

1. Methodological Imprisonment of Research in ELT Education: Exploring Complementary Ways-Out

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*“It is necessary to incorporate utopian thinking in the social sciences”
(Wallerstein, 2005)*

*... and, by extension, in methodologies to research ELT Education
(Castañeda-Peña, 2020)*

Introduction

As Wallerstein (2005) put it, humankind tended to get used to certainties that were ultimately offered by the so-called *scientific findings*. Truth (e.g. scientific findings) could only be revisited and modified when new findings added more true and valid arguments to a *customized* truth. Yet, there was a sort of belief that the scientific method and scientific research were the only valid form to apprehend and comprehend facts mainly external to the subject. Probably, it could be asserted that, throughout their education years, most scholars, as well as undergraduate and graduate students, learned to follow well-organized and consistent research steps, and to use reliable instruments that enabled them to *extract* and analyze data, in order to obtain univocal conclusions expressed in universal analytical categories. This research approach clearly was a less iterative and a more linear way to conduct research. Thus, truth obtained through scientific research processes that *followed the book* appeared to be universal, univocal, immanent and perhaps inevitable. In my view, this approach constitutes a sort of methodological *prison* with

important epistemological and ontological implications. However, I realize that those restrictions imposed by the scientific methods have nested most of the knowledge that humankind possesses, while paving a luminous way for scientists and researchers to follow. As a result, "... for many, the labels 'scientific' and 'modern' became almost synonymous, and for almost everyone, those labels were commendable" (Wallerstein, 2005, p. 15). I dare to say that ELT Education also got caught in this *luminous way*. Thus, in this chapter, or rather brief reflection paper, I mean what I mean drawing on the *scientific* and *modern* language I possess. Such language is part of the educational tradition mentioned above. The desire, however, is not to radically oppose to a methodological tradition, since I have been living / researching using it. There is a desire to multi-signify such tradition using a decolonial *spirit*.

In this paper, a decolonial perspective is proposed as a complementary way out from the methodological imprisonment that *scientific* approaches and *modern* labels have imposed to research in ELT Education; based on a deliberate practice of what I have called *thinking-on-motion*. This chapter proposes that a decolonial perspective could free ELT research out from its methodological imprisonment; a discussion of how such imprisonment has turned English language teaching and learning into a rigid and monolithic practice is included. The ideas that I discuss here, should be considered an ideological, speculative and subjective exercise evolving from Wallerstein's arguments (2005). Yet, they are incipient and not fully developed. Questions and reflections, more than answers, are the contents of this chapter. They are mirroring the uncertainties that have emerged along the way of my own collective and polyphonic research experience in the ELT arena. The underlying assumption is that, even nowadays, a myriad of colonial mechanisms still exists, which support certainties that should be put into question under a decolonial perspective. A second purpose of this chapter is to envision how an ideological and subjective decolonial experience would look like in the local ELT. The chapter finishes with a voice of caution to critically embrace some methodological decolonial assumptions related to ELT Education.

Some Questioned Certainties about ELT

Applied Linguistics to the teaching of English as a second / foreign language, has long conceived the education of English language teachers under a model focused on universal grammar, error analysis, and comparative analysis,

among others. Additionally, cognitive theories have contributed with ideas about long-term memory, learning styles and cognitive / metacognitive styles. More recently, a more socio-culturally based model has emerged as a result of problematizing ideas of power, identity and agency.

This evolution of the thinking behind English-language teaching models (which has been merely mentioned here) has favored the upsurge of a variety of approaches to teach the language (García, 2019), including *Native Language Arts*, *Heritage Language Education*, and *Bilingual/Multilingual Education*, among others. On this matter, García (2009) also states that languages tend to be taught as natural entities in curricular spaces that include, but are not limited to, *Immersion Bilingual Education*, *Developmental Bilingual/Multilingual Education*, *Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)*, *Transitional Bilingual Education*, and *Mother-tongue-based Multilingual Education*.

In the list above is also important to include those approaches with a presence in the local and regional contexts, in particular those applied to undergraduate English language teacher education programs such as *B.Ed. in Languages*, *B.Ed. in Modern Languages*, *B.Ed. in Bilingual Education*, and *B.A. in Language Professional*. According to García (2019), it seems evident that “different types of languages have been assigned to school learners in an effort to control access to opportunities. And it is also evident that both, elite and minoritized populations, have participated in legitimizing these constructions” (p. 159).

In addition to García’s realization of the underlying linguistic and educational standardization at schools, I would like to also point out the fact that this multiplication of the educational systems’ efforts to expand and solidify learning of English language from early education years, has originated methodological and epistemological considerations regarding related phenomena such as: a) binary structures (e.g. native speaker vs. non-native speaker); b) universalization (e.g. methods for English language teaching); c) appropriation of other’s identities, (e.g. language learner as an abstract entity); d) loss of the subject (e.g. ideal language learner and ideal language teacher, best teaching practices); and, e) ideas of community as equals (e.g. unified academic communities), among other mechanisms that currently support colonialism in ELT Education. Under these circumstances, what is considered a certainty is not just the binarism, the loss of the subject, or any

other of the numbered considerations above, but rather the way to conduct research on such certainties.

Granados-Beltrán (2018), for example, states that research in ELT Education has become naturally hegemonic. He proposes, as an alternative, that “prospective ELT undergraduate and graduate researchers should appropriate other methodologies that might enrich their understanding of contexts and participants, such as ethnography, phenomenology, narrative research, and case studies, among other possible study designs” (Granados-Beltrán, 2018, p. 188). Yet, it seems important to point out some pertinent voice of caution to say that novice and more experienced researchers could further their methodological competence by adscribing to either critical methodologies or decolonial doings.

Ever-Growing Local ELT Decolonialisms

Some epistemological and ontological objections to Critical Applied Linguistics, and to some decolonial views (such as those recognized as allegations of linguistic imperialism that Phillipson identified in 1992), advocate the idea that inequality is seen as culturally and socially indispensable to maintain a natural discursive and linguistic order. For example, Rajagopalan (1999) has stated that “In any society, language planning and language teaching necessarily entail a rehashing of existing power relations simply because power is exercised in and through language. It is foolhardy to expect that such power inequalities can be rectified or done away with, once and for all. From a linguistic perspective, all societies are riddled with what Ray (1965) calls *indispensable inequality*” (p. 206). Such thinking that social and cultural organization is naturally instrumentalized through language needs revision. The reason for that is precisely what discursively configures ideological certainties that perpetuate for example, binarisms, universalization, appropriation of other’s identities, loss of the subject and diverse communities seen as no equals. In spite of this criticism, it would also be senseless not to expect evolution of ideologies that contribute to the discussion with alternative and complementary viewpoints.

That is why I regard the emergence of decolonial positions with enthusiasm and at the same time with some anticipatory concern, particularly when it comes to the Colombian and regional contexts in relation to the

teaching-learning of the English language. At the time of writing this chapter, such positions have effectively been sponsored by our doctoral program⁷ in the emphasis of ELT Education (see Castañeda-Peña et al, 2018). For us, the most prominent uncertainty is related to the methodological aspect of the research process. Methodology has been, so far, the most criticized research-related aspect challenging our PhD students as well as myself. In most cases, methodological criticisms have come from a positivist mindframe that puts into question, for example, the number of participants in any particular research study, its statistical validity, its triangulation processes, and/or how unreliable its research findings might come to be.

However, some efforts rooted on the decolonial view are examining the ELT arena with a critical-ethnographic-action-research (CEAR) approach, that put forward actions to decolonize English language teaching (López-Gopar, 2014, 2016). This upsurge of reflection papers that reinvigorate the quest for decolonial doings has been recognized. Some examples are, the revision of the colonial legacy in relation to ELT teacher professionalism and identity (Torres-Rocha, 2019), and the need to help pre-service and in-service English language teachers to become more power literate (Granados-Beltrán, 2018), both aiming to reflexively challenge the ideology of indispensable inequality. There is not an intention to prescribe a *one size fits all* solution. Yet, the main question revolves around comprehending what could work as decolonial doing. Would such decolonial doing apply to investigate challenges related to English-language teaching and learning? The same question is valid when it comes to basic and continued education programs for English teachers. It is necessary to recognize that the research methodology tends to be a problem of Modernism. How to escape from such imprisonment?

It is not my intention to find a final answer to all these questions. However, I think helpful to reiterate the need for a flexible, open-minded evolution on how to think *English-language teacher's education* and *power inequality and identity*, which are two of the foundational themes of the ELT Education in our Education PhD program. Some of these ideas are based on the work of Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg (2011) regarding an evolving critical attitude and methodological bricolage. In their words, it is advisable not to commit to a singular or specific way of doing research “by eschewing positivist approaches to both qualitative and quantitative research [...] and refusing to cocoon research within the pod of unimethodological approaches; we

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believe critical theory and critical pedagogy continue to challenge regularly employed and obsessive approaches to research” (p. 173).

In the same line of thinking, some other authors see that “we are immersed in an exchange of insults (between those who do not consider themselves decolonial and those who do) in the midst of the struggle for control of the resources on the institutions that generate knowledge. It is time to start meditating on the philosophical premises of our scientific activity and the political context of knowledge structures” (Wallerstein, 2005 p. 16). Thinking can be understood as something that has the ability to move, and that should exercise such ability to movement. Under this view, the natural attributes of any thought are recognized to be political and ideological, including epistemological, ontological and methodological axes interweaving as a tapestry made of multiple rationalities. The *thinking-on-motion* should also be applied to possible revisions of decolonialist theories and political proposals, possibly in the same manner as the decolonial thinker and critic Espinosa-Miñoso (2014) does regarding feminist critical epistemologies, or some other epistemologies and philosophical traditions at some point in history did regarding alternative loci of enunciation (for example the Confucionism).

Exerting the *thinking-in-motion* should result in the identification of, at least, the three current and major decolonial perspectives that Castro (2016) finds in Latin America: “Within this model of rationality, there are various positions ranging from criticism to all foundational and universalist normativity (Grosfoguel), to a paradigm that restores essentialisms appealing to *the popular* (Dussel), or to those coming from the claim of border thinking (Mignolo)” (Castro, 2016, p.1). To this viewpoint, Ojeda and Cabaluz (2010) add up that the identification of several decolonial perspectives would happen “particularly in regard to the categories of ‘coloniality of power’ and ‘geopolitics of knowledge’, (which) have enormous links with critical pedagogies as an emancipatory political project” (p. 155). Within my proposed scenario of *thinking-on-motion*, and following to Wallerstein (2005), “the fundamental argument is that the assertion of universal truths, which include universal norms, is a ‘meta-narrative’ or ‘master narrative’ (a global narrative) that represents an ideology of powerful groups within the world-system and that, therefore, has no epistemological validity” (p. 124). No form of knowing, or related to knowledge, should have the status of *the* only supreme, unparalleled epistemology. I would like to argue that, within a decolonial *thinking-on-motion* methodology, questions regarding methodology emerge

precisely because of the epistemological rethinking that is installed as part of ever-growing, permanently evolving local or regional decolonialisms in ELT.

Assumptions to Help Exploring Methodological Ways Out

According to Wallerstein (2005) “we must discard the image of the neutral scientist and adopt a conception of scientists as intelligent people but with concerns and interests and moderated in the exercise of their *hybris*” (p. 21). What is more, accordingly with some methodology recommendations from Granados-Beltrán (2018) focused on researchers on ELT Education, it would be important to critically and decolonially consider the following set of assumptions to shatter traditional unimethodological approaches and to support revisited research agendas (see Castañeda-Peña et al, 2018):

- Research processes are to be conceived as researching with (someone) not about (someone).
- Research processes are mediated by power relations that develop heterarchical alternatives.
- Research processes are relational.
- Research processes appeal to traditional research instruments yet should revisit them from a decolonial perspective.
- Research processes acknowledge the existence of a locus of enunciation or loci (understood as “the geo-political and body-political location of the subject that speaks” (Grosfoguel, 2011, p. 5).
- Research processes are ethically intersubjective.
- Ever-growing local decolonialisms *foci*, in ELT, are discursive and constituted through language.
- Ever-growing local decolonialisms in ELT emphasize historicity focused on finding continuities, discontinuities, ruptures, cracks and multiple relations (which are not necessarily relations of cause-effect).
- Ever-growing local decolonialisms in ELT are intellectual and should remain connected to critical emancipation and to critical action.

- Ever-growing local decolonialisms in ELT should respond to criticisms with a critical and decolonial mindframe and method.
- Research processes should focus critically on “public policies on education grounded in globalization”, should be seen as a “complex phenomenon [that could] be understood in a continuum” (Guerrero, 2018, p. 121).
- Research processes should focus on unmasking “the power knowledge relations in which the English [language] teacher subject has been objectified to fulfill the requirements of policies, the standards of an idealization of being or to explain the failure of a State’s goal” (Méndez, 2018, p. 203).
- Research processes should focus on “colonial mechanisms or devices that are noxious to human existence in general” (Castañeda-Peña, 2018, p. 28-29), and to English language learners, and teachers in particular.

Conclusion

The first six assumptions above would constitute, to some degree, a decolonial-doing framework that is no prescriptive and has no pretention to becoming a decolonial certainty. Those assumptions simply put forward alternatives that should enable researchers to exercise epistemological and methodological reflection. Such resource is needed in order to prevent “reestablishing hidden [or overt methodological] mechanisms that invigorate colonial situations”, (Castañeda-Peña, 2018, p. 28), which support and maintain knowledge and colonialism within ELT arenas. The remaining seven assumptions also point towards uncovering potential research agendas that methodologically could challenge unimethodological positions, and/or methodological research imprisons in English language teaching and learning.

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