

Chapter 4.

Author Ideologies and Textbook Creation: An Autoethnographic Study

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Abstract

This chapter inquires into the author as a subject as a means to study the ideologies behind textbook creation and the struggles faced when designing textbooks. My study aims to unveil the coloniality present during the process of creating, developing, and adapting material, which is still used as a core resource for language learning and teaching in the Colombian context by authors and editors, who play the leading role in the process. The chapter has three sections: the first section is autobiographical and includes my positionality statement; the second describes my research interest on a general level; and the third section addresses the salient elements of the research focus of my research interest. This helps me to root my interest in setting out the author within the textbook creation process.

Keywords: Colombia, contemporary authors, English language textbooks, coloniality.

Biographical Statement

My experience as an English teacher has guided me in discovering methods to improve my craft as a teacher and the role that research plays towards that end. When I did my Master's degree at Universidad Externado de Colombia, I took part with some peers in research studies. I was able to collaborate there with pre-service teachers at the School of Education, which helped me to see the need to bring research back to the classroom and lead teachers towards a better understanding of EFL education.

Over the past twelve years, my journey towards this goal has been circuitous at best. It has carried me through different language institutions and universities where I have had the chance to improve my teaching; however, there is still more to be done to enhance the field of EFL education. Along the way in my quest for self-improvement in the field, I have observed how the English language has been taught with the guide of well-known language textbooks, but without acknowledging the prominent levels of superficial cultural components included in their contents, which are displayed to teach English as an instrument of a dominant cultural power. Textbooks carry with them ideologies about the language and the people who speak it (and even about those who do not). In a way, the pre-service teacher favors socio-cultural resources that facilitate not only linguistic interaction, but also cultural exchanges, with a standardized, homogenized, and decontextualized view of the world, in whose production authors and editors at international publishing houses play a key role.

Research Problem

English as a second language is a subject that has been taught in Colombia for many years. As such, it has been affected by economic, cultural, and political factors, as national policies have been influenced by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and the Colombian Ministry of Education, to fit the country into the process of globalization, which has indeed affected language teaching in the country. Following Bhabha (1994), I can see how the free market forces of competition are imposed; in this case, with the adoption of mandatory English textbooks, which may fail to meet completely the students' needs or interests. The cosmopolitanism prevalent in society, where relative prosperity and privilege have ushered ideas of progress, has portrayed the role of EFL education as a global development language system for worldwide communication. Therefore, we can say that English language textbooks are linked to state-controlled economies and politics in which bureaucracy, inefficiency, and nepotism exist. Language teachers and students relate daily to cultural differences, social discrimination, inclusion, exclusion, dignity, respect, and repudiation. (Bhabha, 1994. p. 23), but language teachers face a dynamic of power in the classroom that is imposed by textbooks.

Historically, a country's desire to become bilingual has led to the emergence of colonial practices in the classroom. However, the fact is that local knowledge and expertise in the teaching of a foreign language have not been considered by governments in national bilingualism policies and, instead, have preferred the implementation of a Northern view of how English should be taught and learned in educational contexts, along with the materials, tests, and methods that should

be used. In the end, the EFL teacher has become a consumer of knowledge rather than a producer.

The former context is a framework to explore the authors of EFL material in Colombia, their struggles, and strengths in the field of English teaching and learning. Soto-Molina & Méndez (2020) show that EFL textbooks contents deal with prominent levels of alienation burden, superficial cultural components, and instrumentation by the submissive person, favoring the dominant culture of English and offering no possibilities to embrace interculturality in EFL teaching contexts. In this way, textbook authors impose a great deal of authority over lessons and constrain teachers in terms of syllabus selection, teaching methodologies, and other pedagogical decision-making processes which, in turn, marginalize teachers. Students implicitly accept the power enclosed in textbooks because they lack the knowledge and experience to judge them. These textbooks are not challenged in the academic context and are considered as authorities because they are reliable, valid, and written by experts and published by recognized international publishing houses. Therefore, the cultural content is taken at face value and often unjustifiably considered as correct, or even as the only possible interpretation of a foreign language. As Álvarez (2008) states, “It is common to see text publishing conglomerates offering teacher-proof training programs, promoting the traditional one-size-fits-all methodological model, and commercializing educational materials like textbooks and software” (p. 7). In other words, what comes from international publishing houses is seen as a better option than the material and ideas on language teaching based on local teachers’ experience and knowledge.

According to Usma (2009), the Ministerio de Educación Nacional (Colombian Ministry of Education [MEN]) uses a top-down approach to delegate policies, and even though teachers are called upon to participate in policy creation, their voices are silenced and substituted by foreign views of education. Usma also mentions that the MEN uses mostly the names of teachers and institutions only to validate and provide support to choose the tendency on methods or approaches, meaning they accept what should be taught in Colombian classrooms before discussions on the matter are held. A study conducted by Quintero (2011) traced reports on teaching research conducted in Colombia and found that before 1990, the field of education had been dominated by foreign research on teaching, whereas the next decade, local research on teaching started to appear. Therefore, he states, research studies conducted in Colombia have also been influenced by the coloniality of being, knowledge, and power. The English language is commonly assumed as a language of neutrality and global communication, but a language, as any cultural product, is laden with meanings and pondered on through colonial discourses.

The authors who include cultural components in English textbooks, as well as the diverse ways these components are displayed to teach the language, can be instruments of a dominant cultural reproduction system. Most of the English teachers around the world, once they start working for an institution, decide to follow strictly a textbook's methodology, which is usually imposed by the organization they work for. Therefore, these textbooks' authors are presented as invisible people, whose configuration as subjects is, taking Foucault's words (1969), determined by three dimensions: knowledge, power, and subjectivity, the latter referring to the way the subject understands and expresses itself depending on the context. However, Goldstein & Brooks (2007) also mention that publishers' representatives and their authors value the feedback local teachers give them, taking notes of requests, compliments, and complaints heard most often. They report this to the publishers who, in turn, hold meetings with the editorial departments, but the feedback stays as worksheets and the textbooks barely change.

In EFL programs, teachers give pre-service teachers a variety of sources to help learners become more skilled in learning a foreign language, leading most of the teachers to prepare their own materials. In fact, they are taught that they are not doing their job correctly if they "simply" take a textbook and teach straight from it day after day. In teacher practice, if a pre-service teacher teaches a lesson directly from the book, the observer appointed by the school dean will call attention to the importance of innovation in the classroom. There are programs in Colombia that give teachers the option to create and adapt material to their needs, but what is usually seen is teachers using foreign EFL material, which is a transfer of idealistic cultural constructs. Authors of EFL material are focusing on providing pre-determined input rather than facilitating intake, language acquisition, and development. Such a concern for input seems to result invariably in material that uses more language-practice exercises than language-using activities (Masuhara *et al.*, 2008).

According to Canagarajah (2005), scholars operating in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom lead the international research community. They not only produce knowledge on the matter of teaching, but also produce textbooks, materials, tests, and training courses that are consumed by countries off the center (countries where English is not the official language). In other words, pre-service teachers learn the coloniality from their teachers, since they copy or imitate predominant English culture practices, and when they are in the classroom, they reproduce the predominant culture to their learners unconsciously. Although many educational institutions have taken for granted that commercial textbooks supply what is needed to help a language learner to become bilingual, these English language textbooks, which are not created for

specific and local contexts, may produce a negative effect on students' motivation. Núñez & Téllez (2008) state that textbooks usually provide content that tends to generalize students' needs and fails to fulfill learners' and teachers' expectations. Harmer (1998) affirms that when students engage with content related to their lives and experiences, they learn better.

Therefore, I will focus my analysis on author subjectivity and the struggles they face on material design. Although they work in groups, they are aware of the neoliberal demands of economic growth imposed on them by foreign educational institutions to gain international recognition, organizations who, according to O'Neil (1982), are the experts or "knowers" in charge of providing scientific knowledge.

Contextualized materials informed by locally emerged content and methods that are sensitive to cultural diversity, without omissions, distortions, and biases, favoring the development of politically and culturally aware subjects.

By the same thought, Núñez-Pardo (2020) calls for students' and teachers' resistance to hegemony, a search for their critical socio-political awareness, committed agency, and generation of local knowledge, so that "subaltern can destabilize mainstream ways of developing standardized, homogenized, decontextualized and meaningless materials" (p. 19). EFL teachers and students are immersed in the world of materials, where the big publishing houses and textbook authors have constructed English as a "branded commodity" along lines which are entirely congruent with the values and practices of new capitalism, selling a world that is different from reality. English textbook authors convey the new capitalist values through idealized representations of work, such as the idea that living abroad helps learners to have better jobs, professions, and occupations, or even a better social status.

Despite the body of research described in this section, little is known about the author's subjectivity, and the literature on his struggles in material design is scarce. This issue will be addressed in the next section.

A Particular Setting

The use of learning material has played a key role in the teaching and learning of the English language. In all the settings I have worked with pre-service language teachers, I have realized there is a need to follow specific material to teach English in order to comply with the institution's curriculum. Teaching programs planned by teachers who analyze the right contents to include in each syllabus program have shown to offer better outcomes in students' needs and interests. Altman & Cashin (1992) pinpoint that a syllabus aims at communicating to

students what the course intends to be, the reasons for teaching it, its destination, and the requirements to pass it.

Institutional decisions are usually based on the content presented to teachers. However, they feel attracted and trapped by the textbook's layout and the teaching trends (methods and approaches) implemented in countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, among other. With the idea of teachers following international standards to teach a language like the Common European Framework, institutions and teachers can assume that textbooks are a magic potion to learn and teach a foreign language. The author who creates learning material includes what he or she considers should be the new trend in the market based on interculturality, until a new trend emerges and the author replaces the former one. This happens year after year.

Núñez & Téllez (2008) mention that learners' needs, informed teaching requisites and learning tendencies, as well as the wide range of socio-cultural conditions, must be properly identified, addressed, and considered by English language teachers if they want to promote more interesting, significant, and favorable learning environments. The evidence shows the degree to which English learning material has been influenced by trends from countries where English is the dominant language. When international publishers reach the teachers in charge of choosing the material to be used in institutions, they cite Colombian bilingualism policies as a way to enhance the validity and reliance of their material; later, teachers are forced to choose only one option of material, include it in the syllabus and use it with their students; finally, when pre-service teachers graduate, they continue replicating the methods and approaches used in the material they used during their studies. Regardless of the blame on this colonizing classroom practice, materials used by teachers in universities are seen as a "straitjackets" imposed on them.

Following my reflections on this procedure in universities, now I want to focus my attention on textbook authors as subjects and find out if they are aware of the colonizing nature of their materials, analyze their struggles before publishing a textbook, and inquire into the existence (or not) of their awareness of the real intentions behind the international publishers they write for.

Problematic Facts

In this section I will address three relevant aspects when discussing authors' subjectivity from a colonial perspective, since they play the key role in the development of EFL material.

The first aspect is the tendency to normalize the textbook author as someone who creates material. Most of the time, this key player is not as recognized as the publishing houses. Whereas usually we cannot name a single well-known

author of English language textbooks, as language users we know of many globally famous English language publishing houses. Language textbook authors are criticized in academic fields by the coloniality presented in their materials, but those comments are not focused on the authors, but on the materials that teachers and students use to carry out their teaching and learning processes. Teacher resistance is not aimed at the authors themselves, but at the textbooks' layout and the exclusion methods of less favored sectors of society used in the content.

In Colombia, the MEN usually seeks the advice of international publishing houses on the topic of bilingualism. Most of the government's strategies on the field of foreign languages, such as "Colombia Bilingüe", stem from the consultancy received from institutions like the British Council, which seek, paraphrasing Quintero (2011), the "strengthening of the development of foreign language skills". In fact, Cambridge University, which produces a comprehensive battery of standardized English language tests, is administered by the British Council. These standardized tests are used to diagnose the state of bilingualism in Colombian schools and help them justify the need to implement certifications of ideal sufficiency levels for the Colombian population. Therefore, language users perceive English language textbooks from international publishers as the guides to the "right" way to teach and learn English.

Though the use of textbooks has brought positive changes in English Language Teaching and learning, it is also true that there have been negative consequences too. On the positive side, they have contributed to the practice of English teaching through the granting of scholarships, assistantships, cultural exchanges, courses, and other similar educational experiences. They have helped most of us to improve our skills on the correct use of the language and have also given us the chance to access more information resources when learning a foreign. Nevertheless, they have self-ascribed the prestige of being the know-it-all when it comes to the teaching of ELT. I believe the MEN has seen the field as a type of "Silicon Valley": when results are positive, they argue that all the programs and the hours the students are exposed to the language are good and that the students are showing better performance in English (in programs offered by offices like the Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (SENA) or the British Council).

I believe with Bhabha (1994) that in Colombia we are far from those "imagined communities" in which the language teacher is part of a carceral world with low salaries, without access to the privilege given to native speakers, and constantly surrounded by evolving policies and foreign trends. In this changing world, language teaching and learning materials will continue working as scaffolds, but their future is in risk of becoming horizontally connected, as both producers and users (teachers and students) will be part of a creation and re-creation

dynamic. Therefore, ownership, autonomy, and contextualization will be core features of materials and material-rich pedagogies in a hard-to-resist marketed world. English language teachers need to become critical customers and co-developers of their tools. Despite being time-consuming, material development will help teachers continue their professional growth and discover new roads for exploration and inquiry. To do so, they need to understand what is behind the process of material development, which is the author's subjectivity. However, the issue of authenticity and pedagogical modification is more problematic.

When we think of authenticity in the context of EFL education, we tend to associate it with materials that have not been destined for an EFL world or for formal education. Paradoxically, most of these publishers in the Northern countries lack the interest in learning a foreign or second language. The Colombian National Bilingual Program (NBP) sees local teachers as a "force" that guarantees the program's success. However, this "force" could not be accomplished due to the teacher's low English level; thus, English teachers needed to be assessed, trained, and prepared to follow the experts' recommendations. According to Gray (2010, p. 31), "teachers are primary consumers of coursebooks and retain considerable power in determining the uses to which they are put in the classroom". This critical position on the examination of textbooks as market goods and capitalist objects is the opportunity to start looking at textbook uses in a new way.

The concepts and practices underpinning the author's subjectivity are monolithic. Said (1978) alludes to "the issue of feeling hostile towards 'others', because once one feels superior to another group, the innate desire to control this inferior group inevitably arises" (p. 67). In the imposed view of the world by dominant discourses, in which EFL has not been the exception because educators tend to replicate other discourses, educators do acknowledge that power creates resistance, but lack the interest in trying to change it. It will be interesting to see how scholars can isolate themselves in a world of their own instead of producing innovative ideas for the real world. As Foucault asserts (1969), "a culture and imperialism, such as the hegemony of culture, resistance against a superior one, and, most importantly, the hybridity of culture" (p.26).

This manifestation of power is presented very neutrally by EFL teachers to their students, which is far from the reality of language communication. They do not provide sufficient exposure to the language nor enough opportunities to learners to use the language themselves, which narrows the learners' opportunities. Probably the biggest complaint that students have about their learning is that the EFL educator is typically a customer of a large market of international publishing houses which try to cater to everybody, but who does not take part in the selection of textbooks. Textbook authors build a worldview with knowledge

and ideas from Europe and other Northern countries, giving language teachers and students the perception that theirs is an inferior culture. Given their key role in the process of material development, these authors should gain a more balanced worldview.

Some textbooks fail to mention local culture and overlook the reality that the learners' knowledge of the world is partially shaped by the constant exposure to international media. In EFL material development, authors and editors surely struggle about the ideas they plan to include in textbooks, as some of these might have found their way into other books, despite the opposition from other team members. There is also the case of a lack of flexibility from those who designed materials, because maybe they cannot adapt or personalize the books as they would like to. Indeed, most of their ideas could be completely different to what the market considers appropriate and publishable.

The author's subjectivity appears to be invisible in the literature related to the struggles authors face before, during, and after the process of creating materials. Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault have examined the role and relevance of authorship in relation to the meaning or interpretation of a text. In his essay "Death of the Author", Barthes (1977) challenges the idea that a text can be attributed to a single author and argues that "it is the language which speaks, not the author". For Barthes, it is the words and language of a text who determine and expose the meaning, and not someone who possesses a legal responsibility for its production process. Every line of written text is a mere reflection of references from a multitude of traditions. As he puts it, "the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture" (p.146). therefore, it is never original. Consequently, the author's perspective is removed from the text, and the limits formerly imposed by the idea of one authorial voice, one ultimate and universal meaning, are destroyed. He states that the explanation and meaning of work do not need to be sought in the one who produced it, "as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author 'confiding' in us" (p. 123). In this sense, the author's psyche, culture, or fanaticism can be disregarded when interpreting a text, because the words are rich enough and hold all the language traditions. To expose meanings in a written work without appealing to the celebrity of an author, his tastes, passions, or vices is, for Barthes, to allow language, rather than the author, to speak.

On the other side, in his essay "What is an author", Foucault (1969) argues that all authors are writers, but not all writers are authors. He states that to assign the title of author to a written work it is necessary to attribute certain standards to the text. These, for Foucault, are working in conjunction with the idea of what

he calls “the author function”. Foucault’s author function is the idea that an author exists only as a function of a written work and warns of the risks of keeping the author’s name in mind during interpretation, as it could affect the value and meaning with which one handles an interpretation. This is probably why international publishing houses decide to assign textbook authorship to a teamwork of scholars working on material design rather than to individuals.

In short, Barthes and Foucault suggest that there is no direct link between the ideas of “author” and “authorship” because of the distinction between producing a written work and the interpretation or meaning of said work; in the context of textbook creation, this same distinction complicates the designation of the “author” title to a textbook writer. Both warn of the dangers inherent in the interpretations arising from the association of meaningful words and language with the personality of a specific authorial voice.

De Sousa Santos (2016) notes that the deliberate destruction of other cultures and the destruction of knowledge has permeated the way our local knowledge is displayed. Authors have been part of the destruction of local knowledge and cultures; therefore, the “incompleteness of knowledge” is a form of domination, oppression, and supremacy on another culture. Not only such destructions have erased memories, but also the way people think about themselves. When applied to textbook creation, the subjectivity of the author who designs material can be seen as an occupation, a domination of the classroom. Displacing the Colombian English teacher’s knowledge and experiences, textbooks have placed teachers as subalterns who cannot have an active participation in the students’ learning processes.

Problem Statement

In this chapter I have given some thoughts on the author’s subjectivity on material development. Consequently, since my research subject is the author, I want to unveil the authors’ struggles in recognition, rights, organization, and payment on English teaching in the field of English language textbook development. My research seeks to contribute to the development of EFL material with a decolonial discourse. I plan to explore the following research questions and objectives:

Research questions

- How are EFL textbook authors subjected by the industry of textbook creation?

Objectives

- Identify the ways in which the author’s subjectivity interferes with textbook creation.

- Explore the struggles faced in the process of textbook creation.
- Characterize the inner forces that guide the author's subjectivity.

By answering the research question and objectives, I hope to contribute to the field of language teacher education in Colombia by acknowledging the way the author as a subject is submerged in a context of language prestige, habits, and values stemmed from English language dominant circles, which are used to universalize author identities to the detriment of minoritized languages' set of cultural values and identities. Authors of in-house materials in Colombia must overcome the intercultural dimension of language teaching in scenarios where textbooks are culturally biased, address problematic ideologies and are used as acculturation instruments that favor linguistic colonialism.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided evidence for the reason behind the importance of studying the author's subjectivity. Authors play a key role in replicating ideologies of colonialism, discrimination, exclusion, and inequalities, which affect the educational context in EFL. They can be the path into power-resistance practices from English language teachers and institutions, as the author's subjectivity can trace the field of resistance and creates the possibility of thinking new ways of teaching and learning English and of integrating local knowledge with foreign knowledge (where English is the dominant language). This will give teachers the chance to develop their own ideas on textbook development without recourse to neoliberal values such as individualism, aspiration, affluence, and consumerism. It will also open the analysis of the author of EFL textbooks and their struggles, strengths, and subjections to dominant western cultures, in a context characterized by power, hegemony, exclusion, discrimination, and oppression, as well as by resistance, independence, inclusion, and individuality.

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