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## A Classroom Survey of Language Teachers' Discriminatory Practices against Students: Causes, Consequences and Keys

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Previous research confirms that individuals frequently become subject to various forms of discrimination for a variety of reasons. This study aimed at revealing the incidence of discrimination toward English as a Foreign Language students, the grounds on which it happens, its adverse effects on students as well as potential solutions to it. The data were collected through questionnaires and were further supported by interviews and classroom observations. The participants consisted of sixty-five Iranian students from a variety of ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The findings indicated that nearly one-third of the students had experienced discrimination of one form or another. Students' perceptions of discrimination were that it is based on skin colour, age, sex, social class, as well as political and religious beliefs. Furthermore, the findings showed that discrimination was perceived to have a negative bearing on students' motivation and their overall ability by adversely affecting their class attendance, sense of responsibility, class performance, and assignment completion. It was found that teachers overtly discriminated against students by openly mocking them, neglecting to call on them for class participation, and unfairly assessing the students and their achievements. Some suggestions to raise awareness of implicit attitudes and biases, identify and end the practice of discrimination among English as a Foreign Language teachers included setting up teacher education programmes, raising learners' awareness, raising teachers' awareness of their responsibilities and students' rights, institutional warning, punishing 'discriminating' teachers, and suspending teachers from work.

**Keywords:** discriminatory practices, English as a foreign language classrooms, language learners, language teachers, discrimination

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## Raziskava o diskriminatornih praksah učiteljev jezikov do učencev pri pouku: vzroki, posledice in napotki

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≈ Dosedanje raziskave potrjujejo, da so posamezniki zaradi različnih razlogov pogosto izpostavljeni raznim oblikam diskriminacije. Namen raziskave je bil ugotoviti diskriminatorno obnašanje do učencev angleškega jezika kot tujega jezika, razloge zanj, škodljive posledice za učence in mogoče rešitve. Podatki so bili zbrani z vprašalniki, intervjuji in z opazovanjem pouka. V raziskavi je sodelovalo petinšestdeset iranskih učencev iz različnih etničnih, jezikovnih in iz socialno-ekonomskih okolij. Ugotovljeno je bilo, da je bila skoraj tretjina učencev deležna raznih oblik diskriminacije, ki je po njihovem mnenju temeljila na barvi kože, starosti, spolu, pripadnosti družbenemu razredu ter tudi na političnih in verskih prepričanjih. Poleg tega so izsledki pokazali, da je diskriminacija zavirala motivacijo učencev in njihove splošne sposobnosti, saj je negativno vplivala na udeležbo učencev pri pouku, njihov občutek odgovornosti, učni uspeh in na opravljanje nalog. Raziskava je razkrila, da so učitelji odkrito diskriminirali učence na način, da so jih javno zasmehovali, da jih niso spodbujali k sodelovanju pri pouku in da so nepravilno ocenjevali njihovo znanje. Predlogi za večjo ozaveščenost o implicitnih stališčih in predsodkih za prepoznavanje in ustavitve diskriminatorne prakse učiteljev angleščine kot tujega jezika so vsebovali oblikovanje programov za izobraževanje učiteljev, ozaveščanje učencev, ozaveščanje učiteljev o odgovornostih in pravicah učencev, institucionalna opozorila, kaznovanje »diskriminirajočih« učiteljev in odpuščanje učiteljev.

**Ključne besede:** diskriminatorne prakse, poučevanje angleščine kot tujega jezika, učenci jezika, učitelji jezika, diskriminacija

## Introduction

A good deal of socio-linguistic research has centred on the issue of discrimination, and its subsequent silencing and suppression of students (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Litosseliti, 2013; Madrid, 2011; Morley, 2010; Rich & Troudi, 2006; Solórzano, 1998). While it is true that discrimination against students has declined compared to the past, by and large, it continues to exist. Researchers have found that students are discriminated against on a variety of grounds, including ethnicity, race, religion, and being of an international status (e.g., Rich & Troudi, 2006). For instance, Delgado and Stefancic (2001) stipulate that, 'Still, by every social indicator, racism continues to blight the lives of people of color, including holders of high-echelon jobs, even judges' (p. 10). To give another example, gender-based stereotyping is, sadly, a common and serious issue in most academic settings (Morley, 2010). In fact, as Morley (2010) points out, most of what is perceived as incompetence or lack of intellectual ability, particularly with regards to females, is based upon hypothetical, and anecdotal rather than concrete evidence. Sexism is believed to constitute a significant area of discrimination (Litosseliti, 2013). Research has revealed that females are discriminated against in academic settings as they are not taken seriously, or their intellectual ability or motivation is doubted (Morley, 2010).

Discrimination occurs in Iran and other countries, on an international level (Kubota, 2001; Kumaravadivelu, 2003). It has been argued that English as a Second Language teachers, especially in Asia, continually stereotype and label their students (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). It is reasonable to argue that some overt discrimination will, in all likelihood, stem from such stereotyping. Kubota (2001) confirmed that the current practices in classrooms perpetuate the discursive practices and images that are presented of American versus Asian classrooms. Kubota contends that these practices develop and strengthen a sense of the *Self* as opposed to a notion of the *Other*, a dichotomy that, according to Kubota, is based upon the power relations present in discourses. Thus, research has decidedly revealed the improper practices of many language teachers. According to van Dijk (2009), racism may manifest itself in a wide variety of forms such as prejudices, stereotypes, and racist ideologies that might be implemented through the dominant institutional discourse (See also van Dijk, 2009).

The present study is an attempt to show the adverse effects discrimination has on Iranian English language students as well as possible solutions to it. It is important to point out that research on the topic of student discrimination in Iranian English language classrooms is almost non-existent.

## Review of Literature

Research reveals that students are still subjected to discrimination in classrooms (Despaigne, 2013; Ibrahim, 1999; Madrid, 2011; Marks & Heffernan-Cabrera, 1977; Solórzano, 1998). However, this confirmation has not yielded corrective measures to diminish or end discrimination. This lack of corrective measures might partly originate from the interdisciplinary nature of the act, and the phenomenon of discrimination in discussions concerned with discrimination is often associated with areas as diverse as critical discourse analysis, critical applied linguistics, power relations, identity (re)construction, and sociology. Therefore, such discussions might not be directly related to education. Further, as each of these areas has its own set of principles and tenets, it seems essential to borrow findings of research from the areas mentioned above to examine discrimination. For instance, Despaigne (2013) investigated indigenous and minority students' perceptions of identity, unequal power relationships and autonomous learning in a Mexican university, informed by critical applied linguistics and post-colonial theories. Despaigne's study revealed the sense of fear and inferiority among these minority students as well as the lack of recognition of their local knowledge and languages. Despaigne's conclusion and recommendation are that students' multi-cultural and multi-lingual values be recognised and appreciated within the classroom setting.

Similarly, Marks and Heffernan-Cabrera (1977) showed that majority group teachers discriminated against minority group students. In another study examining employment discrimination exercised against Sulochana Mandhar, an Indian woman who was not allowed to work as a librarian in the United States, Lippi-Green (1994) explained how individuals are likely to suffer discrimination for linguistic (i.e., speaking English with an accent) or ethnic (i.e., being of colour) reasons. Likewise, Solórzano (1998) examined the extent to which Chicana and Chicano doctoral scholars suffered discrimination as a result of their race and gender. Applying Critical Race Theory to education, Solórzano found that these scholars identified three patterns of microaggression: feeling out of place, lower expectations from them, and feelings of worthlessness as a result of sexist and racist attitudes. Solórzano's research was taken a step further by Ibrahim (1999) who carried out a critical ethnography of a group of French-speaking African immigrant and refugee youths in Canada. Ibrahim demonstrated that these students are discriminated against by the majority group. This research confirms that such discrimination has a considerable impact on students' identity perceptions and on how they linguistically and culturally learn. Reisigl and Wodak (2001) discussed the various forms of

phobias, for instance, black-phobia, Arab-phobia, homophobia or sexism that lead to discrimination against a special group as different forms of racism.

Furthermore, it must also be borne in mind that discrimination and racism do not constitute the same thing. While discrimination refers to '*actions* against members of races', racism denotes '*stereotypical beliefs* toward races' (Bonilla-Silva, 2005, p. 2; emphasis in original). Each of these concepts, thus, warrants separate research attention. Palfreyman (2005) examined processes of *othering* in an English language centre at a Turkish university and revealed that native Turkish teachers and international students viewed each other in terms of difference. Rich and Troudi (2006) undertook a study of five male Muslim Saudi Arabian students' sense of *othering* and *racialisation* at a university in the United Kingdom. The findings revealed that these students were discriminated against based on religious background and beliefs, race and ethnicity, as well as their status as international or international students. In a similar study, Sengstock (2009) reported a good number of cases of discrimination against students based on gender, skin colour, ethnicity, belonging to minority groups, and sexual orientations in the United States. In a more recent study, Seider and Hillman (2011) examined discussions about race and social class among the 'privileged group' students who participated in a university-based community service-learning programme. Their findings indicated that these students utilised a special 'othering' language to differentiate themselves from those students whom they perceived as different, in a word, 'other'. Madrid (2011) examined social and racial discrimination as perceived by English as a Foreign Language students and teachers with special reference given to Roma (gipsy) minority students. Utilising Critical Race Theory to analyse his findings, Madrid (2011) posited that discrimination, inequity and racism are exerted against people from various ethnic, religious, and racial backgrounds. He stipulated that both teachers and students believed that various forms of discrimination were practised against some students.

Similarly, Goodman and Rowe (2014) studied biased internet discussion forums about Roma in the UK. The analysis of a corpus of discussions and responses to accusations posed against Roma showed that the discussions were replete with racism and prejudice.

Finally, a recent study of two Filipino English language students in Canada by Darvin and Norton (2014) demonstrated that migrant students are subjects of discrimination. They postulate that teachers must capitalise on the transnational values and knowledge that migrant students bring with them to assist them in gaining more learning opportunities.

The current study embarks on investigating student discrimination based on a student's race, gender, place of residence, ethnicity, religious, political beliefs and attitudes, age, and intelligence, amongst other things.

## Method

### *Participants*

Sixty-five Iranian male English as a Foreign Language students, constituting three classes in a prestigious and popular language institute in the central town of Ahvaz, Iran, participated in this study by responding to self-administered purpose-made questionnaires and attending focus-group interviews. Their classes were subsequently observed for further data. The participants constituted pre-intermediate (62%) and intermediate (38%) students. Forty-one participants (63%) were from a Persian background and spoke Persian as their native language with limited knowledge of Arabic, and 24 students (37%) were bilingual Arabs speaking Arabic and Persian. As for their socioeconomic status, 11 (16.9%) students stated that they were from a higher class, 35 (53.8%) from a middle class and 19 (29.2%) from a lower class. The participants' age ranged from 14 to 39 years, with 33 (50.7%) participants falling within the age group of 14–8 years, 18 (27.6%) within 19–27 years and 14 (21.5%) within 28–39 years.

### *Instruments*

Three data collection instruments were used: questionnaires, interviews, and class observations. Each instrument is described separately below. Triangulated data were used because three data collection tools, were utilised ('methodological triangulation', see Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 181). Using varied data collection tools has been recommended in the scholarly literature (e.g., Madrid, 2011). As Friedman (2012, p. 186) states, 'Qualitative research often draws upon multiple methods and sources of data in order to achieve triangulation and strengthen the validity of interpretations.' Therefore, the current study is mainly descriptive in design in that the data collection tools used generated both qualitative and quantitative data.

### *Questionnaire*

The questionnaire (see Tables 1-4) was developed based on a review of the relevant literature, the researchers' conceptions, experience with student discrimination in English as a Foreign Language classes and predictions of what and how the teachers' discrimination might be. The questionnaire inquired as to four major issues and was accordingly divided into four parts, which constituted 32 statements altogether. The first part, comprising seven statements, investigated the extent of language teachers' discrimination against students. The second part, with 13 statements, dealt with the consequences and adverse effects on students. The reasons for language teachers' discrimination against

their students were explored in the third part, which consisted of five statements. Finally, the fourth part, with seven statements, looked at how teachers carried out discriminatory actions. All the questionnaire parts comprised items that were to be responded to on a five-point Likert-scale, i.e., 1) Strongly agree, 2) Slightly agree, 3) Uncertain or No idea, 4) Slightly disagree & 5) Strongly disagree).

### *Interviews*

The interview questions focused on four issues concerning teachers' discrimination against students: a) definition, b) cause(s), c) effects on students, and d) solutions. The focus-group interviews aimed to delve more deeply into the questionnaire data. To conduct the interviews, the researchers divided the participants into five groups and audio-recorded the interviews with each group. The interviews were conducted in the Persian language to ensure that the participants encountered no difficulty in understanding the interview questions and to enable them to express themselves more freely and conveniently. Prior to the interviews, the students were ensured that their identity would be kept confidential and that their responses would be used solely for academic purposes. Afterwards, the interviews were first content-analysed and then coded into recurrent themes with interview excerpts provided for the readers to become familiar with them.

### *Classroom Observations*

To obtain more sensible and objective results, the researchers devised an observation checklist, with Yes/No markings, to gain more illuminating insights into classroom dynamics and interactions arising between teachers and students (see Appendix). These observations took the form of participant observation and were conducted by one of the researchers. The items on this checklist constituted a variety of grounds on which discrimination was likely to occur on the part of the teacher, such as teachers' reactions to students of colour. The classes that were observed included students within the age range of 13 to 39.

### *Results*

The results of the interviews and questionnaires are presented in this section with the results of the observations reported separately. The participants were asked to provide answers to four questions dealing with: a) definitions, nature and extent, b) reasons for and causes, c) consequences, and d) ways to counter teachers' discrimination.



*Definition(s) of discrimination*

The first interview question asked the participants to define discrimination, particularly in classrooms. Some definitions were as follows:

**Interviewee 1:** *Discrimination means segregation between individuals without any sensible reasons.*

**Interviewee 2:** *Discrimination means paying more attention to some students and less to other students. It means differentiating among students.*

**Interviewee 3:** *A teacher discriminates when he/she prefers some students over others, pays more attention to them and calls on them more frequently for class activity.*

**Interviewee 4:** *Discrimination means unequal rights for individuals who are equal.*

The analysis of the participants' responses showed the main components of discrimination to be:

- Differential, unequal treatment of individuals
- Differentiating/differentiation among individuals/students
- Preference for some students over others
- Unequal judgement/assessment
- Unequal rights
- Mockery, contempt, abuse, injustice, oppression
- Segregation based on a division of/among students
- Attention vs lack of attention

Accordingly, the first part of the questionnaire aimed to delve further into the phenomenon of student discrimination by enquiring as to the issues raised in Table 1.

**Table 1***Nature and extent of language teachers' discrimination against learners*

Statement	Strongly agree (%)	Slightly agree (%)	Uncertain or No idea (%)	Slightly disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
1. Only some teachers discriminate against students, not all teachers.	22.4	18.4	14.3	<b>34.6</b>	10.2
2. Teachers discriminate against some students, not against all students.	<b>28.6</b>	22.4	18.4	24.5	6.1
3. Teachers' discrimination against students always exists and cannot be eliminated.	14.3	10.2	<b>36.7</b>	30.6	8.2
4. There are a variety of ways to combat teachers' discrimination against students.	<b>34.7</b>	28.6	18.4	18.3	0
5. I have been discriminated against thus far at times.	6.1	18.4	14.3	28.6	<b>32.7</b>
6. Teachers' gender, place of residence, and socioeconomic status affect their discrimination against students.	10.2	16.3	16.3	<b>32.6</b>	24.5
7. Teachers' place of teaching (public schools or private language institutes) affects their discrimination against students.	16.3	14.3	18.4	<b>30.4</b>	20.4

According to Table 1, the participants responded with an equal level of agreement and disagreement on Item 1, which stated that only some teachers practice discrimination against learners. However, most respondents agree that only some learners are subjects to discrimination. Further, most learners doubt that discrimination can be stopped. Nevertheless, they agree that discrimination can be combatted through a variety of techniques and methods. The responses also indicate that most participants have not been discriminated against before. Finally, the highest level of disagreement is seen in the last two items, which indicate that teachers' gender, place of teaching, and residence are not highly influential in their discrimination against learners.

### *Reasons for teachers' discrimination*

The results of the reasons for teachers' discrimination against learners are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2***Grounds based on which language teachers discriminate against learners*

Teachers discriminate against students on the grounds of:	Strongly agree (%)	Slightly agree (%)	Uncertain or No idea (%)	Slightly disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
1. Students' skin colour (e.g., black, white)	6.1	16.3	20.4	14.3	<b>42.9</b>
2. Students' race and ethnicity (e.g., Arab, Kurdish, Persian, Turkish)	6.1	30.6	10.2	16.3	<b>36.7</b>
3. Students' place of residence (e.g., city, town, suburbs, village)	6.1	12.2	18.4	16.3	<b>46.9</b>
4. Students' socioeconomic status (e.g., well-off, poor)	6.1	16.3	14.3	16.3	<b>46.9</b>
5. Students' gender (male & female)	4.1	24.5	22.4	12.2	<b>36.7</b>
6. Students' face/complexion	6.1	24.5	18.4	14.3	<b>36.7</b>
7. Students' age (e.g., kid, teenager, adult)	18.4	<b>24.5</b>	<b>24.5</b>	12.2	20.4
8. Students' physical condition (e.g., healthy, physically challenged)	10.2	16.3	20.4	20.4	<b>32.7</b>
9. Students' religion and religious beliefs (e.g., Muslim, Christian)	4.1	16.3	28.6	10.2	<b>40.8</b>
10. Students' political beliefs (e.g., conservative, reformist)	4.1	8.2	32.7	12.2	<b>42.9</b>
11. Students' clothing style and dress code	14.3	24.5	16.3	10.2	<b>34.7</b>
12. Students' place of study (one's hometown or somewhere else)	14.3	14.3	26.5	8.2	<b>36.7</b>
13. Students' intelligence and linguistic ability (e.g., smart, slow)	<b>32.7</b>	<b>32.7</b>	6.1	10.2	18.4

Table 2 demonstrates that the participants disagree that three specific factors are possible causes of teachers' discrimination: learners' age, intelligence, and linguistic ability. That is, teachers are more likely to discriminate against learners who are less able than other learners in terms of linguistic abilities and intelligence.

The reasons for teachers' discrimination were further examined in the interviews. The responses included the following:

**Interviewee 5:** *Discrimination occurs because of deficiency in the teacher's personality and his/her ethical weakness.*

**Interviewee 6:** *Everyone may indeed have his/her reasons for discrimination, but I think teachers' discrimination comes from their childhood psychological problems.*

**Interviewee 7:** *Teachers may discriminate against some students because of the students' economic condition or even their complexion.*

**Interviewee 8:** *I think that some teachers discriminate against some students with whom they have previous undesirable encounters, like when they have been in their classes before and have exhibited unfavourable behaviour.*

The interviewees mentioned the following features of the students that lead to teachers' discrimination against students: a) learning ability, Intelligence Quotient, mental capabilities, b) ethnicity and race, c) age, e) complexion, f) students' behaviour and class discipline, g) skin colour, h) clothing style and appearance, i) socioeconomic status, j) political and religious beliefs, k) previous acquaintance with a teacher, l) teachers' psychological issues and lack of ethical commitment, m) favouritism and nepotism, n) students' ingratiatory behaviour, o) place of residence, p) native language, q) nationality, r) place of study, s) weak managerial techniques, t) bribery and financial issues, u) location in the classroom, v) overall beliefs, and w) lack of enthusiasm.

### *Ways of discriminating against students*

The results regarding the ways in which teachers discriminate against students are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Techniques of language teachers' discrimination against students*

Item description	Strongly agree (%)	Slightly agree (%)	Neutral or No idea (%)	Slightly disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
1. Teachers rarely call upon some students for class activity.	<b>26.5</b>	24.5	6.1	26.5	16.3
2. Teachers pay scant attention to some students.	<b>30.6</b>	22.4	6.1	20.6	20.4
3. Teachers mock some students.	10.2	18.4	12.2	<b>38.7</b>	20.4
4. Teachers punish some students more than other students or are harder on them.	22.4	14.3	6.1	<b>40.8</b>	16.3
5. Teachers do not give some students their real scores.	16.3	22.4	12.2	<b>36.7</b>	12.2

According to Table 3, the participants agree with three items, namely 1, 2, and 4. The most disagreement is seen for items 3 and 5, which deal with teachers' mockery of students and avoidance of giving the students their true scores (i.e., teachers give lower scores to students than they had achieved). This issue was the focus of the interviews as well, which were clearly supportive of the questionnaire findings, indicating that student discrimination manifests itself in the following ways: a) paying scant or no attention to students, b) mockery and scorn against students, c) rarely calling on students for class activity, d) unfair assessment of students, e) unfair strictness on students, f) grudges and contempt against students, and g) unequal treatment of students.

### *Consequences of student discrimination*

As is to be expected, discrimination has adverse effects on students, which were examined in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Consequences of language teachers' discrimination against students*

Teachers' discrimination against language students is likely to:	Strongly agree (%)	Slightly agree (%)	Neutral or No idea (%)	Slightly disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
1. have a negative effect on students' language learning abilities.	<b>63.3</b>	24.5	8.2	4.1	0
2. have a negative effect on students' English language learning motivation.	<b>53.1</b>	28.6	4.1	14.3	0
3. have a negative effect on students' motivation to attend language class.	<b>42.9</b>	38.8	8.2	6.1	4.1
4. have a negative effect on students' sense of responsibility and doing homework.	24.5	<b>36.7</b>	20.4	12.2	6.1
5. have a negative effect on students' behaviour and discipline in class.	26.5	<b>30.6</b>	22.4	12.2	8.2
6. cause students to choose teachers from the same ethnic group/hometown as the students'.	10.2	22.4	28.6	6.1	<b>32.7</b>
7. cause students to choose teachers of the same gender as the students'.	10.2	18.4	<b>34.7</b>	14.3	22.4

Table 4 shows that the participants consider all of the consequences of student discrimination to hold true. The participants agree that discrimination adversely affects students' language learning abilities, motivation, class

attendance, sense of responsibility, discipline, and students' inclination towards teachers from certain ethnic and social groups. Most participants, however, did not agree to 'choosing teachers from the same ethnic group/hometown/gender as the students' (Items 6 & 7) as a reaction to teachers' discrimination.

The participants were then interviewed regarding the negative consequences of discrimination against students. Student discrimination has adverse effects on students': a) language learning motivation, b) learning ability, c) class attendance, d) sense of responsibility and preparation, e) class discipline, and f) performance of class activities and g) completing assignments. It is, therefore, seen that the interview findings firmly support the questionnaire results.

### *Possible solutions to discrimination*

The interviewees were then asked to provide suggestions for ending student discrimination. The participants put forward the following solutions to teachers' discriminatory practices: a) setting up teacher education programmes, b) raising students' awareness of student discrimination, c) raising teacher awareness as to their responsibilities and students' rights, and educating teachers on covert and overt discrimination, d) institutional warning, e) punishing 'discriminating' teachers, f) teachers' suspension from work, g) avoidance of prejudgment against students, h) surveillance, and i) changing the seating arrangement of students in the class.

## **Observational Data**

The class observations focused on those features of teachers' behaviour in the classroom that were most likely to be regarded as biased and discriminatory. The observations indicated that most cases of teachers' derogatory behaviour were reflected in their mockery of some ethnic groups, particularly Arabs with reference especially to their accented speech while speaking English or Persian and their skin colour. The classes that were observed had a number of Arab students, although they were a minority in general. Most of these Arab students were from low socioeconomic status but were studying English in a wealthy neighbourhood with the Persian population being the majority. This information might give some clues as to the causes of indirect ethnic references which were implicit in the teachers' behaviour.

For instance, a striking observation was that of two white middle-class adult English teachers who were observed speaking with a sarcastic tone about an Iranian black teenage boy and associating his origins with Africa. The teachers' exact words were, "Where is he from? Africa?" The teachers' tone was

sarcastic, because they were aware that that student was not from Africa. In all likelihood, these teachers might have considered 'whiteness' to be the norm and the teenage boy in the exchange as the 'violation' of that norm. Wortham (2008) narrates a similar exchange between a working-class African-American girl and a middle-class European-American male teacher. Wortham demonstrates how the exchange is indicative of 'a powerful teacher silencing a disempowered student' (p. 205). According to Pickering (2004, p. 91), 'Racial stereotyping cannot be understood without reference to whiteness, the racially unmarked, normative centre from which it stems'. This type of discrimination in academic settings has also been reported by other researchers, such as Rich and Troudi (2006) in the UK who have named it 'racialisation'.

## Discussion

Three major issues concerning student discrimination are discussed here: a) causes, b) consequences, and c) solutions.

### *Causes*

As to the question of why and on what bases students are discriminated against, the results indicated that, from the participants' perceptions, the most likely predictors of student discrimination are students' age, clothing style, learning abilities and intelligence, ethnicity and race, amongst others. These results support previous research findings that learners are discriminated against on the basis of their race (Rich & Troudi, 2006; Seider & Hillman, 2011; Tevis, 2012), national origins (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Palfreyman, 2005), skin colour and hearing ability (James & Woll, 2004) and speaking a language with an accent (Chin, 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Fought, 2006; Lippi-Green, 2012; Nguyen, 1994). Lippi-Green (2012) states, 'such behaviour is so commonly accepted, so widely perceived as appropriate, that it must be seen as the last back door to discrimination' (p. 74). In this regard, accent-induced discrimination warrants plenty of research attention since native-speaker competence as the criterion upon which to assess non-native-speakers has been seriously called into question in recent years (see, e.g., Holliday, 2009; Lurda, 2009; Widdowson, 1994). Furthermore, such discrimination has been severely condemned in the constitutional law of many countries, for instance, the United States (see Lippi-Green, 1994). Cook (1999) called for a recognition of the L2 users as learners in their own right and not 'failed native speakers'. Cook implies that this recognition leads to an improved understanding of L2 learners as multicompetent. There is no reason, Cook explains, to assume that

L2 learners are to be compared and contrasted with another group, say, native speakers. Students, therefore, might be discriminated against, particularly in native-speaker communities due to their non-nativeness. The results confirm Fought's (2006) prediction that in most modern societies, accent, and the inability to speak the 'Standard Dialect', is one of the bases for discrimination against non-native speakers. Research has shown that accent might be used by non-native speakers to exhibit their L1 identity (Tamimi Sa'd & Modirkhamene, 2015). Norton (1995), for instance, narrates the story of Maria, an Italian girl, who strived for acceptance in a community that resisted her efforts. Maria's story indicates discrimination against her on the basis of 'foreignness'. This is a clear example of *Othering* or *Otherising*, which is the basis for much research into discrimination in education. Further, individuals might be subjects of discrimination on the basis of their speech called 'linguistic profiling' (Alim, 2003). Similarly, Palfreyman's (2005) study in Turkey demonstrated that native Turkish teachers' perceptions of international students in a university English language centre drew upon various factors such as class, gender, and national and institutional features.

Gender-based discriminatory practices are also well-documented in the scholarly literature (see, e.g., Taylor, 2004). In a discussion on ethnocentrism, Labov (1969) asserts that it is neither reasonable nor fair to measure foreign language students against the norms of another group. Solórzano (1998) believes that the investigation of racism must go beyond the black/white dichotomy to include notions of gender and ethnicity. Reisigl and Wodak (2001) assert that 'racism' might result from a combination of factors including religious beliefs, pseudoscientific doctrines and stereotypical opinions. Therefore research confirms the complicated nexus among power, control, and dominance (Kumara-vadivelu, 2006).

Also, most participants stated that they had not suffered being discriminated against, which might have been because the participants were themselves the dominant group in this study. Such a group has been described in the literature as 'white, male, affluent, heterosexual, and able-bodied' (Seider & Hillman, 2011, p. 2). This description might be used to characterise disadvantaged students: black or of colour, female, of low socioeconomic status, homosexual, and physically handicapped. The literature confirms that individuals might be subjects of discrimination on the basis of skin colour and hearing ability (James & Woll, 2004). Power seems the most outstanding feature by which this dominance is characterised. Resistance is the solution scholars have proposed: 'Standards and institutions created by and fortifying white power ought to be resisted' (Bell, 1995, p. 901).



Another major aim of the study was to explore the consequences of student discrimination. The participants contend that teachers' discrimination affects their motivation, language-learning abilities, and class attendance more than anything else (see Table 4 above). Noels (2009) confirms the debilitating effect of discrimination on students' desire and motivation for language learning. Highly dynamic, unstable, and changing, motivation is under the constant impact of myriad social, individual, and even biological factors (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). Discrimination also influences students' sense of responsibility, assignment completion and level of discipline, which are intimately associated with motivation. Discrimination can also affect students' identities and their process of identity reconstruction (Despaigne, 2013; Ibrahim, 1999; MacIntyre et al., 2009; Tsui, 2007). The negative effects of teachers' discrimination on learners' language learning might lead language learners to acquire a language in certain ways as it limits their access to learning sources, restricts their participation in learning activities and inhibits them. Tsui (2007), for instance, investigated the identity reconstruction of a Chinese English as a Foreign Language learner and teacher, asserting that identity formation is closely tied to power relations: 'The marginality of membership was the result of an unequal power relationship, which was socioeconomic as well as symbolic' (p. 674). Tsui posited that, 'Participation as well as nonparticipation in negotiating meanings is shaped by power relationships among members of a community' (p. 678).

Moreover, discrimination denies individuals the necessary social interaction required for language development (Norton, 2000). In conclusion, asymmetry in power relations in a community (e.g., a language classroom) can lead to inequality and, finally, discrimination against one group. Finally, the participants did not agree that the students would choose teachers from the same ethnic group/hometown/gender as the students as an outcome of student discrimination, perhaps because of their lack of authority to choose their teachers since learners are assigned to classes regardless of their desires.

One of the objectives of the current study was to find ways to counter teachers' discrimination. According to Chou (2007), discussions of racism and discrimination are avoided by a myriad of researchers. The fact that most individuals are aware of the existence of discriminatory practices against students but do not wish to take actions against it, a sort of 'wilful blindness', is perhaps the first issue that must be raised with regard to discrimination. Therefore, the first step to combating discrimination is to admit that it exists.

The consensus among the participants was that teacher education courses and programmes must assume responsibility for preventing discrimination. Institutions and schools should set and enforce anti-discrimination policies.

Furthermore, despite the discrimination that students may experience in the language classroom, the 'discriminated' students can profitably use the classroom setting to their advantage, feasible through what Despaigne (2013) calls a 'hybridization process': '[a] process through which they put their different identities into perspective' (p. 167). According to Despaigne, this process results in a resistance agency which is utilised by the disadvantaged students to position themselves in classroom settings. Marks and Heffernan-Cabrera (1977) maintain that teachers with favourable attitudes must be selected for teaching minority group students to counter discrimination against them. They also predict that '[...] bilingual education and training can change the attitudes of teachers who actually are discriminated against minority group students' (p. 401).

Similarly, Chou (2007) strongly argued that since classrooms are getting increasingly culturally diverse, prospective teachers should have the essential skills, knowledge and attitudes to deal with this enormous cultural and ethnic diversity. Chou regards mainstream teacher training/preparation programmes as responsible for preparing teachers for this diversity. In confronting supremacist ideologies, Allen's (2004, p. 124) statement is insightful: 'As people of color around the world engage in the struggle against global white supremacy, they should work to humanize both themselves and whites, *when strategic*'. Other areas of education where discriminatory practices must be banned are curriculum design and the production of materials. Most language teaching materials comprise textbooks that promote 'the ideal male', described as white, middle-class and a native speaker, a description which is viewed as the norm and an image universally accepted. Allen (2004) contends that, 'In educational institutions, from kindergartens to doctoral programmes, whiteness is pervasive and constitutive' (p. 131). Various curricular reforms such as including more culturally diverse contents, pictures of students of colour and from various ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds can be implemented.

### *Concluding Remarks*

Breaking the culture of silence surrounding the issue of discrimination seems to be the first step to stop student discrimination. Preventive action to combat student discrimination can be taken through teacher education programmes with institutions to bear the onus of dealing with this phenomenon in classrooms. Discrimination is led by hidden processes that are produced, reproduced and maintained through discursive practices that are used, consciously or unconsciously, by the powerful groups in society (Burr, 2006). Chisholm (1994) advocates for the promotion of multi-cultural diversity and tolerant education in pluricultural and multi-lingual or multi-ethnic settings are of importance and

relevance here. Chisholm (1994) suggests that, 'preservice teachers can observe classrooms in a variety of socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic community settings, tutor at community centers or local schools with diverse populations and interview minority members about their experiences, values, or beliefs' (p. 10). Sengstock (2009) spoke of the success of 'the Diversity Program' in accommodating students' needs and ending discrimination. The implication is that students' awareness should be raised, which is where critical pedagogy comes in to intervene where the hidden layers and structures of pedagogy and curriculum are uncovered and proved to be far from innocent (e.g., Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2010; Morley, 2010). 'For critical pedagogy to become anti-racist,' Allen (2004) posits, 'it will need to be much more serious about the race-radical philosophies of people of color around the world' (p. 122).

Discrimination might occur unintentionally on the part of the teacher. I was once addressed by a teenage student who said: 'You barely call upon me to answer the questions you ask in class!' The researcher should admit that only then did he notice that that student was present in class, which might suggest that some student discrimination is unintentional, occurring due to the widely practised pedagogical routines that have been shaped, strengthened and practices for long. All of this happens through discourse: '[...] through discourse, discriminatory exclusionary practices are prepared, promulgated, and legitimised' (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 1). This finding should be of central importance to language teachers and institutions that should be made cognizant of such discriminatory, biased acts.

Most participants reported that they had not confronted discrimination. This finding is not surprising as most of them were white middle-class male teenagers. Such students are much less likely to be discriminated against because they constitute the majority group in the context of the study. Similarly, Cotterill (2003) reported that while African-American respondents of her study felt a keen sense of racism, white prospective jurors did not regard racism as an important and pervasive issue. Therefore, research on discrimination must be based upon data gathered from minority students as insights from such subjects are more valid and reliable. Such research should both be contingent on data from and benefit those discriminated against, not those who are not.

### *Implications of the Study*

We hope that the study has implications for disadvantaged students. In line with Despaigne (2013), we recommend that students create and perish their own 'imagined communities', subjectivities and values and develop 'plurilingual and pluricultural learning strategies' (to borrow Despaigne's terms) while

resisting undesirable features of the learning environment. Students should be made aware of their rights in educational settings and should demand this awareness. It seems that, at least in the context of this study, most students were not aware of their rights or educational legislation, for example, how assessment was done by their teachers. Gaining 'critical language awareness' cannot be emphasised, and other researchers have also called for it (e.g., Despagne, 2013).

Such awareness is one way to combat discrimination that might be directed at students. Learners' awareness of how to create opportunities to use the target language will help them to overcome the biased practices directed against them. Norton (1993), for instance, reported on how Katarina, a Polish immigrant woman, could attain immense success in learning English when she reconstructed her identity in the target language even though she did not know English when she came to Canada. Another way to prevent student discrimination is 'empowerment' and 'empowering education' (Shor, 1992). Gaining an understanding of the practices of *Othering* in an English as a Foreign Language context can enhance our vision toward and strive for what Rich and Troudi (2006) referred to as 'equitable practices and democratic learning communities' (pp. 624–625). In their study of the racialisation of students of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages in the UK, Rich and Troudi (2006) stipulate that, in order to prevent such discriminatory practices, one needs to develop a deep understanding of what constitutes racist community practices from the viewpoint of students.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

One promising area for future research is to examine disadvantaged learners' perceptions and experiences of discrimination. Further research should also trace the consequences of bias and discrimination against students in the long run and focus on how to combat such discrimination through teacher education programmes and academic institutions. Researchers might investigate if policies are anti-discrimination and if they are followed by teachers. Research shows that this is not always the case and that 'policy as text and as lived experience' constitute two different issues (Morley, 2010, p. 392). A major limitation of the current study was that, due to practicality issues and lack of access to more participants, the instruments were not piloted. In addition, discrimination can be examined in areas such as curriculum design and material development. Sunderland (1992), for instance, investigated 'gendered' use of English (i.e., sexism) in favour of males in textbooks, English as a Foreign Language classrooms and the English language itself.

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## Appendix. Observation checklist

Item/Statement	Yes	No
1. Teacher uses sarcastic tone about some students.		
2. Teacher only walks around in some areas in class.		
3. Teacher makes discriminatory comments about some students.		
4. Teacher does not call upon students for class activities equally.		
5. Teacher does not pay enough attention to some students during class time.		
6. Teacher makes comments about students' ethnic groups.		
7. Teacher makes culturally stereotypical comments about some students.		
8. Teacher makes derogatory and mocking comments about some students.		
9. Teacher is stricter on some students than on others.		
10. In general, teacher favours some students over others.		
11. Other: _____		



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