word poetry performances submitted to Nancy and me before the final class. Fourth, students maintained online journals with weekly prompts. They were encouraged to reflect and comment on specific course moments, topics, and incidents. These entries and shared details guided the interviews at the end of the program.

Finally, post-semester semi-structured interviews were conducted on Zoom, lasting between 55 to 80 minutes. These interviews incorporated insights from my research

journal observations of students' in-class spoken word experiences, along with prompts from their weekly journals and classwork. Throughout the interview, I was engaged in active listening, guided by Brown and Danaher's (2019) Connectivity, Humanness and Empathy (CHE) framework as a commitment to ethical and humanizing research (Paris, 2011) in line with an affective ontology (Mazzei, 2013). CHE emphasizes authenticity and reciprocity and understands meaning making as situated in social and cultural environments and fostered through dialogic relationships (Brown & Danaher, 2019). Researchers who adopt the CHE framework embrace practices that promote trusting relationships with a genuine desire for honesty, dignity, and transparency. Participants were informed that they could pause, end, step away, take a break, and change topics at any point during our interview. The interviews had a conversational tone, and I often deviated from the protocol to engage in discussions relevant to each participant. I was empathetic to the stories shared. Above all else, the relationships I had with participants were more important than the data collection. One participant shared a personal story and asked that it be redacted from the transcript. All participants had been provided resources to free counselling services at the university they attended.

## 3.4 Analytic Framing: Critical Discourse Studies and the Attachment of Emotions

Influenced by Sara Ahmed's (2014) work, this study investigates how emotions move and attach to various objects, bodies, ideas, and individuals, shaping dynamics within classrooms and informing discursive practices and language learning processes. Critical discourse studies analyze how emotions are constructed, represented, and mobilized within discourse to serve various social and political purposes (van Dijk, 2015). A critical reflection on emotions understands that certain emotions may be valued based on cultural and social contexts which, in turn, can contribute to maintaining the hegemonic structures of power and reinforcement of persisting inequalities. A critical discourse studies perspective considers how emotions shape identity formation and social relations, as well as contribute to social change. Ahmed (2014) emphasizes the importance of understanding what emotions *do* rather than what they *are*. For her, emotions circulate between bodies, connecting to some objects while sliding over others. They may attach, re-attach, or only adhere in specific encounters or spaces. Impressions are made when surfaces come into contact, leading to viscidity—an effect of histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs.

The analysis process was iterative and emergent. Focusing on my engagement with the data with an understanding that the researcher is inseparable from the "relationship with what s/he is trying to understand" (Strega & Brown, 2015, p. 8), I paid attention to how emotions, including my own, moved and cohered into meaning while rereading the artifacts and listening to the interview transcriptions. I first identified data that pertained to emotions, which allowed me to make comparisons across data sources and

participants. Then, I examined how the different emotions that emerged within the collaboration circulated and adhered to objects, bodies, and ideas. For instance, in the case of Marcus, fear of a few, based on previous negative experiences, was extended to a very large group of people.

I present the findings by describing two situations that unfolded in the course of the research project and narrate how emotions are intertwined with language, power, and ideology, in order to show how they shape the ways in which we make sense of the world and interact with others. I also include reflections from my research journal to make my position more transparent in the analysis process and as a way to question self-other orientations (Rhodes & Carlsen, 2018). These situations were chosen because they are data-rich and highlight the dynamic flows of emotions when diverse perspectives are brought into productive tension in order to make the complexities of engaging in critical practice in English language teaching transparent.

In the first example, "Confronting Racism," the focus is on a dialogue between myself and Marcus regarding his racial biases and attitudes towards Black people. The conversation highlights my difficulties of confronting personal biases and stereotypes while promoting critical consciousness and understanding. In the second example, "Challenging Generalizations," I discuss a dilemma faced by Nancy and myself regarding Shah's spoken word poem, which contains discriminatory generalizations about Chinese people. The examples underscore the importance of navigating sensitive topics and promoting awareness while respecting individual experiences and perspectives.

# 4. RESULTS

## 4.1 Confronting Racism: “I don’t Want to Discriminate…I Have to”

To demonstrate how emotions circulate between ideas and experiences as well as make transparent the viscidity of emotional investments in challenging dialogues, I share this extensive exchange with Marcus, an international student from China living in Canada at the time of the study. This exchange has been edited for brevity, and the ellipses […] are parts of the text that are not relevant and have been omitted. The conversation occurred in our post-semester interview, while Marcus and I were discussing his rationale for selecting the content of his poem on the helpfulness of Canadians, before our conversation took a sharp turn to a discussion on racism:

> Marcus: I experienced two robberies, one is on campus and one is by [area of city]. They are Black people. Criminal rates in Black people is higher than any other group. That’s a fact, yeah… Once I go into the elevator when the door is open I say hi but he stopped me [and asked] what are you laughing for? All of these unfriendly guys are Black. That’s a pity, I think.
>
> Jennifer: … Why is that a pity?

Marcus: Because I have many Black friends. They are really great guys. Yeah, but just these 3 people I have a negative attitude to this race … I think it's my problem.

Jennifer: … What do you mean your problem?

Marcus: It's my problem because these really bad peoples are a minority. But I hate as a whole race. Because of three people. Yeah, that's unfair. That's a kind of unfair treatment.

Jennifer: … it's easy to make assumptions or generalizations. It's easy to say, 'Oh, my God, I had that bad experience three times with Black people, and think, Black people are not doing something good.' But here's where I disagree with you. I think it's our responsibility to challenge that prejudice within ourselves.

Marcus: Yeah, I know.

Jennifer: … I think that's a really unfair way of thinking against an entire group of people or a country.

Marcus: Yeah, I know. I know it's unfair.

Jennifer: … What do you think you can do in order to challenge yourself to think differently about that?

Marcus: I don't disagree with this thinking. I know, I know, it's unfair. And I know most of my Black friends are very kind. But I couldn't persuade myself.

Jennifer: Do you think, do you think that that is a type of racism?

Marcus: Yes.

Jennifer: Do you think racism is okay?

Marcus: … once bitten by a snake 10 years in fear.

Jennifer: Okay, okay, so you had a personal experience. Yeah, this experience has influenced and impacted the way you see Black people.

Marcus: I will default everyone is might be the bad guy. Once I see his kindness, I will release my defense.

Jennifer: I have a question. Do you want to change yourself?

Marcus: I don't think it's really necessary. I don't want to discriminate, it's not what I want to do, right. It's more likely to be what I have to do.

While conversing about choices of topics for Marcus' spoken word poem, this controversy had emerged spontaneously. In my analysis of this excerpt, it is clear to me that I had an agenda during our exchange. I felt an urgency to challenge the negative attitude Marcus had towards Black people. I wanted him to become aware of his dualistic thinking. On the one hand, he had Black friends who were "very kind," yet, he could not "persuade" himself not to generalize and denigrate an entire population based on race. Important in this analysis is to acknowledge that such generalizations are

produced by emotions, specifically the circulation of fear, justified by "facts," as he asserts, "criminal rates in Black people is higher than any other group."

Even though Marcus admits his opinion is a type of racism, he does not accept being racist. He does not locate the source of his problem in his thinking but in the actions of Black people based on his lived experience. This allows him to disavow personal responsibility for racism, "I don't want to discriminate…I *have* to." I do not discredit the fear Marcus surely must have experienced being robbed; rather, I want to challenge the transfer of that fear and its attachment to *all* Black people, using his reference to crime rates among Black people to justify his stance.

In my exchange with Marcus, I demonstrate a mix of empathy, concern, and determination to challenge his perspectives. Marcus grapples with his own identity and attitudes towards race throughout the conversation. The affective atmosphere of the dialogue is characterized by tension, discomfort, and emotional intensity, as reflected in my research journal. In my interpretation of the exchange, I challenge Marcus's prejudices and encourage him to critically examine and challenge his own biases. I also emphasize the importance of recognizing and confronting prejudice within oneself, highlighting the social responsibility to combat racism and discrimination. Marcus's reluctance to confront his prejudices created a sense of unease, and my persistence in challenging him creates a dynamic of emotional engagement and conflict, exacerbated by the power differentials between students and educators/researchers. Marcus may have felt threatened by my urgency to get him to acknowledge what I perceived to be racial discrimination because of my position as a white, "native speaker" of English. I still experience a sense of unease upon reflecting upon the conversation, indicating the emotional complexity and lasting impressions involved in confronting racism and navigating difficult discussions. I wonder if there was another approach or different questions I could or should have asked him.

I have included this example for three reasons. First, I want to highlight how discord can arise unexpectedly for instructors engaging in critical work in and beyond their EAP classrooms. This addresses a noticeable gap in the literature on critical pedagogy regarding how educators manage and address such interactions (Abednia & Crookes, 2019; Kubota, 2014). Second, I want to make transparent what can occur when educators seek to cultivate critical dialogue and aim to understand students' experiences through the genre of spoken word poetry.

Finally, I want to acknowledge tensions between raising students' critical consciousness (Freire, 1970; Dorner et al., 2022) while simultaneously allowing students more pedagogical agency (Ferreira, 2021). Research reports on the current inadequacy of antiracism pedagogies in ELT and proposes strategies to decenter privilege (for an example see, de Oliveira, 2022). Raising critical awareness through dialogue and questioning biased statements, as I attempted to do with Marcus, can ignite divisions (Kincheloe, 2005; Kubota, 2014). This situation also called me to consider my position of power as a non-racialized speaker of a dominant "standard" English, and how my

status shaped social interactions among students. My solution to the situation with Marcus was to disagree when I felt he would not change his stance despite admitting his position was problematic: “I know it’s unfair.”

## 4.2 Challenging Generalizations: “If You have Never Been to China Then You’re So Lucky”

In this section, I describe a second situation, an experience with troubling content in Shah’s spoken word poem, and the dilemma Nancy and I faced in deciding how to handle this revelation of a personal experience with racism. This occurrence has been chosen because it goes to the heart of understanding pedagogic affect, its tensions and contradictions in relation to critical work in the classroom, particularly when engaging diverse multilingual English learners.

Shah’s spoken word poem describes an incident at a border crossing. He was travelling from his home country, Bangladesh, to Canada with a transit through China. In his journal, Shah portrays his encounter with the airport officiants:

> I had one experience when I went to China. They asked me lots of questions that were not necessary and also asked me religious questions that were so embarrassing for me. For example, they asked me why people go to Saudi Arabia to participate in hajj [a religious ceremony for Muslims]. I said it’s kind of a religious part and they asked what kind of. All the people were looking around me. I was so nervous that time. I think it’s one kind of racism.

Shah perceives the question as a form of racism, indicating that he feels targeted or marginalized based on his religious identity, as the questioning about Hajj reinforces a sense of ‘othering’. I will never know what pain and embarrassment Shah experienced when his religious identity was questioned in public by officials in a position of power. But I do know this experience was haunting him because it later became the topic of his spoken word poem. An excerpt from his draft shows how he projected his anger and frustration to the Chinese people as a whole:

> Today I’m gonna share one story in my life. First of all, if you have never been to China then you’re so lucky. Last year, I went to Bangladesh and my transit was in China. They were so rude to me and they asked me some weird questions that was totally unnecessary.

Shah’s letter to his friend prompted feelings of uneasiness for both Nancy and me and led to a lengthy discussion about the teacher’s role in intervening in situations that could lead to further harm and racial discrimination in the classroom:

> Jennifer: I don’t want to discount Shah’s experience of racism and discrimination … So I don’t know, it’s a point where we can have a conversation, I think.
>
> Nancy: It’s a tricky one, yeah.

> Jennifer: Do we feel comfortable putting it [his poem] in [the collection] … I feel that it's problematic … I think we do have a responsibility [to address this].
>
> Nancy: Yeah … And like you say, [it's] othering of a whole country … And so, I think my feedback to him is that, you know, 'I'm curious, does that mean, you would never go back to China?' I mean it is important to name it [the experience of racism at the airport]. Reasonably, this happens at airports all the time.

Spoken word is a genre with relatively little or no gatekeeping as no one previews a poet's story before it is performed. One interpretation of this situation could be that Nancy and I influenced Shah to uncritically make changes to the content of his poem, given our inherent position of power. Nancy and I wanted to provide space for Shah to tell his story and respect his experience of racism; our goal was not to silence him. However, we felt uneasy about his tone and wanted to point out that he was discriminating against the entire population of China.

We also wondered if he would understand the impact of his words on others in his class, especially the students from China. As evident in my dialogue with Nancy, we experienced an apprehension because intervening could result in changing his discourse and imposing our worldview on him. Because Shah's writing was not known to the class, Nancy and I decided that I would have a private talk with him in a breakout room the following class to ask more questions about his experience in an effort to understand why a single event of racism provoked him to tarnish all Chinese people. A key feature of spoken word poetry is what critical literacy scholar Shor (1980) refers to as social life in dialogue, meaning that students' lives, issues, and problems form the core content of curriculum and are then subjected to inquiry by challenging dialogue stimulated by teachers.

In my conversation with Shah in a breakout room on Zoom, I sensed his feelings of anger as he became emotionally charged while recounting his encounter at the airport, as reported in my research journal. From my position, I offered validation of his experience of racism as I listened intently. I inquired who he was referring to when he used "they" and "them." Then I asked him to imagine what it might be like to step into the shoes of his Chinese classmates—that is, to enter a relationship of affective equivalence (Anwarrudin, 2016)—and read the letter from their perspective. To illustrate this point, I read his letter to him, changing China to his country of origin, "if you have never been to Bangladesh then you're so lucky."

Shah realized that he had been unintentionally discriminating against all Chinese people. We discussed the role of language and Othering, that being the linguistic choices that students use to encode their semantic stance, or, in other words, how language is used to construct otherness (Pandey, 2004). He offered to use more specific language (e.g., the airport immigration official), rather than "they" and "them." He altered his letter to his friend first by removing the reference to being lucky to not travel to China and second by replacing general pronouns with specific ones. The final poem he presented to the class read as follows:

*Figure 1*. Shah's spoken word poem in text

**Dear friend,**

BY SHAH

**Dear friend,**

I hope you're doing well. I heard you're coming to Canada to study. Best wishes for you my friend. Today I'm gonna share one story in my life. Last year I went to Bangladesh and my transit was in China. The airport immigration official was so rude to me and he asked me some weird questions that were totally unnecessary. So I recommend you if you faced this kind of situation don't argue with them. Just be calm and talk properly. And keep your important papers that you have. So again best of luck for you and take care yourself.

Your friend,

SHAH

While Shah suggested these changes himself, the power differential between teacher and student may obscure his motivation; he might have wanted to satisfy his teacher, avoid conflict, and be seen as a keen and agreeable student. This example calls to question the role and responsibility of teachers as well as the outcome in intervening in dialogue that may be potentially harmful to others.

Shah initially conveys feelings of distress, embarrassment, and anger resulting from his encounter with racial discrimination at the Chinese airport. Later, during the conversation with me, he likely experiences understanding, and shows a willingness to reconsider his perspective. Both Nancy and I exhibit concern, deliberation, and a sense of responsibility in addressing Shah's narrative while also considering the potential impact on students from diverse backgrounds. We navigate a mix of emotions, including discomfort, empathy, and a commitment to promoting understanding and critical awareness. We also acknowledge that our understandings and interpretations are partial and that we need to remain vigilant as we challenge representations and simultaneously search for meaning (Pillow, 2003).

# 5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study seeks to explore implications for practice and avenues for future research in the realm of tensions and emotions in language teaching and learning that engages in critical antiracist work. It discusses how emotions such as fear, embarrassment, empathy, and concern shape the experiences of students and educators through spoken word poetry curricular activities, offering insights into the emotional dynamics of critical antiracist pedagogy. Analyzing the dialogue through the lens of critical discourse studies sheds light on the role of emotions in power dynamics, ideologies, and social implications embedded within the conversation.

The main findings highlight that tensions in language classrooms often arise from differences in cultural backgrounds, communication styles, power dynamics, and societal inequalities. These tensions can manifest in various forms, including conflicts between students, misunderstandings between students and teachers, and challenges related to cultural sensitivity and awareness. The findings also underscore the significance of promoting open communication and understanding among students and educators to effectively address conflict in language classrooms. Creating inclusive learning environments that validate diverse perspectives and foster critical thinking is essential for mitigating conflict and promoting productive interactions among students. This is important because it helps students to appreciate and respect diverse perspectives, communicate effectively across cultural differences, and collaborate more productively in multicultural contexts. Both situations presented in this paper highlight the complexities and challenges involved in addressing issues of race, discrimination, and cultural sensitivity within educational settings. They shed light on the lived experiences of students from diverse backgrounds and the need to promote awareness and understanding of racial biases and stereotypes. By examining the diverse perspectives that come into productive tensions in interactions among students and educators, this study makes a unique contribution to the literature on critical antiracist pedagogy.

This study considers how power and agency are materialized in classroom discourse, highlighting how emotions shape what we do (and do not) say. While the two conversations cannot be generalized across contexts or situations, they provide a peek into how tensions are approached and attempts made to resolve them. Spoken word poetry is not innately antiracist. It does, however, offer a means for students to self-reflect on difference. I argue that spoken word poetry provides an avenue for teachers to "go there," that is, to dive deeply into discussions of racism, which is important given the reported scarcity of these topics in language curricula (Kubota, 2014; 2021; Kubota & Lin, 2009; von Esch et al., 2020). The tendency for educators to stay silent on issues such as discrimination in an effort to remain neutral, rather than stirring up discomfort within the classroom, needs to be examined (Horsman, 2005). At the heart of transformation are tension, conflict, and risk (Pawlowski, 2019; Stanlick, 2015). Yet, I wonder what it means to take risks and be vulnerable. How do these risks vary across

racial, gendered, classed, (dis)abled, and linguistic identities? More research on the intersection of emotions and social positions in difficult conversations with marginalized learners in language education is needed. I have learned that these conflicts do not have simple or straightforward solutions, and, thus, these tensions must be discussed in class. In line with Mortenson (2021), teachers play a critical role in addressing social injustices discussed in the classroom; remaining neutral on discussions of injustice maintains the status quo. I also understand this as a personal, professional, and ethical responsibility (Mortenson, 2021).

This study offers insight into antiracist language teacher education (Bale et al., 2023; Chang-Bacon, 2022; Masson et al., 2022; Schissel & Stephens, 2020). Specifically, it emphasizes the significance of ongoing professional development for educators to enhance their ability to navigate complex classroom dynamics. Tensions and discomfort continue to exist, power is still exercised, yet multiple points of view can co-exist. A premise of this work is the recognition of the inherent risks of engaging in deeply personal and emotionally charged topics, as well as asking students to reflect on and share stories that may be painful. Campbell and Eizadirad (2022) argue that storytelling can be enacted as critical pedagogy to share pain, suffering, and trauma to deliberately disrupt the norm. This work, they advocate, must be guided by love, respect, support, and reciprocity to foster trust within relationships to work towards harnessing collective action and transformation.

Humanizing our classroom is not achieved by prohibiting stories of violence, pain, love, and hope shared by the participants in this study, but by careful consideration of the material effects of not allowing such stories, memories, and experiences to circulate and surface in the first place. Silence has the potential to cause greater harm. I believe discussing deeply personal and potentially painful topics in the language classroom must be done intentionally and with tremendous care so as to not cause unintentional harm. In line with Seo (2023), it is of critical import that teacher education programs enable teacher candidates to develop insight into their position as English language teachers and adequately prepare them to be critically reflective practitioners. By equipping educators with the necessary knowledge, skills, and strategies, they can effectively manage tensions and emotions in language classrooms in order to create supportive learning environments where students from diverse backgrounds feel valued and respected.

Finally, the researcher-practitioner relationship guiding this study functioned as a reflexive space. Reflexivity is an ongoing process of integrating critical perspectives and approaches into the process of self-awareness and reflection, which allows educators and researchers to deeply engage with one's assumptions, biases, and positions within the broader socio-political context (Pillow, 2003). Nancy and I continuously encouraged each other to step outside our respective comfort zones. It was in the co-creation of our dialogic space that Nancy and I built a foundation of trust and respect for one another that provided the relational safety to take risks which was also a critical aspect of the

research design. We sought to create multiple dialogic spaces for students to engage in discussion; we also understood silence as a communication choice and respected students' declining to participate. The reflexive space was critical insomuch that Nancy and I intentionally examined how power functioned to shape our relations with one another and with the students. We also kept assessing our attachment to ideas. We continued to recognize and examine our privilege of being white. Nancy and I viewed this personal work as a responsibility to a field that continues to "frame whiteness as both a prize and a goal" (Gerald, 2020, p. 44). Sometimes our conversations were uncomfortable, as they conjured up feelings of guilt and sadness (Zembylas, 2018). Confronting our own discomfort rather than suppressing it served as an entry point to identify, understand, and challenge our own emotional attachments to ideas and recognize that we may be complicit in maintaining injustice. We are limited by our own biases and understandings; as such, our self-reflexive efforts must always be ongoing.

There are limitations in this study. First, the interpretation of the situations and their outcomes are influenced by the subjective perspectives and biases of me, the researcher. To account for such interpretations, I included self-reflexive notes and observations in the analysis where possible, while acknowledging representations and needing to find meaning (Pillow, 2003). The full complexity and depth of the issues being explored may not have been fully captured, resulting in an incomplete understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Second, the specific context in which the situations occurred, such as the unique dynamics of the classroom, the cultural backgrounds of the participants, and especially the timing (during COVID-19), will limit the transferability of the findings to other settings. However, it is important to note that online learning still has implications that could be important to in person learning, such as engaging in critical reflection of students' experiences with racism. Finally, there are temporal considerations. The study does not capture changes in attitudes, behaviors, or dynamics over time, as it focuses on specific moments and interactions. Despite these constraints, this study engaged with the tension-filled realities of doing critical work in second language education contexts and uncovered some of the difficult moments experienced by engaging with emotionally charged content (Gkonou & Miller, 2021).

## 6. CONCLUSION

Language education encompasses a rich tapestry of experiences, interactions, and emotions that shape the learning journey of students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Within the dynamic landscape of language classrooms, educators grapple with multifaceted challenges related to addressing tensions, confronting biases, and navigating diverse emotional dynamics. Meaningful critical engagement calls for responsiveness to the unexpected, particularly when confronted by discriminatory or hurtful comments (Janks, 2010). The spoken word poetry curriculum provided an avenue for critical dialogue where diverse perspectives were brought into productive tension. In both examples, the emotions that surfaced in the interactions are integral to

the complex dynamics of addressing racism, challenging stereotypes, and fostering constructive dialogue within educational contexts. By recognizing that emotions move and attach within educational settings, researchers and educators can gain insights into the nuanced workings of emotional experiences and their implications for teaching and learning. The situations experienced by and with Marcus and Shah underscore the intricate interplay of emotions, identities, and socio-cultural contexts in language classrooms, offering valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities inherent in promoting inclusive and emotionally responsive learning environments.

## THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Burton is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Education at Concordia University. Drawing on nearly two decades of language teaching experience in Canada and globally, in diverse contexts, Jennifer's research examines how second language classrooms might become more inclusive of learners' multiple cultural, linguistic, and affective ways of knowing.

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