

# Antiracism in the World Language Classroom

## EDITOR'S NOTE:

In this issue, we present articles on the Focus Topic “Antiracism in the World Language Classroom.” The submissions for this issue were blind reviewed by two education experts, in addition to staff from *The Language Educator* and ACTFL. We thank Krishauna Hines-Gaither, Vice President for Equity, Diversity and Justice at Mount Saint Mary’s University-Los Angeles, CA, and Cécile Accilien, chair of the Interdisciplinary Studies Department and Professor of African and African Diaspora Studies at Kennesaw State University, GA, for writing an introduction to this important topic.



Want to discuss this topic further? Log on and head over to *The Language Educator* magazine group in the ACTFL Online Community ([community.actfl.org](http://community.actfl.org)).

## If Not Now, Then When?

In this article, we discuss the many issues associated with antiracism in our schools and classrooms, as well as the challenges and relevant connections with “hot topics” across education. As we pen this framing article, “27 states have introduced bills or taken other steps that would restrict teaching critical race theory or limit how teachers can discuss racism and sexism” (Schwartz, Harris & Pendharker, 2021, para. 4). The writing of this article is an act of social justice and antiracism. Our vision and hope is that our colleagues will establish an antiracist world language agenda, even in the face of opposition.

### Positionality Matters

Antiracism calls for ongoing self-reflective practice and self-interrogation. Gloria Ladson-Billings acknowledged, “[W]ho I am, what I believe, what experiences I have had all impact what, how, and why I research” (Ladson-Billings, 1995,

p. 470). We believe it is essential to situate our positionality within the framework of this special edition on antiracism. We call upon our language colleagues to consider how their identities inform their language practice as well.

We are two Black women originally from the United States (Krishauna Hines-Gaither) and Haiti (Cécile Accilien). As Black language educators who are women, we are often viewed as less qualified until proven otherwise. We are met with lowered expectations and bias by students, parents, and also our language colleagues and professional organizations. Notwithstanding these realities, we have persisted and continue to be passionate about languages and cultures.

We have taught world languages for more than two decades, hold terminal degrees, and have presented and published on antiracism in world languages. We are currently under contract with Routledge Press to author the forthcoming book, *The Antiracist World Language Classroom*. As such, we are slowly getting to the tables where we have the power to give voice to prominent social matters. Along with a multitude of educators who are Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), and white allies, we continue to push ourselves and our language profession to do better and to be better.

### Whose Language Matters?

Between the two of us, we speak five languages (African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Haitian Kreyol, Spanish, French, and English). With few exceptions, most settings do not formally recognize AAVE or Haitian Kreyol as legitimate

languages nor are Chicano Spanish, Jamaican Patois, and the like recognized. In charting a path toward antiracism, as a profession we must challenge and newly imagine how we define languages.

We call for educators to value the language of the classroom (languages traditionally taught, affirmed, and acknowledged), and also the language of community (languages traditionally not taught, affirmed, or acknowledged). Chicana, lesbian, feminist, Gloria Anzaldúa popularized the term *linguistic terrorism*. Anzaldúa explained:

Chicanas who grew up speaking Chicano Spanish have internalized the belief that we speak poor Spanish. It is illegitimate, a bastard language. And because we internalized how our language has been used against us by the dominant culture, we use our language differences against each other (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 38).

The understanding that our students enter our language classrooms with rich linguistic foundations will enable educators to honor their home languages as assets, and not see them as deficits.

### Defining Antiracism

We lean to Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo's framing of antiracism. We appreciate that they offer a complex framework that addresses the individual, the interpersonal, and the systemic levels of education. They also name the role of whiteness in antiracism.

Antiracist education recognizes racism as embedded in all aspects of society and the socialization process; no one who is born into or raised into western culture can escape being socialized to participate in racist relations. Antiracist education seeks to interrupt these relations by educating people to identify, name and challenge the norms, patterns, traditions, ideologies, structures, and institutions that keep racism in place. A key aspect of this education process is to raise the consciousness of white people about what racism is and how it works. To accomplish this we must challenge the dominant conceptualization of racism as individual acts that only some bad individuals do, rather than as a system in which we are all impacted (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 142).

Our hope is that we rally a critical mass of antiracist educators who will serve as ambassadors for this essential work. Our students' futures depend on it. As more antiracist educators assume strategic roles on policy-making boards, we will achieve the goals of systemic change that extend beyond the personal and interpersonal levels. Nigerian journalist and scholar Ijeoma Oluo wrote, "When we look at racism as a system, it becomes much larger and more complicated than it seemed before—but there is also more opportunity to address the various parts of it" (Oluo, 2019, p. 36).

### Antiracism for White and BIPOC Educators

In the antiracist classroom, educators who are white and educators of color are equally called upon to do this work. Capacity-building is needed for all educators, regardless of identity. Yet, far too often, antiracism falls to minoritized educators and a few white allies that Bettina Love refers to as co-conspirators (Love, 2019). Sheri Spaine Long, Executive Director of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese, poignantly reflected,

I am a white female; I am a language educator and humanities professor by training. I was a child during the civil rights movement ... From that time, I understood that we all have to work on not being racist every day. It is a process. The educational community has a responsibility to work on this process constantly with our students collectively and individually (Long, 2020, p. 21).

Long's quote acknowledges her positionality, centers her experience as both an individual and also as part of larger societal patterns, and calls for her to actively engage in antiracism. These are productive ways for language educators to assess how their lives and experiences have influenced who they are and the type of educators they wish to become.

### Antiracism for all Proficiencies

L.J. Randolph and Stacey Margarita Johnson acknowledged, "A principal concern with novice (and even intermediate) language students is that they have not yet developed the necessary language proficiency to engage in critical reflection and critical discussion about social justice issues in the world language classroom" (Randolph & Johnson, 2017, p. 111). This concern is shared by educators with respect to antiracism.

Educators can begin incorporating antiracism from Day One at all levels, including the novice level. For example, setting the stage at the very beginning of the class may mean revealing the large numbers of people of color who are L1 speakers of our target languages. Educators can be intentional in showing images of indigenous, African descendants and other identities of target communities.

While commonly taught languages receive more scholarly attention, do not present Asian languages as race neutral. Instead, ask learners how their communities engage with various Asian communities and vice versa. Pose critical questions that allow students to discuss historical and contemporary relationships, perceptions, celebrations, solidarity, and tensions that may exist between some Asian communities, majority communities, and other communities of color.

While it requires planning and intentionality, we believe that *all* educators can create an antiracist classroom where their students have the opportunity to learn about the diversity and critical content pertaining to the language they are studying.



**“Denial is the heartbeat of racism, beating across ideologies, races, and nations.”**

**– Ibram X. Kendi**

ACTFL’s Special Interest Groups such as African American Students, Small Undergraduate German Programs, Cinema (Film), and Critical and Social Justice Approaches offer dynamic sessions on antiracist curriculum and lesson ideas.

International Baccalaureate Spanish teacher of the Semiahmoo Secondary School, Adriana Ramírez shared, “BIPOC are not at the center of the production, *at all levels*, of language materials.” In addition to our call for all educators to embrace antiracism, we also need antiracist content that is created by BIPOC educators or in collaboration with white colleagues. BIPOC voices must be centered both in the production of materials and in the content.

### Ten Principles of Antiracism

Although ever evolving, our framework for antiracism in the world language classroom is based on the following 10 principles:

1. Silence is the enemy of antiracism.
2. Being an antiracist is a conscious journey, and not a destination.
3. Racism systematically and generationally disenfranchises Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC).
4. The survival of BIPOC students and educators in the academy is dependent upon an antiracist paradigm in which they can survive and thrive.
5. Since racism intersects with economics, class, gender, sexuality, religion, ability, and other identities, white people can be similarly impacted by these systems of oppression, hence the necessity for solidarity.
6. Educators need to understand that an antiracist classroom undeniably changes the game for students of color, while also enabling white students to understand how privilege, power, and positionality play out in white dominant cultures.
7. An educator who wants to create an antiracist world language classroom must build the capacity to talk about race in an ongoing manner.
8. Educators must have self-accountability and be willing to work to create an antiracist, diverse, inclusive, and equitable culture in their classrooms.
9. Educators should be aware that being social justice-minded does not automatically equate to being antiracist.
10. Educators need to acknowledge that the majority of our textbooks and curricula have thrived on racist practices that silenced the voices and omitted the experiences of people of color and were not written by BIPOC scholars.

### From the Classroom to Systemic Change

Educators who are truly committed to antiracism will consider how racism operates beyond the classroom. Ryuko Kubota asserted, “[C]lose examinations of social structures and individual experiences will reveal that racism indeed exists in various corners of everyday life, reflecting and reinforcing racial relations of power” (Kubota, 2015, p. 3). For sustainable antiracist change to occur in world languages there has to be an examination of systemic or structural racism. A focus on the individual or the classroom alone does not allow for a comprehensive assessment of our language profession.

At the systemic level, we must look at the structure of pipelines and pathways. What does it take to join a world language board? We surmise that the current pathways are too narrowly tied to state and regional language organizations, which are almost all white-dominated. What if we worked to build strategic partnerships with organizations such as the Haitian Studies Association, the Caribbean Studies Association (CSA), the Latin American Studies Association (LASA), the Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas, and a litany of others? The diversity of identity and thought are rich in these affinity-based spaces.

What if our boards delineated *ex officio* seats and designated them for the Special Interest Groups already in existence such as those previously mentioned? Many of the SIGS tend to be

more racially and ethnically diverse than the ACTFL membership at large. These SIGs could promote diverse pathways to ACTFL and other associations' board positions.

What if we really thought outside of the box to include social media-based affinity groups to inform world language policy? These might include the following Facebook groups: Incorporating Afro-Latino Culture in Spanish Classrooms (3,500 members), the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association (9,600 members), PLC Culture and Diversity (200 members), etc.

### Shifting from Words to Actions

The call for papers for *The Language Educator* edition on anti-racism states, "The *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* and the Learning for Justice (Teaching Tolerance) *Social Justice Standards* have natural connections, but we need to be intentional about teaching antiracism and de-colonizing curriculum in our classrooms." We honor the undeniable impact that many of our framing documents have had on the language profession. Some of these documents include *The World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages*, the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements, the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, and others. They gave us common language and common goals. These frameworks serve as foundational tenets for the world language profession. However, at present, none of these documents mention race, racism, antiracism, or social justice, nor do the Social Justice Standards (Learning for Justice) reference race. Ibram X. Kendi wrote, "Denial is the heartbeat of racism, beating across ideologies, races, and nations" (Kendi, 2019, p.9).

We do not mean to suggest that these documents cannot be adapted to an antiracist or social justice classroom; any good educator can certainly make these connections. However, language is powerful. There is power in explicitly naming what

we value. When we do not name these constructs, we leave it to the interpretation, will, or desire of the individual educator, school, district, or state to infer what we value. We call for more explicit language in our framing documents, and strategic support and development to shepherd antiracism.

### Closing

Harlem Renaissance writer and antiracism activist, James Baldwin, wrote, "If I love you, I have to make you conscious of the things you don't see" (Baldwin, 1973, p. 41). As this quote affirms, our call to action is to uplift our profession so that we can fulfill the mission of equity, diversity, and justice that all language organizations should uphold. We must see this call to antiracism as a radical act of love: Love of profession, love of community, love for our students.

It is time to enact what indigenous groups have termed *collectivismo*, or collective organizing. We can no longer afford to work as an enclave unto ourselves. We must consider other theoretical frameworks to inform our practices such as critical theories. We must move beyond the insularity of the language profession and begin to work across aisles with colleagues from other disciplines, other departments, and those outside of academia. We need strategic planning at the national level to shift policies and to set a national agenda for antiracism in world languages.

It is time to put action behind many of the statements that were made following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and too many others. It is time for us as a language community to be relevant to the times in which we live. We will chart a new cartography for antiracism. As Alice Walker wrote, "We are the ones we have been waiting for."

If not now, then when?

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