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Comments on Ryuko Kubota’s “Discursive Construction of the Images of U.S. Classrooms”

A Reader Reacts . . .

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In “Discursive Construction of the Images of U.S. Classrooms” (Vol. 35, No. 1, Spring 2001), Ryuko Kubota writes,

The underlying assumption in the discourse of cultural dichotomy is that U.S. culture is the norm. . . . Applied linguistics, grounded in liberal cultural relativism, would not accept the normal/abnormal divide on the surface, but the mission of teaching English inevitably presumes what is standard and what is not . . . . Although contemporary [applied linguistics] discourse avoids discussions of inequalities and maintains power relations, racism, another colonial legacy, persists . . . . Hidden in this discourse is the old hierarchy of racial superiority that determines which form of cultural product or practice is the norm or deviant [italics added]. (pp. 24–25, 28)

The only plausible reading I can give these words is that ESL teachers and applied linguists, by their very involvement in the field, are racists. It is my intent to examine this proposition here, both in general and specifically as it relates to one ESL teacher/applied linguist Kubota uses to exemplify such “racism”—myself.

To paraphrase Kubota’s quotation, which in fact fairly summarizes her main arguments, English language teaching/applied linguistics is pervaded by an ideology of (U.S.) racial superiority that operates through maintaining standards of normal/abnormal, “us” versus “them.” Quite
apart from questions regarding the elision of TESOL and applied linguistics, or the special place of the United States in all this, I will here investigate in more detail how Kubota substantiates her points. Used rightly, racism is a label with great moral power: It brings immediate opprobrium on those it is directed toward—for example, supporters of pure race ideologies in various parts of the world. Accusations of racism must therefore be treated seriously—but those who use them bear a special responsibility not to abuse their power.

The main theoretical concept Kubota uses to support her arguments is orientalism (see also Kubota, 1999, where the notion is given further theoretical development). A major assumption of orientalism (Said, 1978, chap. 1) is that all “Western” characterizations of “non-Western” others—and, as stated in her quotation, Kubota clearly sees this assumption as applying without exception to ESL teaching as well—are based in well-worn discourses that see “non-Westerners” and their cultures as static, tradition-bound, irrational, passive, imitative, primitive, rigid, and so on—in a word, inferior. It is largely on the basis of such a conception that Kubota applies terms like essentialism, othering, stereotyping, and dichotomization to culturally oriented studies in applied linguistics and TESOL. Without a doubt, such orientalizing discourses do clearly exist in “the West” (as well as in other parts of the world; Kubota, 1999), and scholars such as Said (e.g., 1978) have done exemplary work exposing them. But I find the tenet that they are all-encompassing and without exception a curious one at best. This is because orientalism falls of its own weight when subjected to its own critique—it becomes itself essentializing, dehumanizing, dichotomizing, stereotyping, reductive, and self-contradictory rhetoric.

Orientalist theory claims that, while all non-Western others are of course individuals, any “Westerner” who teaches or writes or talks about them is participating in the all-pervasive discourse of orientalism, or othering (e.g., Said, 1978, p. 2). The very theory of orientalism itself, therefore, appears to be an essentializing, othering, and totalizing one, in that it reduces all Westerners (or anyone engaged in anything that is, according to the judgment of Kubota and others, an orientalizing discourse) to “social dopes” under the iron-clad control of this discourse. So whereas it is wrong, immoral, and racist to “other” or essentialize non-Westerners, labeling, stereotyping, and reductionism flow freely and naturally in the opposite direction. Although this may be a viable form of political-moral retribution against the West for past and present sins of colonial and neocolonial aggression, it does not seem to work as an academic argument.

Certainly, for someone so insistent that the field recognize the diverse, nondeterminate nature of people and cultures, it is hypocritical to construct applied linguistics views of culture as simplex, closed, dichoto-
mous, and determinate. It is also dehumanizing in that it puts a large number of people (not just applied linguists, in fact, but anyone who happens to believe that people do, among other things, “live culturally”—Ingold, 1994, p. 330) into a single, closed category, and having done so seeks to diminish them by accusing them of racism, essentialism, stereotyping, othering, and so on. Does such an approach really offer a better, more humane world of the sort that Kubota seems to consider herself champion of?

The highly questionable substance of these arguments is matched by the evidence Kubota uses to support them. My own work (Atkinson, 1997; Atkinson & Ramanathan, 1995; Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999), for instance, is prominently featured in Kubota’s attempt to establish the pervasiveness of orientalist discourse in TESOL and applied linguistics. Let me now examine three ways in which Kubota misrepresents this work:

1. On p. 12 of her article, Kubota cites my coauthor and me (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999) as “perceiv[ing] the main goal of education in the United States as the promotion of logical, analytical, and critical thinking skills, reflecting and promoting individualism as a cultural value.” In doing so, Kubota attempts to portray us as boosters of U.S. education over the educational practices of non-U.S. others, her argument being that such boosterism is a central move in constructing the orientalized, essentialized, deficient other.

I am sorry to say I have no idea what “the main goal” of U.S. education is, and I challenge Kubota to find it stated in my work. But I am reasonably sure that one of its important consequences is to reproduce the current social structure. This has been a major focus of mine in writing about critical thinking and other social practices apparently based on an ideology of individualism; that is, although such social practices are in fact usually part of the noneducational, early-acquired cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1982; see also Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983, 1991) of particular groups, they masquerade as educational accomplishments, and therefore justify and reinforce the continued dominance of insiders over outsiders, have-overs have-nots (Atkinson, 1997). Kubota therefore grossly misportrays our article, where we were basically critiquing an ideology of individualism apparently underlying certain concepts and practices of teaching writing in the U.S. university and, in this important sense, U.S. education itself.

2. In a similar vein, Kubota misrepresents my work on critical thinking (Atkinson, 1997), individualism (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999), and university L1 versus ESL writing programs (Atkinson & Ramanathan, 1995) when she writes, “The above conceptualization of U.S. education portrays an image of a teacher who uses a dialogic
teaching approach that encourages the exchange of logical arguments rather than a didactic approach that transmits knowledge” (p. 13). Kubota apparently cites us here on the basis of our use of empirical data to exemplify, in the university L1 versus L2 writing program study, the former’s efforts to teach critical thinking. In fact, we had nothing at all to say about “dialogic” teaching via the “exchange of logical arguments” versus education-by-transmission; nor did we make any attempt to extend our findings to U.S. education as a whole. We have stated elsewhere our belief that a certain (more or less idealizing) disposition toward argumentation characterizes some segments of U.S. society, as part of a larger ideology of individualism that all peoples of the world—including, very broadly speaking (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999, note 5), some non–European American social groups—may not necessarily share. But this is a far cry from Kubota’s misleading claim. Neither can Kubota’s statement be excused as a passing comment: It is the opening sentence of the second substantive subsection of her paper, the statement I took issue with in Point 1 above being the opening sentence of the first.

3. On p. 29, Kubota takes my coauthor and me to task for “an applied linguistics discussion” [italics added] which presents “idealized images of U.S. classrooms that reflect U.S. middle-class norms and values . . . as a ‘necessary convenience.’” The reference here is in fact to Footnote 12 of Atkinson and Ramanathan (1995)—a point not mentioned by Kubota, no doubt because footnotes are harder to reinvent as major, monolithic (essentializing, othering, racist, and so on) discussions. In fact, the footnote referred to our use of the term “American culture” in reporting that, in comparing the U.S. university ESL program and the L1-dominant composition program in the previously mentioned study, the former assumed of its entering students no special competence in American culture, whereas the latter appeared to. We then went on to argue that the composition program’s assumption in this regard was probably mistaken given that roughly 20% of its population were “nonnative-speaking” or “international” (other problematic terms for which I know no workable substitutes and which I therefore must also use as necessary conveniences, despite the threat of Kubota’s essentializing labels) students. We were careful to place American culture in scare quotes in the body of our text and to footnote its status as a “necessary convenience,” at the same time “acknowledg[ing] the many critiques of the monolithic American culture myth that exist in current scholarship” (p. 557). Thus, although this usage may have been a mistake—I continue to struggle with myself over how to express such
compromised concepts when usable alternatives are unknown to me, as I think the footnote reveals—the footnote hardly constitutes an “applied linguistics discussion” of American culture presented as a “neutral, objective truth but . . . [actually] constructed by discourses that exploit various convenient notions to serve their own interests [italics added]” (p. 29). On the contrary, Kubota has once again essentialized, reduced, stereotyped, and constructed to serve her own interests.

Kubota misrepresents my work and that of others (e.g., the ethnographers mentioned in Footnote 5, whose work by no means simply supports Kubota’s views, as she herself admits—see also Atkinson, 1999a) throughout her article—the preceding are just examples. This is a shame, in my opinion, as some of the ideas she promotes clearly have worth (Atkinson, 1999a, 1999b, in press). But in the end one’s ideas, no matter how good or how important, cannot be successfully advanced unless one also treats others and their own ideas with fairness and honesty. I for one would much prefer to respond to the worth of Kubota’s arguments than to her highly questionable ways of constructing them: I therefore challenge Kubota to present her arguments ethically—to “practice what she preaches”—in future research. Equally, I would urge much greater caution in branding whole fields (TÉSOL and applied linguistics, in this case) as racist, for by doing so one reproduces the very evils one is seeking to defeat.

REFERENCES


The Author Responds: (Un)Raveling Racism in a Nice Field Like TESOL

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When people of color assert that the academy is racist, individual whites in the academy, who do not see themselves as racist, are offended or think the judgment does not apply to them. . . . Neither whites nor people of color seem to understand that there is a clash here between a social group perspective, learned by people of color through the social experience of racism, and an individualized perspective, learned by whites through their racial socialization. (Scheurich, 1997, p. 122)

I welcome Dwight Atkinson’s comments, as they clarify some of the points that he has made in his previous work and caution against essentialism in critical scholarship. I agree with Atkinson that Said’s (1978) critique of Orientalism runs the risk of essentializing the all-encompassing Occident as a category opposite to the Orient, as Clifford (1988) has pointed out. Nevertheless, Atkinson’s critique strikes me as reactionary, defending a liberal pluralist stance that takes little account of the power and politics influencing the construction of images of the Self and the Other. Furthermore, its color- and privilege-blind individual approach to racism, in effect, denies the existence of racism and avoids confronting it. His criticisms have thus compelled me to reiterate the main point of my article and to provide more detailed discussions of racism to expose its complexity in ways that go far beyond mere individual prejudice.