

## 2. ELT Research from the Global South: Uncertainties in a Rarely-Walked Road

---

*Carmen Helena Guerrero Nieto*  
*chguerreron@udistrital.edu.co*  
*Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas*

### Introduction

Being an educator of English Language Teachers and embracing a decolonial perspective may seem a contradiction. Often times, when talking about this doctoral program to colleagues of other disciplines, they look puzzled because in their worldviews, it would be not possible to form teachers to teach the language of the empire while at the same time problematizing the very same field from the vantage point of decolonialism. But, the world is not black and white. The world has many colors, shades, and textures. And, although we try to keep consistency between our discourses and practices, we also acknowledge that we live in constant contradictions, and are full of questions, doubts, and uncertainties. That is a part of who we are, as well as an important component of the intellectual and academic work.

One of the questions that constantly hunts us, and we munch about with our doctoral students in the research seminars, has to do with: what would entail a serious pursue of qualitative research in the Global South? We are yet to have the answers. However, in this chapter I would like to take a risk and discuss some of my reflections, which ideally would keep pushing us, the ELT community, out of our comfort zone.

For the rest of this chapter, I'll be using the voice of a first person singular, thus accepting my responsibility for the ideas that I am about to present. In trying to answer such a complex question, I will only deal with the role of researchers as well as the challenges and possibilities I see for them<sup>8</sup>. I would like to start by reviewing the contribution of quantitative and qualitative methods in the

<sup>8</sup> In order to keep a gender perspective, I will use the singular "they" (them/their/they) whenever I refer to a second person singular, that is, she/he/her/his/her/him. I ground my decision on Geoff Pullum,

production of knowledge and truth. I consider that this is a necessary discussion if we are interested in undertaking research from a decolonial perspective where these concepts are decentered. Then, I will address the need to engage in epistemological reflection in ELT. After that, I will discuss some challenges and difficulties that embracing a decolonial perspective might entail, particularly when adopting an *Epistemología del sujeto conocido* (Epistemology of the Known Subject), and finally I will close this chapter with proposing some possibilities for doing research in ELT from the South.

## Quantitative and Qualitative Methods in the Production of Knowledge and Truth

Research is a vast and therefore exciting field. From a Western perspective, there has been general consensus regarding what knowledge is, what truth is, and how they are discovered or uncovered. The two dominant paradigms in research, the quantitative and the qualitative, have both pursued the same ideal. The quantitative paradigm, as it is widely known and accepted, has been largely influenced by positivism. According with the positivist thinking, only what is observable and measurable can become a source for knowledge and knowledge itself; the same happens with truth.

The emergence of different types of qualitative research methodologies led to the configuration of the qualitative paradigm. Qualitative methodologies challenged the prevalence of quantitative research because their object of study, as well as their methods for collecting and analyzing data, came to be very different than those of quantitative methodologies. Many of the qualitative methods were not observable or accurately measurable because they were imbricated in the living world where the individual, their feelings, ideas, and ways of signifying the world were central. However, and due to all the criticisms towards this emerging approach, qualitative researchers tried to mirror quantitative stages and procedures in order to make these methodologies more *scientific* (e.g. trustworthiness as a way to show reliability, as Cochran-Smith & Lytle discussed in 1999), or used triangulation in data analysis as a way to minimize sources of bias, as explained by Freeman (1998). As a consequence, the concepts of knowledge and truth remained unchallenged, as much as the methods to access and produce them, which was evident in most graduate qualitative research textbooks (including the widely used in Colombia *Metodología de la Investigación* (Research

Methodology) by Hernandez (2019), which adhered to the principles and procedures of quantitative research. Some other indicators of the strong influence of the quantitative paradigm, in particular the quantitative approach when understanding and producing knowledge and truth, include: a) the criteria established by research agencies to finance research projects; b) the guidelines of indexed journals for the publication of research reports IMRAD (Introduction, Methods, Results And Discussion); and, c) the general outline and format for masters and doctoral dissertations on graduate programs.

Through time, and with more and more scholars conducting different types of qualitative research, the field has undergone deep transformations as the result of questioning the consistency of conducting *by the book* qualitative research that is based on positivist thinking and quantitatively-oriented methods while reality presents itself in so many and complex ways. Feminist research methods, for example, emerge as a response to a generalized masculine view on research that was apparent in every aspect of the process (Lichtman, 2012). These methods challenge, for example, the hegemonic relationship between the researcher and the participant, where the researchers see themselves as the owners of knowledge and truth while relegating participants to the role of mere informants who are left in the dark about the purposes and results of the research study. This is just to give an example, because as reported by Denzin & Lincoln (2012), scholars are problematizing the given in a wide array of qualitative research methods.

Adding to this ample global interest in examining qualitative approaches, and with the emergence of decolonial theories, the question about how to conduct research within such qualitative framework becomes of interest to those interested in conducting decolonial projects (Mardones, 2016). Puentes (2015), states that, within decolonial theories, the methods to conduct research remain as one of the gaps that still needs to be addressed, which in fact has become a challenge in our doctoral program.

## ELT on the Path to Epistemological Reflection

All the authors who contributed to this book, including myself, have performed as English-language teachers at some point of our professional careers. Some of them remain working as such, while some others have become teacher educators. We all have in common an education as English teachers based on Anglo American teaching methods and approaches. Thus,

most of us likely have participated in colonial practices while teaching English. Additionally, several of us have privileged either American or British English dialects over other English-language varieties and have also penalized students for using Spanish in the classroom or have praised those students who were able to attain an English-language pronunciation that was to some degree native-like, among other common teaching practices in the classroom. As researchers, our studies have all been framed within the qualitative paradigm, and we have consistently attempted to explore the most complex issues (such as subjectivities, identities, gender, power, and language policies, to mention just a few), from critical perspectives. Yet, while engaged on those qualitative research projects, we have strived to follow the traditional research parameters pertaining to quantitative thinking, since these are the practices accepted and legitimized in academic communities. However, we have complied with all the requirements and steps of a research study.

Only after engaging in this doctoral program, we have started to detach from thinking research only from traditional perspectives and have embraced epistemological reflections. As stated by Vasilachis (2009: 3), such processes are the result of the ingenuity expected to emerge, in part, when investigators face research situations for which there are not clear perspectives, or for which the existing research methods do not serve the purpose of the study. In this aspect, Social Sciences have advanced thanks to the work of the group of scholars participating in the decolonial turn (Cruz-Gómez & Grosfoguel, 2007), and have contributed to generate new ways of thinking about the administration, production, and distribution of knowledge.

ELT, on the other hand, is in need to examine itself, which is particularly true when considering ELT ways to produce knowledge. As stated by Vasilachis (2009: 2), "What we call science, like other forms of knowledge, is a social construction and depends as much on the beliefs and values of scientists, as it is on its strict adherence to abstract methods and measures"<sup>9</sup>. Traditionally, ELT research has been dominated by Western perspectives regarding how to produce knowledge. Such perspectives deal with several matters, including topics of interest, role of the researchers, the methods to analyze and report data, and the role of participants, among others. It is relevant to say, though, that some Colombian scholars have been working on the development of alternative research agendas, some of which are distant from the imposed (or self-imposed) research topics-of-interest that are prevalent in the Western thinking. Publications in indexed journals, scholarly events, and

---

9 My own translation from Spanish

graduate dissertations, are evidence of this transformation in research topics. However, the field does need to engage in a more serious epistemological reflection, particularly because, until these days, most of us, the researchers, have reproduced research methods that, in some cases, cannot account appropriately for many of the phenomena in our complex realities.

## Challenges and Possibilities

Conducting research from a decolonial perspective constitutes an enormous challenge related to a variety of aspects. It demands that, as researchers, we change our old skins to unlearn practices as well as to question and reformulate our beliefs about knowledge, science, and the entire process of doing research. Research questions might be many, but here I will only refer to what Vasilachis (2009) calls “*sujeto cognoscente*” and “*sujeto conocido*” in order to propose a turn in the way we conduct ELT research; such, should decenter the “*sujeto cognoscente*” and place the “*sujeto conocido*” at the core of the process.

Vasilchis (2009) definition of “*sujeto cognoscente*” (knowing subject) and “*sujeto conocido*” (*known subject*), stems out of the three paradigms that she identifies in her epistemological reflection about research in sociology: Historical Materialism, Positivist, and Interpretive. The *sujeto cognoscente* and the *sujeto conocido* are conceived in highly unequal terms, where the *sujeto cognoscente* has the cognitive tools to know the *sujeto conocido* in their context, while also possesses all the information and control over the research process. The *sujeto conocido*, on the other hand, comes to be the other actor in the process, where he is constructed as passive and objectivized, voiceless, and unable to interpret his own reality.

Positivist research curtailed the human dimension out of humans (emotions are not measurable or quantifiable) in their interest to be fully scientific and objective. This idea, as mentioned above, has permeated even qualitative studies, which in turn have developed procedures to attain the desirable objectivity. The challenge for research in ELT, discussed in this chapter, is to change the positivist perspective to adopt an *Epistemología del sujeto conocido*. Such epistemology proposes, first of all, that participants must be considered not an object but a person who has the ability to signify and gives meaning to a living world, where meaning emerges from the individual and

not from the external context. Bringing the human dimension back would mean that the researcher and the participant are seen as two selves who co-construct knowledge in an intersubjective relationship.

Considering both, the researcher and the participant, as parties who jointly develop knowledge within an intersubjective relationship, is something that might result in producing tensions for the researcher. I will refer to three of those tensions that I have identified in the collective work with the doctoral students in this program, and which are intertwined: tensions related to the researcher epistemological perspective; tensions that have to do with the research process itself and how to conduct it; and, tensions related to the professional implications of doing research on the Global South. In epistemological terms, these tensions tackle a wide range of aspects.

**Tensions related to the researcher epistemological perspective.** As mentioned above, members of the ELT community worldwide have been constructed from a very technical and instrumental perspective (Kumaravadivelu, 2003), where teaching the language (in this case English) is seen as a neutral and candid task. As such, from the epistemological point of view, the field of languages teaching has been defined within some limits related to which competences should students develop and with which teaching methods, as well as what are the types of questions to be asked and the processes or methods to answer them. An immense challenge to ELT researchers emerges when, within broader discourses on what knowledge (in singular) is, the need to explore another people's knowledges becomes apparent. Such is a challenge that necessarily destabilizes the field, the researcher's own self, and the ways of knowing, among others.

**Tensions associated to the research process.** The influence of the positivist thinking has also permeated qualitative research approaches and confined researchers within very strict boundaries. Traditional ways of knowing have turned into an obstacle, because the researcher is considered knowledgeable and competent as long as he follows the rules of traditional research. Thus, casual conversations with participants in a given research study, or any data coming from sources that were not originally included in the research design (regardless of how relevant it comes to be) cannot, and shall not, be used because they are assumed to violate the general research protocol. It seems that in an attempt to be as objective and valid as possible, qualitative research has become even stricter than quantitative research when it comes to designing and conducting research studies. The need of piloting instruments, as well as

the processes of triangulation of data, are good examples of this self-imposed *objectivity*.

The task of removing the heritage of positivist paradigms, in order to view the *sujeto conocido* as an *acting other* who has something to say about who he is and how he constructs his worldviews, is something that creates tension. That is, among other reasons, because the researcher has been conceived as the *knowing subject* who is invested of a superior power given by his academic and research careers. Thus, when embracing a symmetrical relationship with the *sujeto conocido*, it is implicated that the participant in a given research study also has access to the rules, tools, and information pertaining to the research process about which he was ignorant before.

**Tensions pertaining to investigating in the Global South.** A third tension that I have identified, has to do with the professional implications associated to conducting research at the Global South, particularly when adopting the *Epistemología del sujeto conocido*. As I have been claiming along this chapter, positivist thinking has been highly influential in our field. As scholars, we are expected to produce and disseminate knowledge. However, as I mentioned somewhere above, the guidelines for publications in indexed journals and graduate dissertations in both, masters and doctorate programs, generally follow a clear positivist structure. In addition to that, most terms of reference from national or institutional research-related organizations, require adherence to the same positivist patterns when applying for research grants. Once again, this set of rules becomes a career obstacle because the opportunities to disseminate knowledge produced in the Global South are very limited given the positivist structures that dominate academic circles.

However, I would like to mention some scenarios where to rethink possible solutions to these issues that we, as a team, (teachers and students) have found in our research endeavor:

Constant engagement in epistemological reflection. During the two years of our Research Seminars, we have taken every opportunity to reflect about the research projects we are proposing; we have challenged our own systems of beliefs and have strived to find or create possibilities for an *Epistemología del sujeto conocido*.

Value the potential for intersubjectivity in the co-construction of knowledge. Listening to the *sujeto conocido* opens a whole lot of possibilities towards knowledge and towards different ways of understanding and acting in the world.

Placing the *sujeto conocido* at the center of the research process has allowed us to move from asking *why* to asking *who*. The subject recovers their human dimension and their perspective on the living world. Furthermore, by placing the *sujeto conocido* at the center, he is not represented but actually invoked (Vasilachis, 2009), while by doing that, we bring to the research report his story, his identity, his essence, and his very existence in the living world.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to answer the question: what would entail a serious pursue of qualitative research in the Global South? It is necessary to acknowledge that such a question deserves (and demands) a comprehensive study, so that to be able to, at least, scratch an approximation of an answer. Here, I have brought to the table some of the concerns that, as a member of a scholar team that is engaged in issues of identity, power and inequality, and ELT, I have researched about. I have focused in the proposal of adopting an *Epistemología del sujeto conocido* (Vasilachis, 2009), in the hopes to seduce other ELT researchers to join us in this uncertain but fascinating endeavor.



## References

---

Cochran-Smith, M., Lytle, S. (1999). The Teacher Research Movement: A Decade Later. *Educational Researcher* (28)7, pp.15-25.

Castro-Gómez, S., Grosfoguel, R. (2007). *El giro decolonial. Reflexiones para una diversidad epistémica más allá del capitalismo global*. Bogotá: Siglo del Hombre Editores.

Denzin, N., Lincoln, Y. (2012). *Paradigmas y perspectivas en disputa*. Barcelona: Gedisa.

Freeman, D. (1998). *Doing Teacher Research: From Inquiry to Understanding*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Kumaravadivelu, B. (2003). *Beyond Methods: Macrostrategies for Language Teaching*. Yale University Press.

Lichtman, M. (2012). *Qualitative Research in Education: A User's Guide*. California: Sage.

Mardones, D. (2016). Investigación cualitativa. *Investigación Cualitativa*, (1)1, pp. 1-5.

Puentes, J. P. (2015). Decolonización metodológica e interculturalidad. Reflexiones desde la investigación etnográfica. *Revista Latinoamericana de Metodología de las Ciencias Sociales*, (5)2, p. 6.

Vasilachis, I. (2009). Los fundamentos ontológicos y epistemológicos de la investigación cualitativa. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* (10)2.