(Re)Constructing ELL and International Student Identities in the Oral Communication Course

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When I was an undergraduate student, I competed in intercollegiate forensics (speech and debate) for a span of four years. Even though I would consider myself a successful competitor during all those years, I still felt that my Asian international student body was a barrier that marked my difference from other White and native U.S. English speakers. On several occasions, forensics judges wrote comments on my ballots (judging evaluation forms) that clearly indicated my otherness in the forensics arena. For example, a common remark sounded like this: “You need to work on your diction, enunciation, and articulation.” The latter comment is not as harsh compared to the one that diagnosed me as having a speech deficiency: “You should check out our university’s speech pathology center... They can help you work on your accent and articulation.” After reading a number of ethnocentric ballots while I was competing in forensics, I realized that I was different and will be

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treated differently because of my Asian international student body.

Like my international student body and non-U.S. accent, other English Language Learners (ELL) and international students also experience similar challenges that prevent them from gaining acceptance and credibility in the U.S. American academy, especially in the oral communication classroom. When I was once a student in an oral communication class, I remember seeing some of my classmates, who were also either ELL or international students, feeling ashamed of their accent. In fact, some of them would start their speech by apologizing to the audience: “I’m sorry that my English is not good” or “I’m an international student and I’m still learning English; I hope you’ll understand what I’m saying.” After hearing these statements so many times in an oral communication classroom as a student and teacher, I cannot help but think of the images and messages in the (oral) communication literature that constitute and reinforce ELL and international student identities as those who are incomprehensible and acquire a speech deficiency, which is a form of othering with respect to accent, linguistic, and other cultural differences.

The othering of ELL and international student identities is not limited to the issue of accented speech; there have been numerous studies (e.g., Dick, 1990; Ferris, 1998; Jung & McCroskey, 2004; Yook, 1995; Yook & Seiler, 1990; Zimmerman, 1995) that discuss the obstacles that ELL and international students face in oral communication classrooms, which in so many ways continue to categorize them as at-risk. Dick (1990), for example, assumes that ELL and international students
are in the U.S. on a temporary basis, which in some ways marks their non-U.S. American status. Spaulding and Flack (1976) also conclude that ELL and international students have a hard time presenting speeches and submitting papers in class. Although these studies and many others may provide some insights on how to better serve ELL and international students, they also reinforce stereotypical student identities that consider them as at-risk.

As can be seen more in-depth later, many studies that have been written about the intersections of ELL/international students and the oral communication classroom seem to reinforce this kind of scholarship: ELL and international students are an at-risk population because of their limited English proficiency, which is why we need to “help” these students. These problematic and essentializing studies continue to rely on strategic rhetoric of educational norms that maintain inequalities in schools (Fassett & Warren, 2004). Strategic rhetoric is “not itself a place, but it functions to re-se cure the center” (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, p. 295). Derived from de Certeau (1984), a strategy is a “calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated” (p. 35). Consequently, strategic rhetoric “systematically reproduce[s] privilege and oppression through the everyday communicative choices and behaviors of individuals” (Fassett & Warren, 2004, pp. 22-23). Strategies that have been proposed, such as an exclusive oral communication section, create this notion that all ELL and international students have the same
low level of English proficiency and that is why they need to be “diagnosed” and/or “trained.”

Because of such problematic constructions of ELL and international students in the oral communication course, I will use Fassett and Warren’s (2007) critical communication pedagogy to problematize some of the foundational studies that construct ELL and international student identities as “at-risk,” as well as critique the consequences of such identity constructions in oral communication classrooms. In this paper, I will focus on how ELL and international student identities have been constituted in oral communication courses. I will also examine how exclusive oral communication sections are used as a specific strategy to “help” ELL and international students. Finally, I will discuss critical communication pedagogy as a means of resisting negative representations of ELL and international student identities as “at-risk” by critiquing the consequences of such identity constructions in the oral communication literature, and offering possibilities to realize that ELL and international students can benefit oral communication classrooms.

**CONSTRUCTIONS OF ELL AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENT IDENTITIES**

Because identity is shaped, influenced, and understood through communication (Fassett & Warren, 2007), many scholars continue to construct educational identities, such as that of ELL and international students, in continual and repeated patterns that consider them in a static fashion where they are measured, graphed, and
counted in order (Fassett & Warren, 2005). Like other constructions of identities, how ELL and international student identities are constructed would be based on what is being communicated to people and in studies that have been published. In this section, I will highlight some of the foundational studies in the intersections of ELL/international students and the oral communication classroom in order to understand how ELL and international student identities have been constructed in the communication literature. As we will see, many studies tend to categorize ELL and international students’ at-riskness based on their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. For instance, in Dick’s (1990) study, ELL and international students are categorized as “sojourners” or “temporary U.S. residents,” which suggest that many of them are not assimilatable to the mainstream U.S. culture.

Furthermore, ELL and international students are often stereotyped as students who have these difficulties: giving oral reports, participating in class discussions, taking notes in class, understanding lectures, preparing written reports, adapting socially on campus, and among others (Spaulding & Flack, 1976). Moreover, even though ELL and international students are stereotyped positively, Spencer-Rodgers (2001) reports that many U.S. American students also perceive them with the following images: “foreign/different,” “socially and culturally maladjusted,” “do not speak English well,” “unsociable,” and “naïve” (p. 647). As can be seen, many studies tend to construct ELL and international student identities where essentialist ideas of race are present that can ultimately lead to products of racism (Simpson, 2003).
Essentialist ideas of race can also lead to an ethnocentric claim that ELL and international students are linked to traits that point to their communication apprehensibility (Jung & McCroskey, 2004). By using the communibiological paradigm, which is the notion that genetic-based temperament on human behavior has much more influence than environment factors, Jung and McCroskey (2004) conclude that “the non-native English speaker in the U.S. is more likely to find herself or himself in situations where it is threatening to speak” (p. 172). As represented in their research, Jung and McCroskey problematically assume that all ELL and international students are alike, which is an ideological assumption that reinforces stereotypes. More often than not, ELL and international students are clumped together as if they all come from nations that do not speak English. The main problem is that many U.S. Americans lack language acquisition experience and do not understand that some ELL and international students know how to speak English with a variety of fluency. There are obviously ELL and international students who have been exposed to English instruction, although they have not acquired fluency at the moment. In fact, ELL and international student identities have their own arbitrariness; many ELL students, for example, will say that they primarily speak English because they were either born or grew up in the U.S. and yet they are still considered as “ELL” students (Rubin & Turk, 1997). What is at stake here is the idea that ELL and international students are assumed to be genetically predisposed to having communication apprehension, which could prevent them from presenting good speeches in the oral communication classroom. Consequently, Rubin
and Turk (1997) state that ELL and international students are encouraged to “take a non-performance class in interpersonal communication rather than a public speaking class, or accept an ESL [ELL] class in speaking and listening in lieu of the basic class in formal oral discourse” (p. 141). Rubin and Turk’s point shows how stereotypical constructions of ELL and international student identities often lead to teachers and advisors discouraging ELL and international students from enrolling in a public speaking class with native English-speaking students.

Moreover, because of their perceived speech deficiencies, ELL and international students in turn have also been categorized as an “at-risk” group. “At-risk students” are “students who are likely to fail or risk dropping out of schools...which position such students as something to fix, as a series of events in which to intervene, as someone to save” (Fassett & Warren, 2005, p. 238). The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) states that there are seven different factors that categorize students being “at-risk:”

Belonging to a single-parent home, spending three or more hours a day alone at home, having an annual family income of less than $15,000, having parents or siblings who did not complete high school, having a limited proficiency in English, living in an urban area, and/or belonging to a racial/ethnic minority group. (as cited in Fassett & Warren, 2005, p. 239)

One of these factors alone—“having a limited proficiency in English”—is enough to place ELL and international students of being labeled as “at-risk.” Within the communication field, Fassett and Warren (2005) point out that communication apprehension is used as a factor
in determining a student’s “at-risk” status. As an example, Dick (1990) states that putting ELL and international students into hybrid classes with their native English-speaking peers would mean that they “would be expected to enter a footrace while they are learning to walk” (p. 40). Statements such as Dick’s (1990) are the reason why ELL and international students are often treated as an “at risk” student population. All of a sudden, they have been diagnosed as students with speech deficiencies and are incapable of meshing with U.S. American students.

**STRATEGIC RHETORIC OF “HELPING” ELL AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS**

In an oral communication classroom context, ELL and international students are perceived as students who are members of “special populations” who need to be “helped.” For instance, Dick (1990) states that ELL and international students need some help to “become as proficient in the language as necessary to maximize their learning” (p. 40). While I appreciate the effort to improve ELL and international students’ English proficiency, Dick and others (e.g., Meloni & Thompson, 1980; Murphy, 1992, 1993) engage in a strategic rhetoric of proposing exclusive oral communication sections designed specifically for ELL and international students. Dick (1990) believes that having exclusive oral communication sections is beneficial because ELL and international students lack involvement (i.e., participation) in hybrid classes where both native and non-native English-speaking students are present. According to Dick
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(1990), ELL and international students will face a “psychological barrier” in hybrid classes. I recognize that there are some ELL and international students who may feel uncomfortable to be in an oral communication section with native English-speaking students. In exclusive oral communication sections, I agree that ELL and international students may feel at home (so to speak) because they would not be as intimidated in front of non-native English speaking peers when presenting speeches. In addition, I believe that exclusive sections would allow teachers to specifically design a pedagogical approach that caters specifically to ELL and international students. In some ways, exclusive oral communication classes can help alleviate the fear that ELL and international students may face while presenting speeches because they can relate to their peers and have a curriculum that meets their needs.

While there are some benefits to exclusive oral communication sections, I find it problematic that some studies in the intersections of ELL/international students and the communication classroom are often marked by ethnocentric bias. More specifically, many of scholars continue to mark ELL and international students as having speech deficiencies who cannot succeed and consume too much class time in hybrid sections. Dick (1990), for instance, assumes that all ELL and international students have the same level of English proficiency, which could contribute to their uneasiness in a “mainstream” class. Dick’s assumption is far from the truth. When I taught hybrid oral communication classes, my ELL and international students blended well with their U.S. American classmates. Moreover, ELL and international students in my oral communica-
tion courses achieved high marks; in fact, most did better than their U.S. American counterparts in both written and oral assignments. I also found in my oral communication classes that U.S. American students were generally supportive of their ELL and international student peers. So, the argument that ELL and international students’ “excessive conformity pressure in a given environment [hybrid classroom] can be too severe for strangers [ELL and international students] to manage…” (Kim, 1988, p. 130) is problematic. Such a categorization of ELL and international students as “at-risk” for their perceived speech deficiencies marks their otherness by essentially creating educational segregation that pushes for separate classrooms.

Unfortunately, many communication scholars (e.g., Dick, 1990; Kim, 1988) continue to pigeonhole ELL and international students as “culturally...unaccustomed to initiating orally in the classroom...” (Dick, 1990, p. 41). As a result, many oral communication instructors are led to believe that they should not call on their ELL and international students because a language barrier exists. What many instructors do not realize is that a lot of ELL and international students prefer to perform silence as form of classroom engagement. In other cultures, performances of silence are valued over speech as a preferred mode of communication in the classroom (Li, 2005). For example, Navajo children are “more inclined to learn by silently observing their surrounding world” (Li, 2005, p. 70). Because of different classroom communication styles, teachers should not assume that all ELL and international students’ silence in class occurs because they lack English proficiency.
In addition, because teachers often do not consider “active listening” as “participation,” many ELL and international students are perceived to lack oral communication skills. In U.S. American classrooms, silence is often seen as the opposite of speech, which is why it is not a surprise that there is always the need to fill the silence as part of typical classroom engagements (Li, 2005). Furthermore, Li (2005) points out that there is a general conclusion that if there is no speech very limited or no learning will occur. In essence, silence is equated to an absence of knowledge. However, there are benefits to performances of silence in the classroom. For instance, silence “may simply allow time for reflection on teaching and learning, which further facilitates more meaningful interactions between teachers and students” (Li, 2005, p. 70). Silence can actually benefit students to take their time to reflect before providing verbal responses to their teachers. Therefore, it is imperative for oral communication instructors to view silence as a complementary of speech. Without doing so, Li (2005) says: “Silencing silences as a primary pedagogical and political action appears to reaffirm the primacy of the speech and perpetuate the dominant group’s speech as the norm at the macro level” (p. 82).

In addition to the perception that ELL and international students’ silent behaviors are a detriment to their oral communication skills, many instructors, introductory course directors, department chairs, and/or university administrators resist having a hybrid oral communication class because the rationale is that “a mismatch between teachers’ and students’ cultural norms results in a differential in teacher interactions with students in classrooms” (Chaudron, 1988, p. 119). Due to the belief
that mixing everyone in one class can complicate the classroom, it is another way of saying that teachers should not do whatever it takes to teach in a classroom that has students from diverse populations. There seems to be an assumption that if one could teach an all-White or all U.S. American native English-speaking student population, that would be preferred, since the teacher does not need to employ different pedagogical approaches to accommodate other students who have different learning styles and cultural expectations. The assumption is having ELL and international students in the classroom would be complicated and messy; therefore, they should be placed elsewhere.

Another concern with the objection to include ELL and international students in a hybrid class is that the time will be improperly used for the whole class. Dick (1990) expresses his concern: “The instructor can devote more time to language and delivery concerns...for NNS [non-native speakers] but would be a time drain for NS [native speakers] if they shared a ‘mainstreamed’ section” (p. 43). As can be seen, Dick’s comment perpetuates the notion that ELL and international students are contaminants of the classroom in that they can negatively affect the educational process of native English-speaking students. With such a statement, Dick also suggests that native English speakers would only suffer because the teacher’s pedagogical approach would have to cater to the needs of ELL and international students, which is apparently a waste of time for native English speakers. With that in mind, Dick in essence proposes ELL and international students to enroll in exclusive sections of oral communication.
However, it is actually disadvantageous to put ELL and international students in a separate oral communication classroom because such a classroom treats the curriculum more like a language class more so than a public speaking-centered one. By doing so, ELL and international students are confined to what Rubin and Turk (1997) call an “ESL [ELL] ghetto” (p. 143). In an “ELL ghetto,” ELL and international students “have little opportunity observe, model, and gain feedback from mainstream native speakers” (Rubin & Turk, 1997, p. 143). So, in these exclusive oral communication sections, ELL and international students are missing out in hearing what their native English-speaking peers have to say and offer for their development as public speakers. I also argue that ELL and international students would not have an opportunity to understand and learn as much about public speaking norms in the U.S. by not being able to see how their native English-speaking peers present speeches in front of them.

Additionally, a heavily focused ELL program in oral communication classes does not adequately help ELL and international students improve their public speaking skills because it focuses on “pragmatic or instrumental conversation and idiomatic vocabulary. Only in rare cases do ELL oral communication classes touch on key public speaking issues on invention and preparation, audience analysis, and nonverbal demeanor” (Rubin & Turk, 1997, p. 143). With that in mind, exclusive oral communication sections limit ELL and international students from concentrating on how to improve as public speakers because the focus seems to be more on vocabulary and conversation learning process. Therefore, selecting such an exclusive oral communication section
for ELL and international students is a disservice to these student populations.

**WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? CRITICAL COMMUNICATION PEDAGOGY IN PRACTICE**

It is unfortunate that ELL and international student identities have been constructed in ways that will continue to mark their otherness in oral communication classrooms. Although some educators make attempts in making ELL and international students as part of the classroom culture by addressing communication apprehension and other issues that may hinder their oral communication skills, several of these attempts have also resulted in constructing their identities as “at-risk.” “At-risk” constructions, such as those of ELL and international student identities, result in the sedimentation and normalization of their identities (Fassett & Warren, 2005). Because of at-risk constructions of ELL and international student identities, many scholars suggest the need to place ELL and international students in exclusive oral communication sections. However, mixing ELL and international students with U.S. American students in the classroom can actually benefit all of them academically and socially. Many studies (e.g., Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986; Schram & Lauver, 1988; Surdam & Collins, 1984; Zimmermann, 1995) documented that ELL and international students’ frequent contact with host nationals, such as U.S. American students, experience less alienation than those who do not have extensive contact. The latter studies prove that mixing ELL and international students with U.S.
American students generates positive effects socially and pedagogically.

As different studies outlined above show the benefits of hybrid classrooms, it is imperative for us as educators, introductory course directors, department chairs, and university administrators to engage in critical communication pedagogy as a point of intervention. Critical communication pedagogy analyzes and examines “the site of communication within classroom interaction” and maintains “a critical orientation” to pedagogy (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 38). Critical communication pedagogy has ten commitments, which include but are not limited to issues of identity constructions, power, human subjectivity and agency, culture, language, and dialogue. Even though all ten commitments are important, I will specifically focus on four commitments that can be directly applied to identity constructions of ELL and international students in oral communication classrooms. The first commitment of critical communication pedagogy is to examine how identity is constituted in communication where repeated patterns of static and fixed identities continue to be constructed in instructional communication, which limits how we understand the impact of identity, power, and culture on different students and teachers (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Second, critical communication educators understand power as fluid and complex. Like identity, power is also relational and emerges from ideological contexts (Fassett & Warren, 2007). Third, culture is central, not additive, to critical communication pedagogy. Finally, human subjectivity and agency are embraced in critical communication pedagogy. Instead of being unaware of our participation in oppressive social systems, we must
be subjects in our right to author and engage in changing our oppressive actions.

Critical communication pedagogy is a useful analytical approach in destabilizing how ELL and international student identities have been constructed and to question the legitimacy of exclusive oral communication sections. Even though there are benefits to exclusive sections of oral communication, especially for beginning ELL and international students, these exclusive sections should not be reduced as the only way for ELL and international students to gain English proficiency. By doing so, we will continue to stabilize ELL and international student identities. Fassett and Warren (2005) argue, “Before we create students as ‘communicatively apprehensive,’…or ‘at-risk,’ we would do well to consider how our own scholarly discourse elides our role in perpetuating the phenomena we study” (p. 254). As critical communication educators, it is our obligation to call out “a more complex, nuanced understanding of identity as emergent from communication commits us to more complex and nuanced understandings of power, privilege, culture, and responsibility” (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 41). Therefore, it is important for us to call out the problems of exclusive oral communication sections. For instance, Rubin and Turk (1997) point out that special oral communication sections for ELL and international students are often perceived by faculty and the student body as less rigorous than mainstream speech classes. More importantly, students who are enrolled in these special sections are seen as having remedial needs. In some ways, critical communication pedagogy allows us to question identity constructions of ELL and international students, as well as how power moves in and
Having taught hybrid oral communication classes before, I strongly believe that “mainstreaming” our ELL and international students with their U.S. American native English-speaking peers has many benefits. Perhaps the most important benefit is that students of diverse language backgrounds will have an opportunity to interact with each other (Rubin & Turk, 1997). For native U.S. American English-speaking students, “a critical mass of culturally diverse students in their classes means more authentic practice in communicating with audiences who may not share basic values and common experiences. Speaking before heterogeneous listeners will help refine audience adaptation skills” (Rubin & Turk, 1997, p. 144). So, meshing ELL and international students with their native English-speaking peers would allow all students to learn how to adapt their presentation skills in front of diverse audience members.

Since hybrid oral communication classes are beneficial to all students, we need to realize that in addition to oral communication skills-building, another value of these sections is the importance of understanding each other’s experiences and dialogue as part of learning. I believe that hybrid oral communication classes can serve as a bridge between U.S. American native English-speaking students and ELL and international students. Rubin and Turk (1997) recommend that a cross-cultural oral communication course would be an excellent alternative where different rhetorical strategies are valued. For example, as Rubin and Turk (1997) point out, “If mainstream students could come to appreciate...”
the rhetorical power of rhythmic balance and proverb-like adages in Arabic style, they might benefit by experimenting with such phrasing in their own speeches” (p. 145). With hybrid oral communication sections, students can learn from each other how to incorporate different cultural styles to public speaking. More specifically, they will realize that no rhetorical approach is natural or given, which is a process that can unpack assumptions about culture, race, and language.

As critical communication pedagogues, we also need to engage in dialogue with our colleagues, coordinators of the introductory communication course, department chairs, university administrators, and students to discuss the implications of exclusive oral communication sections. Granted that dialogue is difficult to achieve, but we need to start somewhere where we could talk about why current ELL and international student identity constructions are problematic and their placement in exclusive oral communication sections. There is no doubt that hybrid oral communication classes may face opposition or resistance from our department and university colleagues, but it is our responsibility to resist ethnocentric pedagogies. Perhaps one way to do this is through Boler’s (2005) affirmative action pedagogy, which is “a pedagogy that ensures critical analysis within higher education classrooms of any expression of racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, sexism, ableism, and classism” (p. 4). We need to start thinking about our power as institutional leaders and how that transfers to our classrooms by questioning and proposing ways to improve the oral communication curriculum. According to Jones (2005), dialogue “provides the opportunity for the development of tolerance, understanding, and ulti-
Jones also adds that dialogue can decrease actual threat between groups and can lead to the dominant group learning more about others, which can improve social cohesion. So, we need to use dialogue as an opportunity to talk about how and why the presence of ELL and international students in oral communication classes can benefit all students involved. By emphasizing the benefits of a cross-cultural oral communication class not only serves the needs of ELL and international students, but also benefits U.S. American students because they will have the opportunity to learn and interact with students who come from other cultures.

Furthermore, we also need to engage in dialogue by challenging the language that is used to constitute ELL and international student identities as “at-risk.” After all, “to do critical communication pedagogy is to do reflexivity, to imagine the role one plays within systems of power” (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 86). Freire (1992) also argues that it is necessary to create a pedagogy of hope in which we must examine and critique language by engaging ourselves in rethinking of what education is all about. It is a way for educators and administrators to “analyze talk in ways that uncover how power is situated and maintained” (Fassett & Warren, 2004, p. 25). Therefore, how ELL and international students’ identities are constructed would be based on what is being communicated to people. For instance, “ELL” is often perceived negatively because it suggests that people who speak English as a second language has not assimilated to the U.S. culture. As a way to challenge the latter perception of ELL and international students, educators can also point out to their U.S. American stu-
dents that learning a new language is not easy. For example, Chinese language learners in the U.S. do not have the opportunity to practice within Chinese-speaking social groups, unless they have friends who actually speak Chinese. In this case, educators can point out that other foreign speakers have a similar experience in which they learn English only through formal training in schools. However, non-native English speakers will eventually gain fluency when they interact with local speakers in natural settings.

Based on the negative connotations that are associated with “ELL” and “international” students, educators should also emphasize to their students that everyone has an accent, and that they should not think that theirs is worse or better than others. This is the opportunity for a dialogue to talk about differences and how everyone should pay attention carefully to the speaker rather than judging his or her speaking ability immediately. Perhaps this is a chance for educators to introduce what Simpson (2003) calls “cross-racial dialogue.” Simpson notes that cross-racial dialogue has its own challenges because cross-racial groups of faculty and students often do not want to engage in discussions that involve race and racism. However, educators must be first willing to engage their students in “cross-racial dialogue” in order to make any progress in reshaping our stereotypical perception of ELL and international students.
CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have highlighted some foundational studies in the oral communication literature that mark ELL and international students as Other by constructing their identities as linguistically and culturally deficient. In so many ways, such constructions of ELL and international student identities are an example of strategic rhetoric that reinforces particular linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Many studies that have been published in the intersections of ELL/international student identities and the oral communication classroom remind me so much of the othering I experienced as an undergraduate student, specifically in the intercollegiate forensics circuit. So, as an international teaching assistant where I taught oral communication at both western and Midwestern universities, I made a conscious choice to allow possibilities for my ELL and international students to have a classroom space where they could feel welcomed. Since I started teaching in the fall 2003, I encountered many students who were just like me—international and/or ELL students who needed extra support from a teacher. Due to a growing number of students from these backgrounds, it is necessary to listen to the needs of these students. In particular, educators need to adapt their teaching styles in order to better serve a diverse student body.

Critical communication pedagogy is beneficial in many ways, especially when it is used as an analytical approach to (re)construct identities of ELL and international students in the oral communication classroom. Critical communication pedagogy reminds me of what
Giroux (2000) calls “critical multiculturalism” because it provides pedagogical possibilities for teachers, administrators, and students to locate their own histories and hybridized identities as fluid instead of fixed. However, Giroux warns us that multiculturalism is more than an educational problem; it is also about exploring the relationship between politics and power, as well as historical past and present. It is significant to point out that critical communication pedagogy is “not exactly critical pedagogy, not exactly communication education, and not exactly instructional communication, but rather a mix of these methodological, pedagogical, and theoretical traditions” (Fassett & Warren, 2007, p. 10). Although my intent is to point out problems that have been created through oral communication scholarship, my ultimate goal is to promote dialogue on what can be done to prevent further damage in how ELL and international student identities have been constructed overtime.

ELL and international students are often perceived as incomprehensible, which prevents them from being able to feel included in the classroom. As these student populations continue to grow in number, educators and administrators in the speech communication discipline must take steps to remedy the obstacles that many ELL and international students face, such as feeling incompetent as public speakers. By employing critical communication pedagogy, I hope that we can make progress in providing a classroom environment where ELL and international students will have a sense of belonging where they can reach their true potential. However, their true potential can only be achieved if educators and administrators take steps to appreciate the diversity that ELL and international students can bring to
the classroom rather than automatically marking them as another “at-risk” student group.

As I reflect from my own educational experience as a student and teacher, I am sometimes afraid to believe that the academy is what Cherrie Moraga calls “a setup” (as cited in Simpson, 2003, p. 124). Simpson (2003) agrees with Moraga:

Moraga is right. The academy was set up by a very small group of people compared to the people it now serves. A small group of economically privileged European American men have made decisions about much of what we experience in the academy. The ways in which knowledge is represented; the process by which student-learners become professional academicians; how students are taught and evaluated; and the existence and structural configuration of separate academic disciplines are all profoundly relevant to higher education today. (p. 125)

I knew from the beginning when I entered the U.S. academy in the eighth grade that the whole educational system was a setup. After all, I was marked as an international student who was placed in an ELL classroom. After a few years in non-mainstream English classes, I was eventually integrated with native English-speaking students. However, it was too late. Due to having only two years of college-preparatory English classes under my belt during my high school years, I could not apply to the University of California, a sought-after California public university system. Therefore, my only shot at college was either to go to a community college or attend a state university. Ultimately, due to my parents’ lack of financial support, I chose to attend a local community college first before eventually transferring to a state
I am not regretting or denouncing the fact that I ended up attending a community college at all. Without attending community college and state university where I met my mentor, I would not be where I am today. The point I am trying to make is that the U.S. educational system already set me up in eighth grade that I was not going to be able to attend the University of California—all because of my international student status and ELL background.

What had happened to me will likely continue to happen to other ELL and international students who are setup by a system that does not recognize them as equal to their U.S. American counterparts. By looking specifically at oral communication classrooms, many oral communication teachers believe that ELL and international students have speech deficiencies that need curing; therefore, they must not be meshed with their U.S. American classmates. These perceived “deficiencies” are the reasons why ELL and international students are and will probably continue to be placed in exclusive oral communication sections. After all, ELL and international students are considered to be “at-risk,” and their identities have been constructed as everyone is alike and lacking English proficiency.

After discussing how ELL and international student identities have been constituted in the academy, I hope that questioning and challenging such identity constructions have given us a chance to provide pedagogical possibilities not only for ELL and international students, but also for other students, teachers, introductory course directors, department chairs, and university administrators. I also hope that we have gained some insights pedagogically in terms of what to think about re-
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garding the current state of our introductory oral communication programs. I am certainly not expecting all of us to start changing everything we do, but what I am advocating for is for us to start thinking about what we can do pedagogically to improve our curriculum that is culturally suitable for both native and non-native English-speaking students. After all, there is no easy fix for anything. Fassett and Warren (2007) remind us, as critical communication scholars, it is not about being able to escape and feel better; it is about always being accountable of our own privileges and our willingness to listen to others.

REFERENCES


