

Navigating Uncharted Waters Towards Decolonial Stances in Research

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Introduction

Doing research from a decolonial stance is a beautiful and alluring endeavor, particularly when the researcher's spirit is always searching to push the envelope, find ways to subvert the canon, and do things differently. This describes what has happened to us as dissertation advisers in our doctoral program. The initial excitement of starting a new journey (and the unforeseen struggles, tensions, and contradictions to come along the way) has been transformed into countless forms of learning while doing and learning together.

This chapter, which results from a formative research process in which the three of us and our advisees have taken part, will be divided into three main sections. In the first one, we will discuss the meta-analysis of our chapters for the previous book on Methodological Uncertainties of Research in ELT I (Castañeda-Peña, 2020) to show what our concerns were at the time. The second part will be devoted to underscoring our epistemological reflexivity as research mentors as we discuss, delve into, and try to make sense of what a decolonial stance would look like. In the last section, we will set out some challenges as we continue navigating these uncharted waters to bring ways of understanding, informing, shaping, and reshaping the field of ELT.

Embracing a Decolonial Stance in Research: Our Initial Concerns

This meta-analysis of the three chapters we published in the first book of this series was conducted to examine the common concerns we had at that moment in time when we started mentoring our first cohort of doctoral students. Among the decisions we made to conduct the research class was to co-teach it. This

meant that the three of us would be in all the classes along with all our students and would teach and mentor them during the sessions (each of us would also meet individually with our advisees). Being able to share this 5-hour weekly space filled with many learnings fueled by the engaging conversations during the classes. This communal experience has, in part, inspired this publication series in which we reflect on our doings trying to figure out how to conduct research from a decolonial stance.

Each of us wrote one chapter: *Methodological Imprisonment of Research in ELT Education: Exploring Complementary Way Out* (Castañeda-Peña, 2020), *Experiencing Uncertainties* (Méndez, 2020) and *ELT Research from the Global South: Uncertainties in a rarely-walked road* (Guerrero-Nieto, 2020). Using the decolonial lens, Castañeda-Peña (2020) took an interest in discussing the nature of research and how we have been groomed into doing it. Méndez (2020) focuses on the “doers” of research, which are, in our case, our doctoral students. Guerrero-Nieto (2020), in her piece, concentrates on examining the role of research in ELT in Colombia. The meta-analysis allowed us to trace two common concerns that we describe below.

Trapped by Canonical Discourses and Ways of Doing Research

The three of us feel that many elements of canonical research still tie us, and it isn't easy to set free. Castañeda-Peña (2020, p. 38) calls it “methodological imprisonment” and describes its consequences on setting the research agendas in ELT globally. A great deal of research conducted in ELT has, traditionally, been based on a set of naturalized beliefs and ideas called “certainties” by Castañeda-Peña (2020, p. 40) and that are passed onto us, ELT researchers of the South, and members of the largely colonized camp, as indisputable truths. For Méndez (2020), this imprisonment expands to our “being and thinking” (p. 60), meaning that the canonical way of doing research has even colonized our very existence and, with it, the way we position ourselves in regards to what truth is and how to go about investigating it. Guerrero-Nieto (2020), in her part, discusses the role of teacher education programs, research agencies, and indexed journals in perpetuating and strengthening practices to keep researchers imprisoned within canonical parameters to conduct research.

This feeling of imprisonment became more apparent as we progressed in our research class and supervised our advisees' projects. More questions than answers started to pop up and positioned us, as mentors, in the challenging role of transforming the discourses of doing research from a decolonial stance into

actual practices. This transition allowed us to see how strong the cell bars were and how deeply rooted, in our skin, the canonical discourses and practices were.

ELT as a “Discipline” Constructed From Canonical Research

Another common initial concern of the three authors is our awareness of how the field of ELT has been constructed, as a discipline, from the results of canonical research, particularly the one produced originally in the United States and the United Kingdom, the countries of the center, to use Kachru’s (1990) concept. This implies that the research agenda, set from outside, dictated the research designs regarded as the most suitable to inform the field and what was considered researchable in ELT. In Guerrero-Nieto’s (2020) words, “such perspectives deal with several matters, including topics of interest, the role of the researchers, the methods to analyze and report data, and the role of participants, among others” (p. 59) to show that the field has had very little room to outgrow those impositions. Méndez (2020) states, “It has, in turn, made us realize that we have supported canonical research in ELT. We have also assumed that certain types of discourses on researching, teaching, and even acting are the natural way of thinking” (p. 59). Her reflection is very much in line with what Phillipson (1992) calls “soldiers of TESOL” where members of the ELT community participate in the hegemonic practices of the field. Castañeda-Peña (2020) calls our attention to the need to “...a discussion of how such imprisonment has turned English Language teaching and learning into a rigid and monolithic practice...” (p. 38), which is a great deal of what we have been doing in our doctoral program during the last four years.

Our awareness of how the field of ELT has been preconceived and prepackaged from the outside posed another challenge: to channel our advisees’ research interests, which stem from their own experiences and mostly with very critical perspectives on the legacies of the field that we have inherited. Part of our task consisted of deconstructing the field, identifying the colonial mechanisms on which it was informed and constructed, and finding ways to challenge them.

As we dealt with these initial concerns, new ones emerged to enrich our endeavors’ views, understandings, and try-outs. In the following section, we will address some of these emerging concerns for which we do not have any definite answer, but points of view to nurturing the conversation about how to do research from a decolonial perspective in ELT.

Setting Free: Our Struggles to Think out of the Box

From the moment we decided to be part of this doctoral program, one of the very few certainties we had, was our motivation to embrace a decolonial stance. Throughout our professional careers, the three of us resisted the canonical agendas of how to do research and what to research about. Castañeda-Peña, for example, has researched gender and its relationship with ELT. Méndez has explored teachers' subjectivities and their struggles as members of unions, and Guerrero-Nieto has devoted part of her research efforts to critically exploring how teachers deal with language policies in Colombia. So, part of the ground was already set to embrace a decolonial stance toward research in ELT. This journey has not been crystal clear but has been tremendously fascinating as we learn, unlearn, and relearn in a constant dialogical relationship with our advisees, the theories, and ourselves.

In this attempt to think out of the box, many aspects, experiences, questions, and conundrums started populating our doings as research teachers and dissertation advisers.

Engaging in Epistemological Reflexivity

As we have pointed out elsewhere (Castañeda-Peña, 2020; Guerrero-Nieto, 2020; Méndez, 2020), epistemological reflexivity became a cornerstone of our work in the research class. Inspired by Vasilachis' (2009) definition of epistemological reflexivity, we adopted the practice of engaging ourselves and our students in a constant dialogue upon every single decision made in the research project and the rationale behind each one. Nothing has been left unexamined. This process ranges from the selection of words to how data will be analyzed and all other aspects in between. It is relevant to state here that as much as we would like to challenge the modern structure of research projects, our freedom cannot (by now) span beyond institutional regulations, which means that we have to comply with the formats adopted by the doctoral program, which in turn are the ones designated and approved by the Ministry of Science and Technology. Therefore, our epistemological reflexivity sometimes hits a wall, and we, as research teachers and dissertation advisors, need to find ways to negotiate the old and the new ways so that the internal consistency of the research project is not jeopardized.

Inner Struggles

For the three of us (and, of course, for our students, too), embracing a decolonial stance does come with many inner struggles. We have all been groomed into qualitative paradigms while pursuing our master's and doctoral degrees. Besides,

the academic culture of publications, conferences, and grants follows the strict IMRAD model mentioned (Guerrero-Nieto, 2020), which implies that approval depends on the observation of this model. So, there we stand, encouraging our doctoral students to think out of the box but at the same think inside the box; challenge the givens in our field but also observe the givens; be daring but not too daring, and so forth. Some of these contradictions emerge from within, but others condition our work from the outside, boil inside ourselves, and push us to reason to weave together research traditions that are faithful to our discourses as decolonial advocates while simultaneously responding to macro structures that demand modern frames.

Recursiveness and Creativity in “Data Collection” Procedures

As stated above, every decision made during the research process has been carefully examined in a search for consistency. We have been reading and conversing about pieces written by decolonial scholars in which they problematize the same act of research and, along with it, many other aspects. We have read and talked about Haber (2011, p. 9) and his idea of the no-methodology as a kind of “undisciplined archeology”; Suárez-Krabbe (2011) problematizing the colonially in anthropological methodologies and ways to contest that; and Ortiz-Ocaña *et al.* (2018) give some guidelines for what they call “decolonial task” (decolonial doing), among many others who have enriched our views on the research. This quest for answers has left us with more uncertainties and questions but, at the same time, has motivated us to search for alternative ways of “collecting data.”

Our students have responded very actively to this challenge and have designed interesting and innovative modes of “data collection.” In this book, Martínez and Castañeda produced their autobiographies to share with their participants and motivate them to write their own. Aldana also found canonical interviews too dry and designed “multimodal encounters” where multiple modes of articulating meaning (videos, songs, drawings, etc.) enrich her conversations with her “participants”; Cabrejo used drawing together as a strategy to engage his participation in a meaningful and honest conversation, and Liu (this volume) conducted small conversations in the teacher launched spiced by aspects of her daily life and her struggles as a transitional teacher.

Although these experiences can be perceived as no new procedures, they were brought to the research class before being tried out with the actual participants with a new attitude and a renewed commitment to being personally

involved and to populate data without being intrusive, disruptive, hegemonic, or extractivist.

Naming Things Anew and Naming New Things

In a captivating conversation between Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Silvia Rivera Cusicanque, she refers to how language ties us and limits our understanding of the world. She claims that translating is not enough but that we do need to find ways to name things anew and name new things (ALICE CES, 2014).

During this process of inviting the decolonial thought into our professional practice as researchers in ELT, and as a result of our conversations, our readings, and the constant epistemological reflexivity we engaged in, led us to find that some of the established terminology used to name Every step of a research project did not suit our needs, our intentions, our expectations, and all in all our epistemologies. We felt, then, the need to name things anew and name new things. The renaming was not a capricious activity for the sake of doing it but rather a conscious and collective process. Hence, the labels matched the complex ways research was thought about and conducted.

Consistent with the decolonial thought, we decided to include the locus of enunciation as a first part of the research design, which allows the researcher to locate themselves geo/body politically, to state upfront where they are standing and what their vantage point is. Having the locus of enunciation as a starting point has given us all, teachers and students, the opportunity to understand where each one is speaking from while at the same time being able to relate to their personal histories and trajectories.

When referring to the “Statement of the problem,” we began to feel that this phrase did not encompass the researcher’s position nor allow them to show a dynamic perspective regarding how they located their research interest. Besides, this phrase seems to respond to a deficit perspective that identifies a problem to solve. We then started to talk about “colonial situations” because a great deal of our commitment in this doctoral program is to contest the coloniality of the field (Pennycook, 1998), which allows us (we hope) to understand where the roots of inequality lay.

Referring to the “participants” has brought us a great deal of struggle because one of the aspects we are clear about is the crucial role “they” play in research. Once again, Vasilachis (2009) has been very inspiring in helping us understand the relationship that must exist between the researcher and the researched (known subject and knowing subject) and try to challenge the asymmetrical power relationships that naturally emerge between the two. We are trying out some names;

Castañeda-Usaquén (this volume) calls them “companions,” Martínez-Luengas (this volume) refers to them as “teammates,” and Aldana (this volume) as “known subjects.” Of course, none of these names go by without rigorous scrutiny that interrogates what the role of a “companion,” “teammate,” or “known subject” entails research-wise and how they will be included in the dissertation.

In terms of “data collection,” some of us have suggested harvesting data (Hubbard and Power, 1999), detaching ourselves from the meaning of just collecting because it deems problematic, in decolonial terms, to act as the individual who only “collects” without being involved in any part of the production of data. Harvesting plays the researcher in a more dialogical, intersubjective, and relational role. Others are using co-constructing data to signal the heterarchical nature of the relationship between the participants in the research, where both research and researched have similar responsibilities, sayings, and decisions in the production of data.

Up to here, we have shown how we are trying to reconfigure the ways of naming the things we are doing so that the names resemble the deep meanings of our activities. We are still waiting to see how these names develop/hold/evolve/die.

Challenges Ahead

Undertaking this formative research class from a decolonial stance has been a fascinating yet unpredictable venture that has meant for us all, teachers and students, a fantastic experience of learning, relearning, and unlearning together while being actively engaged in making sense of decoloniality and how we can incorporate it into our research agendas. This is our fourth year in this project, with many challenges ahead. One aspect that still haunts our thoughts is the “methodology” per se. How do we deal with the “methodology” from a decolonial perspective? Can we think of an alternative, following Kumaravadivelu’s lead of the post-method pedagogy? Is that even possible?

Along with this very relevant concern, the one regarding validity and reliability has enormous weight in the academic community. There is a strong concern for the results and the truth that can be drawn from the “data” and the “data analysis.” Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) have already taken up this task and coined the term trustworthiness to give an account of the rigor of the research process and how the research question is answered. To us, this aspect needs further debate enriched by our epistemological reflexivity.

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