

From the Linguistically Deficient to the Linguistically Oppressed International Student

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

Rather than present it as an individual “deficiency” to overcome for academic success, this paper encourages researchers to recognize how language is used to oppress international students in universities. Situated in the specific context of English-medium universities in the Global North and mainly drawing on critical scholarship on language, race, and colonialism, the paper details how international students’ linguistic “deficiencies” are actually institutional creations. This begins with the label of “international student” itself and how university language policies use it to reinforce racial and colonial hierarchies of language users. Moreover, the interactants of international students as well as the academic disciplines in which they are situated can perpetuate oppressive ideologies that position these students as linguistically inferior, through no fault of their own. The paper advocates for research that challenges the institutional processes that linguistically oppress international students.

Full paper

Introduction

Rather than present it as an individual “deficiency” to overcome for academic success, this paper encourages researchers to recognize how language is used to oppress international students in

universities. Situated in the specific context of English-medium universities in the Global North and mainly drawing on critical scholarship on language, race, and colonialism, the paper details how international students' linguistic "deficiencies" are actually institutional creations, thereby encouraging researchers to name and challenge the institutional processes that sustain linguistic oppression. Below, I offer three pieces of advice for future research in this area.

Question the Linguistic Assumptions behind "International Student"

While much research uses "international student" as a straightforward legal category which describes those who travel to another country to pursue (under)graduate education, Cantwell and Lee (2010) argue that "international" can also define differing levels of alienation. One way to acknowledge this point is to look at how university language policies reproduce racial and colonial hierarchies among different international students (Sterzuk, 2015). In policies outlining exemptions from proving proficiency in English to attend university, there is a general tendency to exempt students from imperial centres like the UK and US while requiring students from such countries as India and the Philippines to prove their proficiency, even when histories of UK and US colonialism have made them highly proficient in the language (see e.g., University of Toronto, 2022). These policies make some students "more international" to certain universities than others in terms of having to legitimate their variety of English.

Understanding how language policy can make "international" a shifting category is vital for researchers who use "international student" as a blanket term for multilingual students who struggle with using English (Jenkins, 2014). Using "international student" in this uncritical manner ignores that English is not necessarily a hindrance for every international student. For instance, even if their English is unfairly scrutinized as mentioned above, Bhalla (2019) notes that Indian students often have an easy time linguistically

adjusting in US universities precisely because they are recipients of a British colonial education, which required them to use English. For future research, then, such an example warrants exploration of how the “deficiencies” of certain international students’ English are products of policy documents rather than actual displays of linguistic inferiority.

Examine the External Perceptions of International Students’ Language Use

Just as university language policies can dismiss the English proficiency of particular international students, representatives of universities, such as faculty and staff, also contribute to this dismissal through their everyday perceptions of these students’ English. Consider how they might be subject to raciolinguistic ideologies, those based on European colonialism which posit that the language practices of racially minoritized groups are deficient even when they match those of their privileged white counterparts (see Rosa & Flores, 2017). In a study examining how English is constructed as white property in a Canadian university, for example, Sterzuk (2015) describes an incident where the thesis committee of a Chinese student immediately started to correct the English of the thesis even though the student’s “native-English-speaking” supervisor had already proofread it. Here, the committee members were perhaps subscribing to a raciolinguistic ideology stating that the student’s English was unintelligible because it was produced by a Chinese person.

Using conceptual vocabulary like raciolinguistic ideologies can problematize research which assumes that international students only need to assimilate to hegemonic linguistic norms in order to escape criticism of their English (e.g., Benzie, 2010). Therefore, future scholarship should focus on how the ideological positions of the interactants of international students contribute to the deficit framing of the latter’s language use.

Recognize the Disciplinary Contexts of Linguistic Oppression

One final piece of advice is to recognize how academic discipline can aggravate linguistic oppression. International students in different disciplines do not necessarily experience the same levels of such oppression. Rather, some may experience even more than others. For instance, because engineering upholds the white cisgender man as the prototypical engineer, Ramjattan (2020) notes how the speech accents of international students in this field can be criticized for not sounding “masculine enough” in addition to their “incomprehensible foreignness.” This small example warrants further consideration of how disciplinary beliefs, etc., intensify linguistic oppression by creating additional linguistic norms to which to conform.

In the end, then, scholars must pay attention to the manifold ways in which international students are linguistically oppressed and, furthermore, create research agendas that inspire social change.

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