

4. Research Methodology: Tracing ELT Teachers' Invisibilized Knowledge

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*“My education was Western, and years of living under Western thought is hard to undo and unlearn. Maybe no puedo get rid myself of it completely. Mis ganas and disposition only go so far. The resistance to any new kind of rethinking and reimagining is debilitating if not futile when one tries to (un)learn Western research and teaching. Research’s and teaching’s scientific tools, spirit and rituals run deep, and constantly (re)appear like fantasmas in a haunted house. When I least expect it, I search for truths, which once “found” only serve to limit our multiple ways of living and existing. When I least expect it, I become a colonizer and I reinscribe colonialist relations of domination/subordination. When I least expect it, I construct “los otros”; when I least expect it, I embody whiteness... When I least expect it, I vivisect not only my mind from my body but my research participants as well. All this happens while attempting to perform criticalist research and teaching!
(Saavedra, 2011)*

Introduction

In this chapter, I will start by describing my current tensions as a teacher-researcher trying to frame a research design, or a path, to unravel the ways through which teachers relate to knowledge, or the ways how teachers experience them. I will first develop a critique of the Western tradition of research. Second, I will explain why I am trying to deviate from it, especially in the context of English Language Teaching. Third, I will advocate for a decolonization of the method and will reflect about strategies for such an

endeavor, by describing the testimonio (testimony) as a provisionally fulfilling qualitative methodology for understanding English teachers' experiences when generating or sharing knowledge; an example case will be included.

The Metaphor of the Snake Charmer on My Relationship with Western Research

I started this paper quoting Saavedra (2011) at length, to contend that I experienced the same tensions she did when carrying out research that did not necessarily subscribed to the Western paradigms, or fluctuated between the center and the periphery of knowledge – an attempt to develop border-thinking (Mignolo, 2013). Saavedra's ideas indeed resembled my digging into my thinking outside the box. However, I have come to find a metaphor that illustrates the tensions I have recently undergone when conceptualizing and writing the chapter of *research methodology* of my dissertation regarding a re-interpretation of teachers' knowledge.

I think of Western research as having the effect of the snake charmer. For years, partially due to my lacking awareness, exposures to other ways of thinking, and epistemological reflexivity, I was charmed by Western methods and research parameters with no questioning at all. For example, I believed that research always had an emancipatory intent, and that we had to be completely objective even if we were conducting research within the field of social sciences. I had never reflected about how researchers exercise power over the researched by categorizing them and/or describing them in ways that are alien to their own world views.

Luckily, I came across the thought-provoking writings by Smith (2012), Chilisa (2012), and Berkin and Kalmeier (2012). Then, what I thought to be my highly consistent epistemological view, turned out to be only my epistemological inconsistencies. Those were, in fact, the fluctuations on my thinking when intending to develop a research agenda that detached, at least to some degree, from research parameters that had remained static over centuries, or had been considered as the ultimate and only valid research paradigm. Now, I now want to share with you, reader, how it is that snakes get *charmed*.

Snakes (e.g. *trained cobras* or *pythons*) are said to be hypnotized to dance and move at the pace of a *pungi* player the charmer . Upon doing my own search regarding snake charming, I learned that snakes are unable to listen the way we typically understand the concept of *listening*; what happens is that snakes feel the vibrations of the *pungi* (the music instrument) in their heads. Snakes are kept in a basket, with no light. So, as the player starts the music, a snake can come out, blind by the outer light, and mistakenly might take the *pungi* for another serpent. Then, the snake starts doing some movements that in reality have an intention of protecting it from what has perceived as another predator, while observers see them as dancing movements. Most charmers have a good estimate of what is a safe distance from the snake; even more, some charmers remove the fangs from the snakes to lessen the dangers. Many of these snakes also remain in a state near starvation as the charmers regularly do not feed them properly. Something that I found highly enlightening here, at first sight, was the fact that the snake is not actually charmed or hypnotized but confused.

What I just narrated, is a metaphor of how I related to Western research and how it related to me. To some degree, the anecdote of snake charming could be equated to that phenomenon of the *captive mind* (Alatas, 2004 cited by Chilisa, 2012); it could also resemble what Fanon (1967) and Thiog'o (1986, a), and b), cited by Chilisa (2012), call the *colonization of the mind* to refer to the "uncritical imitation of Western research paradigms within scientific intellectual activity" (Chilisa, 2012, p.7), which dictates how theoretical structures, research questions, methods, results, and dissemination ought to be.

In my previous research journey, as well as in my most recent conceptualizations of what my PhD dissertation was going to be, I had *danced to the tune* of the Western charming research parameters. Somehow, my mind was *colonized* similarly to how the snake is charmed or confused; additionally, at some point the Western research appeared to me as completely aseptic, unproblematic, and free from colonial interests. It also appeared as invested of certain truths, which supposedly would provide me, as a researcher, with all the necessary support to conduct proper, ethical, responsible, and context-bound research projects. However, after engaging in some epistemological reflections, I have come to agree with Vasilachis (2009, p. 21) regarding an important drawback of Western scientific research:

Scientific knowledge observes only the reality that it has previously constructed as knowable. It limits itself and restricts the possibility

of knowing what is yet to be known because it goes beyond only those ways of knowing that already have a status of legitimate ... How does the qualitative researcher solve the tension between the supposed 'objectivity' that scientific knowledge demands, and his/her own 'subjectivity' and those of the participants?¹¹

I realized that I was certainly blind as a *colonized being*. Western research might not have actually *fed* me with what I needed (having a decolonial interest), while it has kept itself away from me at a certain distance; such, because in general terms Western research is prone to othering that is, seeing other cultures or ways of seeing the world as strangers ; in other words, Western knowledge “creates differences between itself as the norm and sees other knowledge systems as inferior” as explained by Spivak in Chilisa (2012, p. 8). Therefore, as I became more aware of my new ignorance, I ended up understanding how certain tenets of Western research fall short in accounting for a problematization regarding local English language teachers' experiences of knowledge. Further discussion of this matter will be found down below in this chapter. Now, I would like to problematize whether the social sciences originated in the West should have an universalizing goal, and how methods relate to scientific colonization.

Why Western Research Might Not Fit with My Search for Teachers' Invisibilized Knowledge?

This chapter is focused on discussing the approach, method and techniques that I used to explore how English teachers experience knowledge. I have placed myself within a decolonial locus, which implicates that I see myself entitled to select a particular theoretical stance, or as Smith (2012) would say, a “position from which I write and choose to privilege” (p. 1). Hence, I cannot help but to problematizing the core concepts of research and its varied approaches. I think that, when tracing back the origins of research, as it is used in academia, the colonial, imperial agenda could be easily identified.

Given that research is a process that, for long, has been embedded within imperialist and colonialist ideologies, in the next paragraphs I will include a brief overview of such ideologies. In general terms, I see imperialism as a series of historical and connected events where, based on their economic

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goals, countries from the other side of the oceans discovered, conquered and abused some other countries. In my view, imperialism was what resulted from Europe's global businesses and the development of the modern state. Colonialism on the other hand, is understood here as the system of thoughts that put imperialism into practical terms. Chilisa (2012) explains that the processes of colonization that was experienced by vast populations across the Earth as suppression, subjugation, and dispossession by the Enlightened West (France, Britain, Germany, Spain, Italy, Russia and the USA), ended up being not only political but also implicated an imposition of the colonizers' ways of knowing and control over the production of knowledge. Chilisa calls such phenomenon *scientific colonialism*. Scientific colonialism resulted in an unchallenged use of the positivist paradigms over the colonized, with the colonized, and for the colonized. In some cases, Western researchers converted colonized populations into objects of their research, and in other cases into consumers of it, this latter being my case. Smith (2012) explains that critical assessments of research have mostly focused on empiricism or on the ways how the positivist tradition has tried to see the natural phenomena as an equivalent of the social or vice versa. Yet, according to Smith (2012), Western research is more than that. It is, "a compilation of judgmental views regarding several aspects such as: cultural orientation; set of values; conceptualizations of time, space and subjectivity, all of them pertaining to different and competing theories of knowledge" (p. 44). Under such viewpoints, some knowledge would be more valuable than some others, some would embed others, some would be conflicting, and even some would be coming from *the other*. Smith also points out that, unfortunately, the Western hemisphere does not clearly recognize these deep implications of colonialisms.

In a similar line of thinking, Chilisa (2012) says that "psychology, anthropology, and history, operate under the positivist goal to generate and discover laws and theories that are generalizable; researchers mapped theories, formulas and practices that continue to dictate how former colonized societies can be studied and written about" (p. 10). Certainly, Smith (1999) makes a good point when explaining how "research is one of the ways how the underlying codes of imperialism and colonialism are regulated and realized" (p. 8). The author exhaustively demonstrates that such regulation has occurred through scientific models, disciplines, and the entire intellectual production, which has been enacted through the institutionalization of research across research societies, universities, and scholarly networks. She concludes that, in a similar fashion, by locating branches of Europe-based research institutions

and universities at the colonies, the local interests were embedded within the colonial systems.

By comparison with the ELT field, it seems evident that our discipline has also dictated how the formerly (still?) colonized learners should be taught a language through systematic generalizations, standardizations, or theories of how L2 users should be written about and constructed, (see a thorough elaboration in Cook 1999, 2002), through research, public policy, and production of materials, among others. In our context, such actions have occurred overseas; yet, their products have come to our hemisphere by means of an ample variety of mechanisms, including: textbooks; journals; congresses; conferences; lessons from mainstream authors to teachers-to-be regarding second language acquisition; handbooks of second language teaching, learning and research; and, validation of foreign academic works made by local researchers.

Kumaravadivelu's (2016) article "Can the subaltern act?" explains that "hegemonic forces in our field keep themselves 'alive and kicking' through various aspects of English language education: curricular plans, materials design, teaching methods, standardized tests and teacher preparation, primarily through center-based methods and center-produced materials which assure that the marginality of the majority is managed and maintained" (p. 72). With a clear intention of making English teachers critically reflect, he asks: "how many graduate level methodology books on methods that are used as foundational texts for a core course in TESOL, are actually written by non-native professionals? How many ESL/ELF textbooks manufactured and marketed worldwide by 'mainstream' presses in our field are actually written by non-native professionals? Not many. Why is that?" (p. 72).

To answer his question, we should come back to the discussion brought up at the beginning of this chapter: The Western hemisphere canon of knowledge has a will to hegemonize how research must be carried out, and how its results should apply for most contexts. In Smith's words "Colonies were peripheral satellites which gained access to new knowledge and technologies through recourse to the writings of author in the centre" (p. 64). A case in point is brought up by Kachru (1994) when explaining how the concept of interlanguage has been backed up in research by mainstream ELT. The author explains that data that were collected in the United Kingdom from "international students, guest workers in Western Europe, has been treated as valid source of data to generalize or support claims of second language acquisition hypotheses" (p. 795). Kumaravadivelu (2016) goes on to say that

method is the archetypical zone where hegemonic forces feel compelled to apply the biggest control, because the methods work as driving principles determining other aspects, which in the particular case of ELT, include training, materials, assessment, methodological paths, and so on. In terms of research, methods come to play almost the same role not only in ELT but in research in a more general sense.

In my case, when I read Smith's (2012) seminal questions about the research process, *whose research is this?, who owns it?, whose interests does it serve?, who will benefit from it?, who has designed it and framed its scope?, who will carry it out?, who will write it up?, and, how will its results be disseminated?* (p. 11), I arrived to the conclusion that more than instrumental, neat, and crystal-clear answers for a research design that Western research could have expected, answers to such questions needed to be framed within an ethical compromise; they should also reflect my own locus of enunciation and my position as a researcher within an emerging decolonial view regarding the relations of English teachers with knowledge, including any invisible, unexplored versions of themselves. Cleverly, Chilisa (2012, p. 7) urges us to take responsibly our identities as researchers when stating: "the research you do, will have the power to label, name, condemn, describe or prescribe . . . You are encouraged to conduct research without perpetuating self-serving Western research paradigms that construct Western ways of knowing as superior to the other's ways of knowing". She goes on to describe what would be a code ethics for us: "Researcher as a provocateur, and a transformative healer guided by the four *Rs*: responsibility, respect, reciprocity and rights/regulations of the researched (Chilisa 2012, p. 7).

Having stated this polyphonic background reflection, I will now explain some arguments regarding why I do not use anymore Western research frames; afterwards, I will elucidate the methodology that most likely, yet provisionally, reflects my expectations as to what it means to conduct research within a decolonial perspective regarding the knowledge that has been made invisible.

The Case of Research in the ELT Field

Would it be possible to conduct research and construct knowledge without resorting to modern science methods, particularly in the ELT field? Sousa Santos (2018) asserts that modern science methods (as it is exemplified in

the works of Creswell (2012), a frequently-used theoretical source in some ELT research), are developed within a logic of *extractivism*. Such *extractivism*, which can be intellectual, cognitive or physical, is observed particularly in the design and application of data collection instruments such as interviews or surveys, where researchers literally extract information and are the only ones summoned to interpret the resulting data, thus exerting to a great extent, power in the research process and over the researched (Chilisa, 2012). When it comes to analyzing the ethical concerns of research, Creswell (2012, p.169) stresses that:

Data collection should be ethical, and it should respect individuals and sites. Obtaining permission before starting to collect data is not only a part of the informed consent process but is also an ethical practice. Protecting anonymity of individuals by assigning numbers to returned instruments and keeping confidential their identities, offers privacy to participants.

Hence, ethical concerns in educational research applied to ELT contexts, should be addressed by means of obtaining participants' permissions to extract their experiences, ideas, and knowledge, while rigorously keeping anonymous the source of knowledge, that is, the identity of the research participants.

Discussions above seem to support Chilisa's view that a sort of inner belief underlies the dominant paradigms of research: "Knowledge is an individual entity: the researcher is an individual in search of knowledge, knowledge is something that is gained, and therefore knowledge may be owned by an individual" (Chilisa, 2012, p. 21). Mainstream research advocates might resort to claiming that researchers are informed by 'member checks' through which the researcher confirms with the researched the themes he/she found in order to establish the credibility of the findings and supposedly give voice to the researched. To decolonize the research methods, more emphasis should be given to the participants' voices allowing for "polyvocality", which consists of allowing the participants to speak for themselves, in a medium designed by themselves, as well as to decide whether they want to be visible or not:

How can extractivism in research be avoided? Sousa Santos (2018, p.130) proposes breaking with the extractivist logic through cooperation among knowing subjects "rather than through subject/object unilateral cognitive interactions, that is, by means of engaging the researched in other steps of the research process, including the

formulation of the problem to investigate as well as making him/her be part of the interpretation process or authoring of the research study.

An additional aspect that deserves attention, is the narratives related to the implications of conducting qualitative research in ELT. After an extensive literature review of available research on second language acquisition from the Northern academic environment, Ellis (2012, p.19), draws on Chaudron (1988) to explain that:

L2 classroom research has ‘an important role’ to play in both language teaching and language teacher education. However, the problems of applying research to language teaching remain even when the research is classroom-based. The essential problem is the extent to which the findings derived from the study of one instructional context can be generalized to other instructional contexts... This is not just a problem for descriptive studies of specific classrooms but also for experimental studies that employ inferential statistics in order to claim generalizability.”

In the passage above, an interest in transferability or generalization of research results is deemed desirable, despite the fact that qualitative studies not always seek to produce generalizations. In that sense, the ELT mainstream research field should get acquainted with what Sousa Santos (2018) calls the ‘hermeneutics of partiality’. Such hermeneutics refer to understanding that science, as any other way of knowing, is partial because it cannot extrapolate what happens in one context to another. Another black hole in the study of ELT research is related to the role played by non-scientific, vernacular knowledge that may contribute in the teaching-learning process, which is hardly ever considered.

Another issue to be critically analyzed is the status that ELT teachers’ research enjoys. Ellis’ chapter named *Methods for Researching the Second Language Classroom* (2012), introduces what the author calls “a useful distinction between formal and practitioner research” (p. 20). Here, the *formal research* refers to the type of research conducted by researchers relying on emblematic research traditions, while the *practitioner research* means research conducted by teachers in their own research contexts *drawing on the principles of action research*:

It should be noted, however, that both types of research have in common the general features of research that is, there is a problem

or question to be addressed, data is collected and analyzed, and an interpretation of the findings provided.”

To exemplify the difference between both types of research, he resorts to Long’s Interaction Hypothesis which Ellis himself tested through pre and post test experimental groups, establishing whether learners’ language acquisition was facilitated through meaning negotiation. He wanted to *fill a gap in theory*, demonstrate cause-effect relationships, and ‘conduct a study that would lead to publications in academic journals...all leading journals in my field’ (Ellis, 2012, p. 23). According to this author, formal L2 classroom research is, among others, characterized by:

- 1) The phenomenon investigated is determined by the researcher.
- 2) The research is either theoretically driven (as in experimental research) or conducted with a view to developing theory (as in descriptive research).
- 3) The results of the research are written up in accordance with the requirements of academic articles, and with a view to publishing them in academic journals... a limitation, however, is that it may never reach teachers as they are unlikely to read the journals in which it is published.”

Ellis (2012), describes practitioners’ research as that one that is conducted by teachers who want to develop connections between research and practice. He goes on to say that “research topics are not derived from theory but from teachers’ desire to experiment with some innovation in the classroom, to seek a solution to some problem. . . Practitioner research, however, is not likely to be published in academic journals as formal research, which raises the question of its status in the field of L2 classroom research as a whole” (p. 26).

From the paragraphs above, it can be concluded that there is a suggested, if not overt, interest in keeping the distinctions between those scientific methods that supposedly enjoy more prestige, and those pertaining to research studies conducted by teachers, which appear to be considered as not leading to formulate or consolidate any knowledge or theory. Sousa Santos (2018), explains the matter by saying that “scientific knowledge tends to have an exaggerated idea of its own relevance” (p.138), which would be evidenced in the subtle distinctions between *formal* and *practitioner* research in the ELT field. It can be also inferred that the kind of research carried out by teachers is thought not scientific, whatsoever, and teachers hardly access formal research journals. What the author conceals, however, is that research carried out in the Global North does not allow a proper open access to such knowledge

for the Global South unless high prices are paid. In addition to it, the fact that the results of research are written in accordance with the standards of academic articles, shows how the ELT research field does not escape from the patterns of science promoted by Northern epistemologies. Sousa Santos (2018), says that “the epistemologies of the North favor written knowledge, be it in the science, the humanities, or literature” (p. 184); such, because writing *confers fixity, stability, and permanence to knowledge* (p. 184), while makes knowledge production different from other social practices. Writing gives to science a touch of exclusivity and reinforces its ‘monumental’ character “establishing distance, perennial effect, and remembrance” (p. 184).

Using Testimonies as Method and Data is a Path Towards Liberating the Captive Mind

Could I dare to say what Fanon (1967, p. 5) radically stated in the introduction of *Black Skin White Masks*: ‘I leave methods to the botanists and the mathematicians’...? Indeed, I cannot completely go against the currents of the knowledge community¹². Nevertheless, as decolonization deals with “centering the concerns and world views of the colonized others, so that they understand themselves through their own assumptions and perspectives”, in order to give voice to the historically silenced, suppressed or invisible individuals, and to analyze how mainstream texts legitimize positions of superiority (Chilisa, 2012, p. 13, 14), a research methodology ideally should respond to these ethical, epistemological and ontological challenges. Consequently, I regard a transformative paradigm to research¹³ and a qualitative participatory approach with testimonial data and methodology, as a prospective option to delve into the teachers’ knowledge that has been made invisible, rather than, for example, the interpretive models of hermeneutics or phenomenology, or even the poststructuralist perspective, although recognizing that this last mentioned is also highly appealing based on several reasons that I will now proceed to explain.

12 A thorough discussion about teaching in the knowledge community is developed in Hargreaves (2003).

13 For Chilisa (2012), a transformative paradigm (as opposed to the interpretive or the positivist) focuses on the transformation of individuals through actions. Ontologically speaking, reality is a product of our social locations while certain locations have advantage over others. In terms of epistemology, knowledge emerges from “collective meaning making” (p. 36), where both, participants and researchers, share power and transform each other.

Adhering to the research views from Chilisa (2012), I am not going to frame this research proposal within an interpretive approach, or traditional hermeneutical or phenomenological methods. Ontological, epistemological and axiological reasons lie underneath this decision. First, although ontologically speaking the interpretative approach predicates that reality is socially constructed, it is limited to space, time, and context. Second, even though the epistemological views corresponding to the interpretative approach predicate that knowledge is subjective, scholars have not actually voiced populations or individuals historically invisibilized through research studies. Third, although axiology pertaining to the interpretative approach includes some valuable standpoints, and its methods focus mostly on naturally occurring data thus exposing researchers values and biases, it fails to acknowledge the issue of power within the research design of who investigates, who is investigated, and whose voice represents/constructs reality. (See Chilisa, 2012, pp. 32-36).

An additional consideration is that the origin of the interpretive tradition in the German thought, comes to be problematic within a framework of reference that intends to detach, even if partially, from the Euro-Western epistemology. Decolonization of knowledge, if at all achievable, “would require taking seriously the epistemic perspective, cosmologies, and insights of critical thinkers from the Global South thinking from subalternized, racial, and ethnic sexual spaces and bodies” (Grosfoguel, 2011, p. 4).

Similarly, if I intended to be consistent with the decolonial standpoint, a post-structuralist perspective to research would conflict with the epistemological challenge of detaching from the Western research parameters, even if partially (as already discussed). I could have a post-structural research design aiming at tracing how discourses of resistance circulate as effect of power, thus allowing marginal discourses to revive, and accounting for how any competing ways to give meaning to the world are constructed in teachers’ knowledge (Weedon, 1987). Certainly, poststructuralism posits that everybody takes subject positions within discourses, but is that true? Can everybody indeed subject position as to be heard? Can even invisibilized voices subject position in mainstream arenas and be taken as valid interlocutors? I am not sure. The reflection by Beverly (2005) about Spivak’s (1988) essay “Can the subaltern speak?” creates some doubts deep inside of me when he states: “if the subaltern could speak that is, speaking in a way that it truly matters, that compels us to listen then he would not be a subaltern¹⁴” (p. 350).

14 My own translation from Spanish

Therefore, in this research process, I want to voice English teachers' subalternity based on a testimonial research framework. For Beverley (2005), the subaltern is a social location that is not satisfactorily represented in the social sciences or the *university*, because they are institutionally framed within the dyad power/knowledge that constructs and nurtures subalternity. However, a channel can be built through a testimonial research framework, because it is a way to intervene where the subaltern cannot. For Beverley, although the testimony does not necessarily surpass the typical Western/modern dichotomies of the metropolis/periphery, creole/mestizo, elite/popular, literate/illiterate, it implies a new way to express these oppositions in a collaborative way. The goal to regard the subaltern as being the teller of his/her own situation is best summarized by Gugelberger, & Kearney (1991, p. 4) when asserting that:

In contrast to conventional writing about the colonial situation, which is produced at the centers of global power and near the apices of class difference, testimonial literature is produced by subaltern peoples on the periphery or the margin of the colonial situation. Thus, the margins of empire are now *writing back* in an overdue attempt to correct the Western canon and its versions of *truth*.

In that sense, what is a testimony? What has been said about it? And, how can it be used to serve the purpose of decentering Western research? Testimonial narrative, for Marin (1991), has been "a kind of writing from the margins about the, and to, the systems oppressing the speaking" (p. 51). Privileged individuals, says Marin, write literature, autobiography, ethnography, biography, and Scriptures, but testimony has been theorized to favor those who have not been privileged within the mainstream discourses. For Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona (2012), scholars are gradually using testimony as a methodological approach, as data, and as pedagogy. Its use contests the disciplinary preparation received by researchers to producing impartial knowledge. On the other hand, testimony questions objectivity by situating the individual and the collective in tune with situated bodily, spiritual, cognitive and communal production of knowledge. These authors contend that testimonies can reach several publics because they can be written, oral, or digital, and they should be seen *much like a gift* (p. 6) by the listener; he, the listener, unfolds testimonies' inner sense since learning about one person gives us insight into the life of many others.

Saavedra (2011), asserts that testimony is a groundbreaking Latin American literary genre, which allows people tell a collective history of domination

through the narrative of only one person. These stories are frequently told to someone else who provides access to the testimony to more listeners or readers. Yúdice (1991), explains that as a genre, testimonial writing started to gain terrain in the decade of the 70s, when authors such as Freire tried to bring to the public sphere the struggles of popular sectors to gain recognition in canonical texts. However, even though there was testimonial literature before and after the Latin American boom of writers, this genre was not recognized as literature in mainstream literary circles until the creation of the testimonial literary award of the Cuban Casa de las Américas (House of Americas). More recently, testimonial literature has been taken as a tool in educational settings as pedagogy and as a research methodology (see for example, Hamzeh & Flores Carmona, 2019).

For Marin (1991), first generation testimonies such as those on the books *I, Rigoberta Menchú, An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1983) and “*Si me permiten hablar. . .*”, *Testimonio de Domitila, una mujer de las minas de Bolivia* (*Let Me Speak! Testimony of Domilita, a Woman of the Bolivian Mines*), written by Domitila Barrios de Chungara and Moema Viezzer (1977), show inner political intentions of recognition, fore the communal standpoint through the individual’s voice, and twist the importance of the first-person singular that is the prominent figure in the Western canon of thought, principles that have remained at the core of testimony until now. Elenes (2000), reflects that in the Western tradition “the autobiographical subject has historically been the European man: the subject of the Enlightenment” (p. 109). The author wonders whether *the other*, the subaltern subject, the colonized, the marginal, can build an autobiographical character in which the *I* relates with the *we*. Then, this kind of *speaking from the margins* is situated knowledge that reconstructs multiple identities of the subjects/agents of the testimony as well as of those of the absent ones.

Some authors (Marin, 1991; Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, and Flores Carmona, 2012; Beverley, 2005), draw distinctions between testimonial narratives and other forms of biographical and autobiographical research. Delgado Bernal et al (2012), say that testimony differs from other types of biographical research in that the *testimonialista* is implicated in a critical reflection of his/her experience inside particular socio-cultural realities. For Beverley (2005), although both testimony and autobiography confirm the authority of personal experience, the testimony sustains that the own experience cannot be separated from the class situation or the subalternized group that is brought up with it.

Recent developments on the testimonial genre and methodology are found in the Chicana Latina movement (see Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Burciaga & Tavares, 2006; Benmayor, 2012). Delgado Bernal et al (2012), list 36 dissertations in the decade of the 90s and around 800 in the 2000s using testimony mostly in the educational field. Also, testimonial data and methodology can be found in Critical Latin Studies of microaggressions and racist nativism (see Pérez Huber, 2011), and in studies of embodied literacies and bilingualism (Saavedra, 2011; Passos DeNicolo & González, 2015). Also, testimony has been used as a pedagogy to learn how to rejoin the mind-body-spirit in order to destabilize settler colonialism and legitimize it as a genuine methodological practice of knowledge production (Hamzeh and Flores Carmona 2019). More recently, Colombian author Carvajal (2017), developed a critical and decolonizing ethnographic study utilizing testimonial data in order to challenge traditional concepts of homelessness in the American society. In a similar vein, Brazilian author Ramos (2017), developed her dissertation on how students with a personal background as refugees understand traveling and education within the context of forced migration, using testimonial interviews. The objective of these two dissertations in education and language is to de-monumentalize and challenge static ideas of what it means to be a homeless and/or refugee in such contexts.

The reader might wonder whether the testimony has any ontological or epistemological value whatsoever. Within a postmodern perspective, Yúdice (1991) argues that testimonial writing rejects master narratives that validate grand actors and subjects of traditional history such as the State, the West, and the Academia, among others. The witness or testimonial writer is the one who matters because he/she portrays his/her experience as an agent of collective memory. Truth is summoned to denounce a current situation of oppression, thus turning the need for writing the history again into an imperative (*writing back* as Gugelberger & Kearney 1991; Smith, 2012; and Chilisa, 2012 have pinpointed).

Still, there are differences between postmodern and testimonial writing when applying to *fragmentation and marginality* (p.21). For Yúdice (1991), despite certain postmodern texts intend to deconstruct “the classics of the Western tradition, their purview remains, unsurprisingly Western. The marginalized elements with their own specificity are not explored outside hegemonic discourses” (p.22), while deconstructionists have not defended nor liberated the marginalized but actually have considered them as alterity or as *the other*. In short, deconstruction only recovers the other as absent. Yúdice (1991, p. 25), brilliantly concludes from postmodern texts:

A person cannot see the subject of the counterhegemonic project because they are marginal and such marginalized elements appear in hegemonic postmodern texts only as the horror which excites the writer. With the *other* thus neutralized, becomes undistinguishable from the oppressors.

In that train of thought, a testimonial narrative is meant to unveil this *other* that has wrongly been constructed in the Western canon of thought as non-existent, not able, not interesting, not knowledgeable, and not important.

In discussing the epistemological status of testimonies within a historical perspective, Tozzi (2012) assesses the function it has in the constitution of representations about the past. The author contends that, in regard to historical research, testimonies should not be considered secondhand source of knowledge, but rather tools for the constitution of the historical fact as such. A case in point brought by the author is the Shoah (the holocaust) in which the survivor's testimonies are not just additional elements of the event but constitutive of the event itself. In that sense, there is an advocacy for its use and a call for the recognition of its value, inasmuch as history has also undergone as sort of scientization, while an interest in objectivity and evidence has pervaded it.

Theoretical considerations summarized in the previous paragraphs, suggest that testimony could be a valid source of information regarding the part of teachers' knowledge that might have been made invisible. Particularly inspiring are the contributions of Benmayor (2012), which are the result of more than ten years conducting research projects with undergraduates. As part of one of her undergraduate courses called *Latina Life Stories*, the author has collected testimonies where her students have expressed "their own social and cultural truths (p. 144) and have developed a subsequent interpretation that serve a theorization of their experiences.

One of my research projects inspired by Benmayor's contributions, included a several-steps process, as follows: a) On my role of participant-researcher for this specific project, I called in a group of teachers pursuing an M.A in Applied Linguistics to the Teaching of English; they were invited to reflect upon their experiences of teaching and how they related with their own knowledge (i.e. their professional assets developed and accumulated through their careers such as skills, theoretical contents, insights, etc.); they were also asked to give special emphasis to those of their experiences that had been challenging and/or memorable; b) I introduced the participants to the

testimony genre, and some examples from Chicana Latina Life Stories were examined to analyze the potential of this type of writing/speaking. 3) The participating teachers left the sessions with a question that would help them examine their memories, their classes, their past experiences intending to delve into their knowledges. 4) Teachers were encouraged to write or record some preliminary ideas and exchange them with other participants during subsequent sessions, in an attempt to dialogically help each teacher in the recalling exercise to bring to awareness past episodes. 5) Teachers were asked to decide how they wanted to introduce their testimonies (based on thematic question posed during the first step), regarding specific moments of their teaching that they wanted to bring up for sharing or discussing about. Their testimonies were to be accepted either in writing or verbally. 6) Teachers took at least 3 weeks to produce their testimonies. Once such testimonies were completed, they narrated or read them aloud in order to *collectively theorize* following Benmayor's (2012) words each story. Finally, each reading aloud/oral text was recorded and sent to the *testimonialista* to provide him/her with an opportunity to listen to his/her testimony again, refine contents, and also as a resource to help our participating teachers to theorize about their testimonies after collective interpretation.

The act of verbally sharing the own experiences with other people (i.e. giving testimony), which in the example above took place among the participants in the research study is pivotal to the *Epistemologies of the South*, where knowing *with* others takes prevalence over knowing *about* others (Sousa Santos, 2018). In a similar vein, there is a reconceptualization of the value of listening. Sousa Santos (2018), asserts that "Western culture privileges writing and speech to the detriment of listening" (p. 175). The idea behind listening to the testimonies of others, is that a dialogic relationship can be established, whereas each person can enrich his/her own testimonies when reading them aloud. Therefore, a first layer of interpretation and communal co-construction of knowledge occurs by means of deep listening and engagement. An additional, yet key consideration here, is that there is an overt attempt to favor the *oralization of written knowledge*, acknowledging that scientific standards do not promote oralization because it is seen as prone to imprecision. However, following Sousa Santos (2018), the *Epistemologies of the South* encourage and support oralization because it allows for a certain degree of personalization in the construction of knowledge. The practices engaged in oralization of knowledge invite to the use of vernacular language, dialogic relations, and narrative as a substitute of explanations (Sousa Santos, 2018). Instead of testing theories of success, the contributing to societies, and foregrounding the importance of

experience, are desired outcomes. Indeed, the Freirean concept of dialogue and experience has been foregrounded in the notion that it is through dialogue that knowledge can be co-constructed, thus making especially relevant the themes that are existentially pertinent to a particular context.

I would like to exemplify how I used testimonies in the ELT field to develop an exploration of English teachers' knowledge experiences. The collection of testimonies, as mentioned before, took place with teachers pursuing a degree in Applied Linguistics to the Teaching of English. In the paragraphs below, a description of a specific testimony by a teacher or *testimonialista* is shared. The excerpts are part of a collection of 8 testimonios with the purpose of gaining deep understanding of how teachers perceive their own relations to knowledge. Hence, here I want to share the result of having followed this method of data collection in a real context. The subsequent excerpts exemplify the result of having crafted a testimony, a communal interpretation and a theorization of it. Three types of voices are introduced: the voice of the *testimonialista*, i.e. the teacher who participated in the process of writing the testimony; the second voice is the voice of another teacher interpreting the testimony in the read-aloud session, and my own voice as participant-researcher comes to be the third in the interpretation. Participating teachers were asked if they wanted to have their real names displayed. An asterisk has been added where a pseudonym was preferred. The final excerpt exemplifies a piece of the theorization made by the *testimonialista* after listening the recording of the communal interpretation of his text.

The *testimonialista* introduced in the first part is Alex*. The other participant is Javier, his classmate. The excerpt of the testimony that appears below is the result of working towards the working questions: What have been some of the most difficult experiences as an English teacher for you? How did you experience that? How do you link it with language pedagogy?

Eight English teachers listened to Alex when he read aloud his testimony. Once he finished reading, they were asked to react and interpret the testimony. Verbatim labeled as *Yellow*, *Green*, and *Red*, as well as Javier's reaction, are included below to illustrate how interpretations from other people intervene in the co-construction of the testimony interpretation¹⁵:

Alex*: *I can't believe we still have to protest this sh***

15 My own translations from Spanish

Yellow: . . . *I would say that I exist because of politics. Actually, my parents met at a youth basis of a, let's say, red leftist political party. I am perhaps the product of the social movements and political and economic struggles of those who are behind. My childhood was, thus being a happy and free kid who quickly understood the value of the social advocacy and the political commitment for a better country for every single person . . .*

Green: *University was a constant tension. Although my closer peers and friends aren't as posh and rich as you may think, I had the chance to meet people with way more opulence. I admit I oftentimes felt my notions, positions and struggles didn't find a right place. There wasn't any strike, any political meeting, any graffiti, any demonstration, and even worse, further social and political concerns seemed to be distant among professors and peers. "Yo nunca he ido a una marcha, y esa vaina me da como miedo" used to say a very good friend of mine.*

How would you expect to contribute in a system like that? Teaching, no matter our area, implies more. I wasn't concerned about CLICL or the Communicative Approach so popular at the time, rather, I wanted to know how to foster access to language education to everyone regardless one's socioeconomic status.

Red: *And currently, my pedagogy and notions are the product of everything I have lived. My parents, my friends, my city, my country, my school, my university, and especially the social and political struggles that lie behind. So, the next time that your impressions mismatch with who I really am, remember my own history.*

Please, remember I grew up with a constant fear of not seeing one of my parents coming back home at night. And not because of the fear of dying itself that's the beauty of life, but because I quickly understood that in our country people are assassinated because of their ideologies. Please remember I carried out my undergraduate research reading English short stories in peripheral areas of our city. Please remember I did volunteer work and taught how to read and write to South-east Asian immigrants while living in the Windy City. Please remember that English language is also advocacy . . . And please, please remember that I am just the product of those million voices that couldn't be silenced.

After Alex* finished reading his testimonial narrative, Javier, his peer, spoke:

Javier: *I find it interesting and recall back in the class . . . There was one reading, something we read it is like . . . it would be easy to us to just label Alex as a private college student, from a private university with certain access to higher education. You know, in terms of research, but we do need to know more about people we are interviewing. Having said so, it makes me reflect how are we going to display our students in such an endeavor like, in our research, the one we are carrying out now. I may say this: “from my background, students are from a higher status because . . . [this and that] and that is quite deterministic in certain way, you know.*

Once Alex* had the opportunity to listen to his testimony when it was read-aloud, he wrote the theoretical reflection that appears below, which was the product of having heard his partners discussion and contributions to his work:

Alex*: *By reexamining my own testimony, I realize that there exists a constant inclination toward the political and social struggles that have shaped my life, my academic journey, and my current teaching practices and ideologies . . . the political and social struggle of my background.*

As a researcher, I understood that Alex* considered the very fact of existence as connected with politics. He also found connections among social advocacy and politics with a better future without exclusions. As the testimony exercise advanced, he also saw connections between the English language with advocacy, which suggested that knowledge is connected to politics and social advocacy, whereas knowing necessarily entails them both.

In the verbatim labeled *Red*, a potential conflict regarding knowledge seemed to have come to surface, as Alex* perceived the university to be monolithic: “How would you expect to contribute in a system like that? Teaching, no matter our area, implies more” (Alex). Tension was revealed here, apparently related to the fact that, for Alex*, the knowledge he wished to foreground within the university had not been problematized at all. A subtle criticism of the institution called university and the relations to knowledge it constructs, emerged here. there. On the topic of the university, Castro-Gomez (2013, p. 81) argues¹⁶:

The university is seen not only as the place where knowledge that leads to moral and material progress is produced, but as the vigilant nucleus of knowledge legitimacy . . . the university more or less functions as the Foucauldian panoptic, because it is conceived

16 My own translation from Spanish

as an institution that establishes the frontiers between useful and useless knowledge, between the *doxa* and the *episteme*, between the legitimate knowledge (that is, the one that is highly regarded as having *scientific validity*) and the illegitimate knowledge.

In this order of ideas, legitimate knowledge in ELT is dealing with methods but not with social advocacy and politics. Alex* locates himself within the post method era concerns (Kumaravadivelu 1994). He was interested precisely in comprehending not the circumstances under which acquisition of languages occur or might occur (an interest of mainstream research, see Ellis 2012), but in questioning under which circumstances the access to language education is desired. He was not interested in CLICL or the communicative approach, but rather on how access to language rights were granted. Again, Castro-Gómez (2013, p. 84) helps us understand this situation by problematizing one characteristic of disciplines at the university level:

In practically all university curricula, disciplines have their own canon that define what authors should be read, (the *authorities* or the *classics*), which themes are pertinent and what things should be known by a student who chooses to study such discipline. Canons are power mechanism whose aim is *to fix* knowledge, in certain places, making them easily identifiable and manageable.

When Alex* said: “. . . and currently, my pedagogy and notions are the product of everything I have lived”, he implicated that his relation to knowledge is imbricated by his experiences as lived in the flesh, his emotions and his life trajectory. Additionally, Javier’s intervention revealed one key concern of decolonial research: how are we going to characterize the participants of research without, for example, resorting to stereotypical or restricted visions of them, which would necessarily be framed within our own biases of race, class, gender or economic status?

Conclusion

So far, I have tried to show the epistemological decisions I made regarding the research design of my doctoral dissertation, which intends to uncover teachers’ experiences of knowledge. I have also discussed my reasons behind those decisions. I’ve also advocated for a decolonization of the method and outlined a likely path to do so. Certainly, the paths to decolonizing research and knowledge are uncertain and hard to walk. Nonetheless, it is in this very

uncertain path where we should be able to recognize ourselves as knowing subjects who acknowledge *the others* as knowing subjects as well.

Teacher-researchers in the Global South, like myself, are intending to develop new ways for us to build knowledge considering our own peculiar contexts, with authors and perspectives that honor our origins, ideas, lived experiences, historical locations, emotions, and bodies.

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