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## Restructuring a Developmental ESL Course at an Urban Community College: Asking the Right Questions

Deniz Gokcora

*Borough of Manhattan Community College*, [sgokcora@bmcc.cuny.edu](mailto:sgokcora@bmcc.cuny.edu)

Raymond Oenbring

*University of The Bahamas*, [raymond.oenbring@ub.edu.bs](mailto:raymond.oenbring@ub.edu.bs)

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# Restructuring a Developmental ESL Course at an Urban Community College: Asking the Right Questions

by Dr. Deniz Gokcora and Dr. Raymond Oenbring

In the past few decades, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages' (TESOL) scholars have developed a significant body of research focusing on the intersections of race and ideology in the teaching of second languages. For example, noted scholar Ryoku Kubota's body of work trenchantly critiques how racial, gendered, linguistic, and cultural power relations affect and change prevalent ideologies and educational practices in ESL instruction, scrutinizing the place of epistemological racism in language instruction (see, for example, Kubota, 2020; Kubota & Lin, 2006; Von Esch et al., 2020). As another example, the noteworthy 2016 volume of *Social Justice in English Language Teaching* includes two important chapters on the intersection of non-standard varieties of English and race. In the chapter "Ideological English: A Theme for College Composition," Jennifer Mott-Smith explores social injustice and discrimination that result from comparing the linguistic expressions of various social groups and suggests ways that teachers can combat this by promoting students' ownership of English. In the same book, Suhanthie Motha makes the case for "provincializing English," which she defines as "striving to support in learners and teachers a critical analysis of the ways in which the language is racialized and colonized, of how learning English changes us, of how participating in the teaching of English changes the world" (2016, p. 108). We contend that Motha's critique is especially relevant in diverse urban community colleges, as significant numbers of students at such institutions stem originally from postcolonial nations.

The connection between language and social justice issues has also been a topic of increasing interest in the preparation of ESL and EFL instructors (see, for example, Kubota & Lin, 2006; Hastings et al., 2016; Hossain, 2018; Kubota, 2021). Innovative pedagogies allowing a focus on social justice issues, such as communicative



**Dr. Deniz Gokcora**



**Dr. Raymond Oenbring**

language teaching, project-based instruction, and virtual exchange (that is, digital collaboration between campuses in different linguistic environments) are some recent pedagogical developments designed to enhance student interest in language learning—all while building their language skills and critical faculties (see, for example, Oenbring & Gokcora, 2022). For instance, the University of Arizona's foreign language resource center, the Center for Educational Resources in Culture, Language and Literacy (CERCLL) organizes webinars for language instructors focusing on the connection between "intercultural citizenship and social justice" issues (CERCLL, n.d.). Such topics are particularly relevant at diverse urban community colleges such as the site of the current study.

In a study of the motivations of community college faculty, Brown et al. (2016) observe that instructors at community colleges find their work rewarding in significant part because they believe that social-justice-focused pedagogies empower students to think critically about their social surroundings. That is, the professors in the study connect the topics in their courses with the "lived experiences of inequality and racism, and exclusion" (Oenbring

& Gokcora, 2022, p. 249) that many community college students experience daily. We similarly believe that the nature of community college teaching requires professors across the disciplines to integrate social justice problems in their courses. Community college students join postsecondary environments with diverse backgrounds; they manifest gender diversity, ethnic diversity, linguistic diversity, and academic diversity. As Radencich (1998) notes, in “culturally responsive instruction” (p. 180) educators should be sensitive towards this diversity and adopt a culturally sensitive curriculum to include most learners’ experiences in their communities. That is, when teaching at highly-diverse community colleges, professors need to avoid the deficit model of teaching and include culturally relevant pedagogy in their classes so that students will be able to acquire the necessary skills and competencies for a global world. Accordingly, in this study, we describe how Deniz Gokcora has redesigned an ESL developmental writing course at the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) to include an explicit focus on critical racial pedagogy and social justice topics in order to foster students’ critical thinking and encourage them to be socially responsible individuals in a challenging global world—all while building their communication skills. Our goal in this article is to present an example assignment, what we call *the racial awareness essay*, to provide guidance for professors to use this unit as a model and to give underrepresented students a space to interrogate systemic racism and to learn about the social construction of race.

### The Context

Like other two-year community colleges in the City University of New York (CUNY) system, the student population at the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC) is highly diverse; BMCC ESL students include both immigrant and international students from many different countries, the top ten of which are the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Jamaica, China, Guyana, Ecuador, Haiti, Trinidad and Tobago, Bangladesh, and Columbia (“Enrollment Fact Sheet,” 2022). Registered full time international students constitute approximately 7% of the total full time equivalent student body of approximately 13,000 students (“Enrollment Fact Sheet,” 2022; “International Students,” n.d.). Further,

first- and second-generation immigrant students constitute the majority of the student body, with nonwhite students representing in total 87% of the student body (“Enrollment Fact Sheet,” 2022). Thanks to its diverse student body, BMCC has an institutional mission to globalize the curriculum and provide faculty with educational tools and opportunities to integrate these competencies while teaching.

As largely recent immigrants to the United States, BMCC students find themselves at a crossroads of the world: New York City. As BMCC students see a variety of backgrounds around themselves in different boroughs of New York City, they often ask themselves where they belong ethnically, linguistically, and culturally. They might, for example, have an identity in their religious group as well as another identity in the immigrant group their parents are associated with. Further, they might feel attached to these different groups. For example, they could be Chinese or Polish as well as self-identify as an American because they grew up in the city. However, like students in other postsecondary environments, many BMCC students have not thought in an in-depth or nuanced way about the concept of race; many are not even able to define what it means. While most BMCC students recognize that they have experienced racism during their time in the United States, for many recent migrant students the direct experience of racism in the U.S. context is a relatively new experience—that is, they may have only limited knowledge of the ways racialized individuals are treated in the United States and the discourses of race in the U.S. Indeed, as Kubota (2021) notes, “racism is typically understood as acts of individual offense” (p. 241); however, the assignment sequence outlined here provides a means for students to interrogate the multilayered systemic issues at play.

The course in question, ESL 96: Intensive Reading and Writing, is a class that is designed to prepare nonnative speaker immigrant and international students to write academic papers and be familiar with North American styles of academic writing. Specifically, students learn to write response-type essays and argument essays by stating a thesis and providing evidence for their claim. Further, a major goal of ESL 96 is to give students practice writing

longer essays compared to the previous ESL courses, and to practice critical thinking and academic writing skills so they can be placed into a for-credit first-year writing course. While ESL 96 has traditionally focused on the rhetorical modes of expression, Gokcora recently reframed the class assignments to focus specifically on questions related to racial justice. We describe one of these innovative assignment sequences below.

### **The Racial Awareness Essay**

The assignment sequence we wish to discuss leads to the production of what we call *the racial awareness essay*. As presented to students, the assignment sequence is organized around the framing question: *What does race mean—especially at a time when so many individuals are moving between countries?* The following is the sequence of activities scaffolded to deepen students' awareness of the concept of race and help them eventually write their complete racial awareness essay, for which they use Teja Arboleda's (2010) "Race is a Four-Letter Word" as a springboard piece. The main purpose of these scaffolding activities is to help students understand that race is primarily a social construction rather than a biological entity. What follows is a list of successful scaffolding activities that instructors may consider adapting for use in their classes.

First, to get students interested in the social construction of racial categories, Gokcora shows a series of portraits of people of mixed racial backgrounds. One of the portraits, for example, shows a woman who self-identifies as white, Asian, Chinese and Filipino because she has a Filipino, Chinese, Spanish, Indian, Hungarian and German-Jewish background. After viewing the pictures, students are asked to guess the race and ethnicity of these individuals. Students usually relate these faces to the backgrounds they are familiar with. For example, immigrant students from Central Asia usually guess the ethnicity of an individual right; however, most students in the class think a male mixed-race individual from Turkey has a Mexican background. After students explain how they guessed, Gokcora reveals the ethnicity of these faces. Through the assignment, students realize the difficulty of predicting the race of individuals with mixed backgrounds.

After the portraits' activity, students are then asked to reflect upon racial boundaries through a free write activity. One Asian student, for example, reflected on being a person of color:

In my experience, being a person of color, I adopt an open-minded approach to accept anything in society, such as different ethnicities and backgrounds. Also, I have many abilities to take on any position that I want. For example, if I want to be a police officer, I can go to a police academy. We live in the 21st century; people who are called "a person of color" are not different from others. They can do anything to make their dreams come true.

The above comment indicates that this student feels empowered by being a person of color; they avoid considering the traditional stigmas involved in being a person of color, instead adopting a position of empowerment. Of note, however, is that the student's response is focused largely on individual empowerment rather than systemic issues of racial justice. Further, while not all students respond using the frame of reference of empowerment, a number of students do express understanding that everyone can make significant contributions to their society, irrespective of their background.

In the next scaffolding activity, students watch a Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) documentary titled *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, which explores the topic of race from a biological perspective. In the film, noted evolutionary biologist Richard Lewontin contends that geneticists and anthropologists have found by studying DNA sequences from individuals around the world that "85% of all the variation among human beings is between any two individuals within any local population" (Adelman, 2014). That is to say, geneticists and anthropologists have found that although some differences between social groups are noticeable, and have become social markers, the variations of hair form or skin color are very superficial genetic differences. For some BMCC students, this is a profound realization. For example, one student stated quite bluntly in his free write, "I put people in categories that they don't belong in."

Another source of discussion on the topic of race and discrimination that Gokcora has used for this assignment sequence is *The Black List*, which is a collection of interviews by Black celebrities. After watching each interview as a class, students answer a specific question about what the celebrity has mentioned in their talk. For example, ESL students watch the interview with Toni Morrison and learn about why not educating Black males in the family was a way for survival for some groups in the Black community (McConnell/Hauser, 2019). Similarly, students learn that Serena Williams says that she is surprised when people always attribute her success to her strong muscles but not to mental strategies she uses in playing tennis (Blacklist, 2009).

In the assignment sequence, Gokcora shows students several YouTube videos as supplemental materials. The first of these videos, as previously mentioned, is the PBS program called *Race: The Power of an Illusion*. A National Public Radio (NPR) source shown is *Bias Isn't Just a Police Problem, It's a Preschool Problem*. In an experiment explained in this program, preschool teachers show greater empathy towards disadvantaged children if the children and the teachers come from the same racial background (NPR, 2016). As a whole, these programs make students aware of a variety of discrimination and hidden biases in society and help students to establish a keen eye not to ignore them. Other useful short YouTube videos that Gokcora has shown her class include “Who is Black in America?” (American Refugee, 2013) and “The Myths of Race, Debunked in 3 Minutes” (Vox, 2015). Through watching these videos, students become aware of the preconceived traditional assumptions and learn that the concept of race is largely a myth—that is, it is a socially constructed rather than biologically significant entity. Moreover, through these assignments, students learn that the social concepts of race change due to the vagaries of political discussions in a particular society, following changing social emphasis on social topics of concern such as immigration or wars.

As previously mentioned, these scaffolding activities lead the students toward their ultimate goal in this assignment sequence: an expository essay using Teja Arboleda's (2010) “Race is a Four-letter Word” as a springboard.

Arboleda, having a mixed-race background, indicates that he is tired of asking himself who he is. His father was half Filipino-Chinese and African-American, and his mother was Danish-German. Since he grew up in different parts of the world, it is difficult for him to define who he is. Arboleda notes that in his travels, people have referred to him by a variety of epithets, both explicitly racist and not, including *nigger*, *spic*, *mulatto*, *criollo*, *mestizo*, *masala*, *Afghanistani*, *Turk*, *exotic*, *mixed-up*, *half-breed*, *in-between* (Arboleda, 2010). Gokcora's ESL students often find some connection with Mr. Arboleda since, for many, the U.S. is not their native country, and many have experienced similar experiences. Further, some of them were born in the U.S. but still are perceived as individuals from other countries.

For the essay assignment dealing directly with the Arboleda piece, students are initially asked to select one of a number of prompts or assertions related to race and freewrite on the topic. For example, some students select the quote or topic of race as a social concept that gives people different opportunities and resources. Students who select this topic write about the privileges that the accumulated wealth provides the white and/or rich. Indeed, although BMCC students believe that the U.S. provides many opportunities for immigrants, they are still learning to understand systemic discrimination in the U.S., generally previously understanding their experiences as racialized persons in the U.S. in a subjective, individualistic way. Reading and analyzing Arboleda's essay provide students an opportunity to connect their personal experiences with the concepts of stereotyping and discrimination that are offered in “Race is a Four-Letter Word.”

The next assignment dealing directly with Arboleda's piece is a discussion board assignment. In this assignment, students are asked to respond to the following topic: *Write a narrative describing a time when you were misperceived as being of a race, ethnicity or culture that you don't feel was accurate. What conclusions can you draw from this experience?* One student's response summarizes her experience:

I was misidentified as an African American, but I am

from Nigeria ... As explained by Teja Arboleda in an article I read, he states that “I have been ordered to get glasses of water for neighboring restaurant patrons.” In other words, we are born into a racist society and have learned that races are structured in a hierarchical order, and that some races are better than others. Even if you are not a racist, your life is affected by this ordered structure.

This example shows how the student who had previously understood her experience in a very subjective manner is beginning to understand the systemic nature of racism. Engaging students in this manner leads to active learning and a deeper understanding of the topics discussed.

After these extensive scaffolding assignments, the students formulate original, thesis-driven essays using “Race is a Four-letter Word” as a springboard for their writing. Through assignment sequence, students interrogate the concept of race as a social phenomenon rather than a biological trait using examples through their own experiences and credible sources. For the assignment, the instructor provides guidance for the thesis statement and topic sentences for each paragraph. Students are also directed to make at least one reference to the PBS documentary video *Race, the Power of an Illusion* and Arboleda’s essay and include some critical discussion with observations or personal examples on the specific topic.

The following is one section of the body paragraph from a student’s draft essay in which the student is explaining race does not depend on skin color, but rather it is a perception based on people’s experiences:

In the past, people could only check one box in the census regarding their race because it was simple; however, race is defined by people’s perceptions. Immigrants come to the United States, and multicultural backgrounds are formed through intermarriages. Intermarriages have existed since a long time ago. Therefore, race is becoming a complex issue ... I always thought Tiger Woods was Black, but I was wrong ... In the article “Race is a Four-Letter Word,” the author, Teja Arboleda, says that “my very mixed heritage, culture, and international

experiences seem like a blur sometimes, and I long for a resting place.” In other words, people have blurred vision when they look at a person’s skin color, and they often have misconceptions of a person’s race based on skin color. Thus, in society, race is defined as how people think of others by looking at their physical appearance.

As the student acknowledges in the above quote, racial categories are not natural, but depend on the surrounding socio-political environment. Further, the student in the above quote acknowledges that the U.S., like New York City, is becoming more diverse; therefore, which particular race(s) a person identifies themselves with is a very political act. As this all suggests, the assignment sequence outlined here provides an opportunity for our students, who largely come from postcolonial nations, to acquire advanced levels of language competency and to furthermore become able to express themselves in this critical context. Accordingly, this allows critical consciousness raising to become integral to the language learning process.

## **Conclusion**

While we believe the assignment sequence outlined here creates a space where students can make meaningful progress toward challenging received assumptions about race and nationality, we do not mean to imply that this assignment sequence led toward a simple “I-once-was-lost, - but-now-I’m-found” narrative of progress for each student. Like all students, ESL students in diverse urban community colleges can harbor explicitly or implicitly racist attitudes against other groups of people. For many students, their received prejudices were stubborn and their progress only incremental. Furthermore, we do not wish to suggest that the assignment sequence we illustrate here only led to a one-way street of enlightenment, with students only playing the role of passive receptacles of knowledge as they were ideologically corrected by the instructor. Instead, we have found that instructors following the approaches outlined here may also learn from students as students share their stories of being both immigrants and racialized individuals in the U.S.

Despite the “messiness” of the explicit teaching of

race-related topics—and even explicit prohibitions by certain governments (including, for example, in Florida), we contend that ESL instructors should not shy away from teaching such topics. That is to say, even though these subjects might be considered controversial, these topics create powerful opportunities for students to change their traditional perspectives. Classroom instructors should teach that overt and covert racism are intricately connected to other injustices and that the commitment to action always requires the awareness of our own racial and other privileges that are both relational and situated, and “[t]his should be followed by committed action to confront it” (Kubota, 2006, p. 488). The concept of race intersects ethnic background, nationality, sexual orientation, linguism, body image, ageism, socio-economic status, and many other orientations. Accordingly, the ELL classroom can prove a productive forum for discussions of racism—be it “individual, institutional, or epistemological” (Kubota, 2021, p. 242). In sum, integrating global issues such as race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation into the ESL classroom challenges students to think about their identity, society, and history in a broader and more complex way. In the hands of a skilled instructor, the ESL classroom can become a productive site to discuss diverse values in a civic platform with a dialogic approach. Although there is no single way of approaching antiracist pedagogy, students should be able to see the interconnectedness of the realities of their lives in the context that they live as each student brings a unique experience to the classroom. Further, as they put their thoughts in writing, they gain confidence in their critical writing and self-expression skills and stand up for their beliefs and challenge established ideas in society.

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## Author Biographies

**Dr. Deniz Gokcora** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Academic Literacy and Linguistics at the Borough of Manhattan Community College/CUNY. She has published papers in the *Journal of Computer-Assisted Learning*, the *Journal of Virtual Exchange*, and the *International Journal of Academic Development*.

**Dr. Raymond Oenbring** is a Professor of English at the University of the Bahamas. He is interested in composition and linguistics. He can be reached at [raymond.oenbring@ub.edu.bs](mailto:raymond.oenbring@ub.edu.bs).