

Reflections on the Relationship between (De) Colonialism(s) and Applied Linguistics in ELT

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Una vez en Barranquilla existió un hombre que dedicó su vida a estudiar el fenómeno de la sonrisa de la Gioconda.

Luego de muchos años de estudio e investigaciones, descubrió que Leonardo no pintó sobre el rostro de la mujer ninguna sonrisa. De su pincel surgió un rostro adusto con ojos del dulce color de las nubes del vino. Es el espectador quien al mirarla y quererla sonrío primero. Ella lo hace después.

(Jairo Anibal Niño, 1998)

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During the past five years, there has been a notable concern for decolonial studies in the *Doctorado Interinstitucional en Educación* program and the experiences of the students doing the major in ELT EDUCATION¹⁵. The interest in these studies raises new questions for colonial situations, which are currently reflected, it seems, in the study of Applied Linguistics in ELT in Colombia, or at least in Bogotá, as a city-region, a development that may give investigators of ELT food for thought. Personally, I very much appreciate these concerns, since they stimulate those who are engaged in the discipline. However, while I support the advance of this line of research, and hope it will thrive, I believe it is important to continue to explore local ELT issues which throw light on the Westernization that seems to characterize the assumptions of Applied Linguistics in ELT. Very briefly, this chapter discusses aspects of this problem

15 Visit http://die.udistrital.edu.co/enfasis/elt_education for further information. ELT stands for English Language Teaching and also refers to the education of language teachers

which investigators of ELT can expand on, with the aid of the decolonizing approach.

The first section of this chapter focuses on the history of the Westernization process. The second speaks of a recognizably Latin American contribution to post-colonialism. The third goes over some ideas related to Subaltern Studies. The final section points to some subjects that should be of interest to those who have a decolonizing approach to the place of Applied Linguistics in ELT. The whole chapter raises questions which are relevant to local research efforts and should prompt stimulating debates in this field.

I.

To illustrate my thoughts on these issues, I cite the above fable by Niño but with no intention to trivialize the task I have set myself. Instead, it is a good way to show how speaking about the term “Westernization” depends on the point of view of the speaker. In an essay on the Argentinian writer Dussel, Mignolo (1995) argues that 1) the philosophy of liberation is postmodern and largely ignores the impact of that liberation on the periphery 2) The notion of post-colonialism, understood as an intellectual recolonization, has more to do with Asia and Africa than Latin America and 3) the trans-national circulation of capital leads to a globalization of communications as well. If Dussel’s idea of liberation were applied to the study of Applied Linguistics in ELT, what would the results be? What does the philosophy of liberation mean for Colombian students and teachers of English, especially the latter? Another critical question is: what makes a discourse philosophical? Would the relationship between decolonialism and postcolonialism and Applied Linguistics in ELT simply be philosophical, when talking about European or “colonial” philosophy for example? According to some analysts, a postcolonial position “would hold that an intellectual emancipation would transgress the required rules and order of modernity”. However, such anti-colonialist pamphleteering is not really philosophy. To paraphrase Dussel, “it would need to [be] transformed into new genres that not only lead intellectual emancipation along the paths of ‘content’ but also dissect the discursive formations (for example, philosophy), which consolidated modern thought” (p. 30). That is, does postcolonial thought need to be turned into or expressed in terms of philosophy? What is philosophical? This last question, I think, is very difficult to answer.

Without being a philosopher myself, I would dare to say that a discourse is philosophical when it structures a problem with a system of categories. The categorical system allows one to question a part of reality. A philosophical problem unmistakably arises in the face of the amazement that reality causes and we ask ourselves what something is, what the entity is. It might be said that, in the West, one thinks in this way. Decoloniality, however, precisely questions this way of thinking, hence the existence of “European philosophy” and “colonial philosophy”. But I am not so sure that we can call the decolonial intellectual movement a collection of “anti-colonial pamphlets that are not yet philosophy”. What would be the role of Applied Linguistics in ELT be in that discussion? Gadamer (2002, p. 23) claims that “philosophy and science were originally inextricably linked; both are the creation of the Greeks. These creations, which are gathered together under the generic title of philosophy, comprised the set of all theoretical knowledge. It is true that, since then, we have come to speak of the philosophy of East Asia or India, designating them with the same Greek word, but in reality, we are basically referring to our Western traditions of philosophy and science”. I think that despite knowing this, we can fall into the trap of language. It is therefore imperative to look at the history of how some people turn others into subordinate. This could explain the upsurge of hegemonic practices. This is a task that I consider to be crucial to examine in Applied Linguistics in ELT.

The Latin American Group for Subaltern Studies asks us to reflect on this question, arguing that “the subaltern also acts to produce social effects that are visible [...] in these paradigms or the State policies and projects legitimized by them. It is the recognition of this active role of the subordinate, the way the subaltern alters, bends, and modifies strategies of learning, research, and understanding” (Latin American Group for Subaltern Studies, 1998, n.p.). Who is the subaltern in Applied Linguistics in ELT and how has the subaltern been constituted historically?

Analyzing the local agendas of research into ELT may also require us to consider Coronil’s (1999) point that “terms such as the West, center, First World, East, periphery and Third World are commonly used to classify and identify areas of the world. Although it is not always clear what these terms refer to, “terms such as the West, center, first world, East, periphery and third world are commonly used to classify and identify areas of the world. They are used as if there were a precise external reality to which they correspond, or at least have the effect of creating that illusion” (p. 22). For example, “The ‘Third World’, firmly anchored for many years in the ‘periphery’ –that is, in

Asia, Africa and Latin America— now seems to be moving towards the United States, where the term is applied not only to areas inhabited by immigrants from the original ‘Third World’, but also places inhabited by former national ‘minorities’ such as ‘women of color’ and ‘vulnerable’ ethnic and social groups. The phrase ‘the capital of the Third World’ is increasingly used to characterize Los Angeles” (Coronil, 1999, p. 23). In other words, if the West was traditionally Europe, the United States and “others”, we can now see a “localization” of the English-speaking world in parts of the United States which have become politically important, even though they lack military power. The current COVID-19 pandemic may also be playing a role in this.

The geo-political balance in Latin America (including Latin Americans who live in the United States) has thus changed. Such apparent political balance is subjected to a process of invention with a dependent and subordinate character. How has Applied Linguistics in ELT responded to these changes, which also include the emergence of the “Black Lives Matter” movement sparked by the assassination of George Floyd and the death of many immigrants caused by the pandemic?

The United States has long regarded itself as an imperial center, going back to the Monroe Doctrine, which states, “The occasion has been judged proper for asserting, as a principle in which the rights and interests of the United States are involved, that the American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects of future colonization by any European powers...”. But, the idea of the Occident, as opposed to the Orient, has traditionally excluded certain parts of Europe (Said, 1978). This binary approach also seems to have characterized the use of Applied Linguistics in ELT. How can this be challenged in Applied Linguistics? How to avoid the danger of falling into the same notion of Westernization, but under a different name?

Coronil (1999) thinks that “Occidentalism is not the reverse of Orientalism, but its condition of existence, its opaque side (as in a mirror). A simple reversal would be possible only in the context of symmetrical relationships between the Self and the Other, but who then would the Other be? In a context in which relations of equality prevailed, the difference would not be represented as Otherness. The study of how the Others represent the West is an interesting undertaking in itself, which could help to counteract the dominance that the West exercises over the images of difference that circulate publicly” (p. 26). I think this is a very interesting argument to explore with caution since

Coronil himself thinks that Occidentalism is constituted from representation practices that “1) divide the components of the world into isolated units; 2) disaggregate the story of their relationship; 3) convert the difference into a hierarchy; 4) naturalize those representations; and, therefore, 5) intervene, albeit unconsciously, in the reproduction of the current asymmetrical relations of power” (Coronil, 1999, p. 27).

Thus, it would be useful to thoroughly review the employment of such representations in Applied Linguistics in ELT.

II.

Castro-Gómez (2005), a Colombian philosopher, explains the difference between coloniality and colonialism by linking the epistemological and economic aspects which formed the Western idea of knowledge and created the subordinate “who not only served to legitimize imperial power on an economic and political level, but also helped to create epistemological paradigms ... and the identities (personal and collective) of the colonizers and the colonized” (p. 20). This epistemological analysis might also throw light on the history of ELT EDUCATION in Colombia. It also seems clear that Orientalism and the modernity / coloniality debate in Latin America could share the criticism of Eurocentrism as an orientation. According to Castro-Gómez (2005), “Said’s great merit was having seen that the discourses of the human sciences ... are sustained by a geopolitical machinery of knowledge / power that has declared the simultaneous existence of different ‘voices’ as ‘illegitimate’ cultural ways of producing knowledge” (pp. 26-27). But criticizing coloniality as such neglects “the analysis of its material constraints, that is, colonialism” in Latin America itself (Castro-Gómez, p. 39), when the material and political conditions in the East are different.

In other words, Applied Linguistics in ELT needs to write its own intellectual history. This means listening to the subaltern voice, leaving open the question of whether the subaltern has spoken or will speak (Spivak, 1988).

Dirlik (cited in Castro-Gómez, 2005, p. 33) argues that 1) “the narrative of capitalism” is not at the same time the “narrative of the history of Europe”; 2) denouncing exclusions at the local level “is not enough either”: “the legitimizing ideology of the system” could be standardized and, 3) the idea

that postcolonialism may be co-opted by modernism (if it has not already been) for wanting to separate itself from the global material conditions where it finds itself “producing”, thus becoming a totalizing pole at the same time. Seen in this way, “postcolonial theories, far from becoming a critical theory of capitalism, have become one of its best allies” (p. 35). Can Applied Linguistics in ELT avoid this? How and why?

Hence, we should look at contributions from Latin America itself.

1. Basing himself on Enrique Dussel (the first Dussel) Castro-Gómez (2005) argues that it is not fruitful to separate ourselves from the lifeworld and that “relationships between people cannot be seen as relationships between a rational subject and an object of knowledge” (p. 43). This leads to a totalization of other forms of knowledge and the monitoring of the “stages” you must go through to become “modern” and / or developed: one revolves around the conquering ego and another, the rational ego.
2. Drawing on the work of the Argentine semiotician Walter Mignolo, Castro-Gómez, notes the Christian/racist bias of the *Orbis Terrarum*, the first true modern Atlas (1570): “the sons of Shem populated Asia, those of Cam populated Africa and those of Japheth populated Europe” (p. 53), thus turning Europeans into the children of God and the others into barbarians. America became an extension of the territory of Japheth in order to justify the invasion and annihilation of its natives, since “only from Europe could the light of true knowledge about God come” (p. 55).
3. Castro-Gómez (2005) also draws on the work of Aníbal Quijano, a Peruvian sociologist and political theorist, especially the latter’s notion of the “coloniality of power” as a “specific structure of domination through which the native populations of America were subjected after 1492” (p. 58), that is a domination that was cognitive and spiritual at the same time (e.g., *La Encomienda*). This was strengthened by the privileges granted to those of “pure blood”. “The coloniality of power also refers to a hegemonic type of knowledge production” (p. 63) which Castro-Gómez has called the hybris of ground zero.

Can Applied Linguistics in ELT confirm any of these ideas? What would be the right conditions for doing that?

Galceran (2016) helps us reflect on embodiment of the colonized, since we sometimes do not notice how the European discourses form an epistemological center that ignores specific historicities. Another question that Applied Linguistics in ELT might focus on is what those historicities are, in terms of the following: “if we listen to Foucault, since the middle of the eighteenth century this new punitive practice, focused on ‘souls’ and not on the body, comes into play, so that the restriction of movement, the pattern of time, the economy of gestures, even the obligation to work will be elements of the construction of a submissive subjectivity, locked in the ‘docile bodies’ of free human beings” (p. 238). [...] “This is something that Foucault ignores when putting together “the mad, the children, the schoolboys, the colonized”, all of whom “are subject to a production apparatus and are controlled throughout their existence, ignoring their differences” (p. 243).

I am left with several questions: When we draw on the “decolonial turn” in Applied Linguistics in ELT: How can we avoid falling into an “intellectual colonialism”? How can we promote further discussions about how to know ourselves in Latin America and better scrutinize our thought, to avoid being co-opted by this universalization?

III.

A basic premise of Subaltern Studies entails a very clear requirement: we must understand the locus of enunciation of the person who writes the story and remember that most who listen to his or her version do not participate in its creation, that is, pay attention to the voices which are silenced. Parallel to this, we must bear in mind that the nature of listening and of interpreting what is written and said are often ignored. Consider Niño’s fable (1998) about the Mona Lisa. Analyzing the meaning of “subaltern” implies not only scrutinizing the locus of enunciation of the one who names but how his words are heard by others.

Said (2009) points out that the word ‘subordinate’ has both political and intellectual connotations. Its implicit opposite is, of course, ‘dominant’ or ‘elite’” (p. 26). Gramsci (2000) likewise notes that “for a social elite, the elements of subaltern groups always have something barbaric and

pathological” (p. 175). Who are the barbarians, the madmen, the nonexistent, the subordinates in Applied Linguistics in ELT? And who are the “elites”? The relativity of this polarization of subordinate vs. powerful groups is revealed when we look at the geo-politics of peoples and disciplines. The trouble with a dichotomy which is so absolute is that it may exclude the “emergent” groups. In other words, I think that there is a danger of hegemony on both sides. It would be better to think in a more plural rather than a binary manner. It might seem advisable to think from, with, and for groups otherwise. As Said (2009) maintains, “a distinctive feature of this field of Subaltern Studies is rewriting the history of colonial India from the different and singular point of view of the masses, using unconventional or forgotten sources, such as popular memory, oral traditions or certain administrative documents not previously examined” (p. 26). What is the colonial history of Applied Linguistics in ELT? Who are its forgotten masses? This amounts to a rejection of unilateral history (Guha, n.d., p. 27) that rests on the “recognition of the coexistence and interaction of both political domains, that of the elite and that of the subordinate” (Guha, n.d., p. 31). For Chakrabarty “it is about how to think about the history of power at a time when capital and the governing institutions of modernity increasingly reach a global scale” (p. 13).

These ideas of Said, Guha and Chakrabarty could broaden the local research agendas in ELT and lead researchers to draw on subordinate sources of knowledge which have probably not been tapped so far. Although I see signs of self-reflective and challenging work in our discipline, in line with the Subaltern Studies of the 1980s Said (2009) refers to, I still wonder whether it is really the subaltern who speaks there. I would argue that modernism and coloniality continue to have a strong influence on Applied Linguistics in ELT, as Said, Guha and Spivak noted in their own fields and I therefore believe that a questioning of the current use of Applied Linguistics in ELT is necessary and should take the position of the subaltern more into account. It would enliven the discussion of these issues, always provided that the limitations of local government language programs and policies are overcome. It would entail raising the awareness (political and historical) of those of us who work in the discipline of Applied Linguistics in ELT in Latin America. For Gramsci (2000), it is necessary to study:

1. “the objective formation of subaltern social groups through the development and the transformations that take place in the world of economic production, their quantitative diffusion and their origin in

- pre-existing social groups, of which they preserve for a certain time the mentality, ideology and goals;
2. their active or passive adherence to the dominant political formations, the attempts to influence the programs of these formations to impose their own demands and the consequences that such attempts have in determining processes of decomposition and renewal or new formation;
 3. the birth of new parties of the dominant groups to maintain the consensus and control of the subaltern groups;
 4. the formations proper to subordinate groups for claims of a restricted and partial nature; [...]
 5. 5. the formations that affirm integral autonomy, etc.” (Gramsci, 2000, p. 182).

IV.

From the above discussion of local research agendas in ELT, some subjects for further study arise:

1. Analyzing the work of those who question Eurocentrism in our discipline. In other words, it is important be aware of the uncritical acceptance of traditional Eurocentrism.
2. Analyzing the assumption that Latin America is a peripheral part of Eurocentric culture, its place in Subaltern Studies and its relation to Applied Linguistics in ELT.
3. The possibility of cross-disciplinary studies of Applied Linguistics in ELT which would combine anthropology, sociology, literature and especially pedagogy.
4. Analyzing how the dominance of elite thinkers in Applied Linguistics in ELT reveals an internal colonialism.
5. Finding out which groups are the current subordinates in Applied Linguistics in ELT.

6. Analyzing the concept of knowledge in Applied Linguistics in ELT and its hegemonic political aspects.

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