

Researching Horizontally: Methodological Assumptions About Observers' Subject Positions¹

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The ways in which scientific research is involved in the worst excesses of colonialism remain a powerfully remembered history for many of the world's colonized peoples. It is a history that still offends the deepest sense of our humanity.

(Smith, 1999, p.1)

Introduction

The life stories, autobiographical narratives, and the horizontality of the English class observers represent a methodological dynamic in this book chapter. This chapter manifests a reflection that has emerged from a horizontal view. It is seen as breaking power relations between participants as well as the researcher. The participants are part of a team. They discuss, reflect, and negotiate the milestone, experiences, and configurations of the English class observers and their different positions within this practice. There are other ways of doing research. From an ontological perspective, the author shows himself as part of this process and looks for paths to identify the positions of the ELT observers.

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Self-Professional Portrait

It was a TV show called “The Big Brother.” The show was a reality game where participants lived together in a particularly built space isolated from the outside world. Contestants are monitored/observed by live cameras and audio microphones during their stay in the space. I think many people have watched this TV show, and it has impacted the entertainment industry as a competitive game among people interacting and living together.

This chapter highlighted a well-known TV show since it is part of my professional experience as a Colombian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teacher, trainer, observed teacher, and observer. I have been continuously observed during my academic / work life for a long time. I was observed in my practicum in the B.Ed. in languages program; also, I have been observed in the EFL classes I teach now, and, finally, I have been working as an observer as part of one of the strategies of the Ministry of Education in Colombia about providing observations of English Language teachers at Public Schools in Colombia to improve quality standards in EFL classes. The classroom observations have been manifested in my academic/ working experiences.

I observe EFL teachers’ classes to identify patterns, assess a process, give feedback, or reflect on teaching practices. I have been immersed in classroom observation practices for some time, and I would like to explore this further during my Ph.D. studies. However, I would like to address it from a different angle, *i.e.*, concerning the person who observes the observers’ feelings, negotiations, wonders, and subjectivities. It is not easy to investigate the subjectivities of the observers. I have also been part of my study, which means I could be faced with a multifaceted position...; some subjects are part of the classroom observation practices, and I try to do my best to provoke the ELT (English Language Teaching) community to know more about the Observers’ Subject Positions.

My Research Delves Into...

This research project explores the unseen, silenced, and effective invisibility within the Observers’ Subject Positions in classroom observation practices in Colombia. The research also tries to sustain the idea that practices carried out by observers are not simply normalized (formats, rubrics, and data) but represent more than a process of instrumentalization. In other words, classroom observations, as part of social and educational practices, deal with power issues. This means that the observers are involved in asymmetrical power-relation situations where an expert reasoning system within school contexts prevails, faced with reflection and criticism.

There is a lot of information about classroom observations in the ELT field. As a point of departure, the review of literature allows me to recall Mercç's (2015) definition of classroom observation as an "operative device for learning how instructional methods are implemented, how teaching spaces are structured, and how learners are reactive to the classroom setting" (p. 194). Theoretically speaking, this comprehension is related to the idea that observations must be systematic to avoid causing a distorted view of what happens in class, so the benefits are tangible.

Classroom observation has been identified as an alternative tool for evaluating students' performance (Campbell & Duncan, 2007), a "component of a staff appraisal mechanism" (Lam, 2001), a "tool for self-monitoring" (Wichadee, 2011), and a "meaningful instrument for self-assessment" (Choopun & Tuppoom, 2014). The observation could be an easy method that teachers can include in their classrooms as they would likely face countless matters (or issues). This observation also offers devices for educational testing/supervision.

As stated, several authors have spoken about classroom observations (CO), and what I have done in my research project is to identify three main trends: The first trend declared is CO as a device to assess effective teaching; the second is observation as a top-down practice from the observers' eyes; and the third, the Observers' Subject Positions. I want to explore the interpretation of the Observers' Subject Positions related to my research topic since it represents an important assumption to consider. The observer's subjectivity is not judged or explored in the field.

It is recurrent that people who observe English classes are considered subjects who have had a certain experience in the field, a high level of language, vast work experience, and know the teaching practices in English in the context. Observation in the ELT field is somewhat normalized. A person must observe an English class to judge, evaluate, or provide feedback. Observation is a practice where the position of the observer and her/his subjectivity has not been problematized.

The Observer's Subject Position needs a skilled and trained eye to get, analyze, and benefit from observing the events of learning/teaching. The subject position of the observer is produced by the power of experts (Foucault, 1982). I have noticed that society validates the position of the observers, and the observer, in this specific case, in the ELT discipline.

Also, the observer's position is implemented through an imported structure, as Jordão (2016) highlighted. She points out that the "subjects" have submitted to the colonial structure and accepted imported methods, imported language

descriptions, and imported acquisition theories” (p. 196). In this research, not only the imported classroom observation methods will be uncovered, but also descriptions, theories, and probably the imported Observers’ Subject Positions will be seen.

Consequently, it would be appropriate to show the hidden narratives of the observers at the time of observing, what they think about CO, their points of view at the time of CO, the CO training, and how their subject positions have changed through working on Item. As can be seen, observers are also teachers, women or men, with experience in teaching, training, and structures. These can be practices of being (observers) that are in permanent movement and are not static or rigid. Foucault states it as “practices of the self, through which the subject constitutes itself in an active fashion” (Gutman *et al.*, 2022, p. 517). The observer position is the privileged one, benefited and exclusive. However, it is also an ignored position in the ELT field.

Little has been said about the Observers’ Subject Positions during classroom observations. There is a need to explore these human beings in the ELT field. The observer is the person who analyzes, judges, offers feedback and supports EFL teachers in a strategy of classroom observation (gathering information, assessment, or quality processes in Education programs). Consequently, this research represents situations that still need to be handled, where the observers’ subject position facilitates understanding of the dynamics of the practice of classroom observations, sometimes seen as a colonial mechanism of control and other times as a judgment and a helpful procedure.

Having these ideas about my research project, during the last years, I carried out these problem statements in the observers’ subject positions within ELT classroom observations:

- Normalization of the observer’s subject position as a canonical practice in ELT.
- The dehumanization of the observers in the ELT classroom observation practices.
- The invisible power issues of the observers within an expert reasoning system.

My research also looks into power relations, modernity discourses, subjectivity facts, and decolonial thinking as an option in the ELT field about the Observers’ Subject Positions in-classroom observation practices.

It is evident that some observers of English classes feel superior to those observed; it is a “top-down” system, where, historically and socially, observation is validated as a practice of surveillance, control, and evaluation of the performance

of English Language teachers. In this sense, I want to clarify that, as observers, we have subjective thoughts and biases. Although we have a format (objective technology) to carry out the observation, in most cases, we manage our subjectivity as we want/expect to. To conclude the description of my research, I have tried to critically analyze the colonial power matrix (especially) in observing English classes. There is total/universal knowledge about how to observe classes and why. However, I wonder, who observes the classes? What positions do these subjects have, and is it a static/structural position or a changing one? These positions of the ELT observers, I wonder, are in permanent movement and should be heard throughout the ELT field.

The following parts invite one to analyze the contribution to the field I covered in this research project regarding methodology, research vehicles, and procedures (instruments).

Research Vehicles and Procedures

Before pointing out the methodological assumptions of my research, I would like to mention that during the literature review of my topic of interest (CO / Observers' Subject Positions), I stumbled upon research projects where their methods, instruments, or collection of information are based on questionnaires to participants, structured and semi-structured interviews and classroom observations indeed. Most of these projects inquire about the instruments implemented and the validity of the results in studying the information obtained. At the same time, many methodological chapters have to do with answers to questions such as: Is the objective to point out a theoretical research problem? Why is it necessary to have the most suitable approach to answering your research questions? Are there any ethical or philosophical considerations at the time of research? What can be the criteria for validity and reliability in this research?

These previous questions could be analyzed for an open panorama of what to find in this chapter about methodological uncertainties and struggles. However, I would also like to remember how power knowledge operates in Classroom Observation Practices (COP) through different discourses, an analysis of the COP historically and socially constructed on itself, and an understanding of the Observers' Subject Positions (others) in the ELT classroom observations. I have learned from my doctoral studies, my daily routine experience, and some empirical practices that what is important here is to delve into the uncertainties of the Observers' Subject Positions, their beliefs, positions, assumptions, and the principles of the COP / the human beings who interact on that.

Additionally, this chapter contributes to the ELT field, drawing on reflections from my research regarding methodology and instruments. The idea at the end is to highlight contributions reflecting on current, innovative, and uncertain research vehicles and procedures within Observers' Subject Positions in-class observations. It is important to stress that I am honored to be part of a doctoral program that gives importance to "other" ways of doing research, to carry out research practices where something is not seen, and where it is necessary to think of different possibilities rather than critically embracing the normalized research structure. As a result of said learning, this chapter considers the following underpinning methodological ideas: The ontological is before the epistemological, participants as Teammates, and horizontal provocation.

The Ontological is Before the Epistemological (Vasilachis, 1992)

Before determining if ontology should come before epistemology, I would like to understand my research project from an ontological perspective. I have tried to understand ontology as the existence or non-existence of specific entities and how they relate to each other if they exist. Ontology refers to myself as a researcher, ELT educator, observer, and student. However, having an ontological stance in classroom observations within observers is quite complicated. Also, I can say my study is based on beings (observers) that exist and not on the particular situations obtained from them as a series of certain properties. Based on that, I have tried to discover "the position of the being of my existence" through my understanding, experience, and self-reflection.

These concepts of understanding, experience, and reflection from my being have helped me achieve epistemological and methodological positions, particularly in my research process. To reinforce this idea, I would like to quote, "...on that account, ontological considerations come before epistemological and methodological ones. That is why we must deal with the question about who is known before the one about how it is known..." (Vasilachis, 1992, p. 52).

I can see myself in a mirror when I observe teachers in classes that foster significant or different ways of teaching. This study allows me to reflect on the pedagogical and social practices that are carried out in English classes in Colombia. Do some questions come to mind, such as how to evaluate a class as an observer? Am I more interested in the evaluation rubric or the class dynamics? Could I observe a class from what the students enjoy/learn but not the step-by-step procedures of the English classes? Should the observer put himself in the situation of the observed teacher, yes or no? These questions reflect the reality of classroom observations and the observer's position. I have yet to identify these realities in documents, policies, or guidelines for bilingualism/language strengthening.

These situations rarely come to light; something uncertain should be argued from an ontological assumption.

This is also a qualitative research project with some relevant characteristics that help me specify my epistemological reflection. About this, Vasilachis (1992) said:

Qualitative research comprises different orientations and approaches, various intellectual and disciplinary traditions grounded, often, in different philosophical assumptions. All these different orientations, approaches, and assumptions generate new data-gathering and analysis strategies. This variety of views on what is known, what may be known, how it is known, and on the way, findings are to be transmitted demands an acknowledgment that there is not one legitimate way to conduct qualitative research. (p. 7)

If I characterized my qualitative research, I would enable those characteristics to be collected according to who has studied the particularities of a method and the goal of the inquiry. My methodological research part also seeks to give great importance to qualitative research, which displays an interest in people's lives, behavior, and interactions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 17) and in trying to appreciate those worlds through such views (Savage, 2000, p. 330; 2006, p. 384).

Qualitative research seems interested in personal narratives and life stories in social contexts. My learning in this part focuses on studying myself as a classroom observer and teacher-researcher. This would offer important challenges in my research. However, the purpose stands on the social theories that presuppose contrasts between individuals and groups (I am reflecting on myself and the tensions I go through along this research process). In methodological words, I can also project myself into a multifaceted position where my position as an observer is affected by analyzing the teachers' classes and knowing what is behind their pedagogical practices and what the observer feels, thinks, and claims. I understand the teacher is also the observer, but I move around when analyzing these positions and subjection processes.

Participants as Teammates

In previous academic experiences, I was researching from a hierarchical position where I, as a researcher, had the control and power to extract the data, get information from the participants (x and y people), and interpret whatever I could obtain from them. I want to be part of a co-construction of knowledge, experiences, and thoughts. My intention is not to criticize the traditional way of research. However, I want to do something different and complementary, *i.e.*, to break the power relations among the subjects, particularly with those involved

in my research, and to take down the idea that the researcher knows the most and is the only one who can do research. A reflection that has emerged in this research concerns horizontal research processes. Although the participants in this research have great recognition and credentials in the ELT field, it takes work to negotiate points of view (especially from ELT observers). This is what I mean by breaking the power relations between researcher-participants. My ideal situation is that we reflect together on the roles of the English class observers, we explore together the events that happen during the observation, and we discuss the many positions that pop up in the observation practices, and above all, the positions (other) of the ELT observers. In that respect, I would like to introduce this. My team is composed of extraordinary human beings.

My Team²

I am interested in researching with three close colleagues who have received training to observe ELT classrooms and who have worked as observers for several years in the Ministry of Education/Secretariats of Education in Colombia and worldwide. We also have been working together for more than five years, and we know the “territory” of Classroom Observation Practices (COP) in the Colombian ELT community.

It is meaningful to share as observers and be part of education projects in Colombia, where the COP was our daily routine. We had many valuable stories to bring to this research project. Let us have a look at my Teammates.

Tania

The first is Tania, who works at a well-recognized university. She was also part of a team of observers in the Secretariat of Education of Bogotá, Colombia. She has been working in external entities for some years. She is a great academic researcher, a passionate educator with high critical thinking, and an arts fan.

Wilson

My other friend is Wilson, an ELT Consultant for over five years here in Colombia. He has conducted many observations in schools and universities and worked most recently with the MEN. He has experience in both international and local education projects. We have shared amazing moments in training, national trips, and COP events. He is a good friend, kind, collaborative person, and has a beautiful dog called Pepita.

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2 My Team is the definition related to this research methodology's teammates (participants).

Alex

He has worked as an ELT consultant, observer, and advisor in Colombian universities, schools, and institutes for several years. He has participated in many classroom observations and was part of the language improvement strategies in the Secretariat of Education of Bogotá, Colombia. We have been friends for a long time and have done research projects together and participated in academic events, workshops, and talks, among others.

Some common aspects include expertise in COP, professional similarities, working experience, and academic background among the team. However, some ontological dissimilarities related to the teammates (likes, interests, wonders) are part of this research. This is another of the learning concerns regarding the methodological part of my research. We can work as observers and get the same training, but we face differences in our subjectivities, thoughts, and feelings.

Similarly, another great lesson I have received when carrying out this doctoral research, specifically, is the part of the methodology that has to do with the ethical assumption. I have had the opportunity to meet with my team, and most of them highlight getting a signed consent. Despite their high profiles, they see the importance of the ethical parameters involved in this research. They decided by themselves to sign a document representing some personal aspects, but they did it without any problem and mentioned that this is an honest action for a researcher. Another anecdote I would like to mention occurred when two of my teammates gave me advice, tips on opportunities for improvement, or situations to think about regarding my doctoral research project. This action makes us more human and does not seem like a rigid, academic-demanding process. We are a team that will impact and benefit the ELT field with this research. They are valuable people in my academic process, and I appreciate their help, knowledge, and time.

Analyzing the four observers' subjectivities (including mine) will decode our negotiations, feelings, and struggles during observation. The idea is to handle a reflection that will give a more detailed view of what happens in classroom observations, analyze the subjects' positions, and understand the why, who observes, and by whom the observation is done.

These power relations in observation practices can not only be seen from the subject (observer). The observed teachers' narratives, particularities, and experiences will also help to analyze this negotiation, where the different positions of the ELT observers emerge.

Furthermore, this seems like something other than a traditional analysis I propose to give a voice to the Teammates. I am the chain to support and inquire

about reflective assumptions. My team interprets and analyzes the data collection (together); plus, the role of the Teammates is to co-construct the theory that emerges from our encounters. With the data collection from our meetings, the vehicles (instruments), and our further reflections, we could offer analytic-reflexive detours.

Although the participants' agendas are very tight, in most cases, the reflection, interpretation, and analysis of the information have been agreed upon. As an approach to a decolonial project, it is intended that in teamwork, we can create "other" ways of thinking, feeling, and existing, which requires the configuration of new types of knowledge, especially within the positions of ELT class observers.

Horizontal Provocation

How can I achieve a Horizontal Provocation? I have found a lot of information about classroom observation as a technique, instrument, and evaluation process. However, there needs to be more about the observers' stories, their experiences during this practice, and what happens beyond the evaluation rubrics they should do. Accordingly, I propose the following insight to give scope and a broader picture of my research project.

"Horizontality is usually the construction of knowledge created by the intersection among subjects and, therefore, by the intersection of knowledge" (Pérez & Sartorello, 2012, p. 11). But I have asked myself, how do I carry out this horizontal process in my research project? I think the first thing is to identify my Teammates who are part of my research. The people described above are of great importance to addressing paradigms and situations in the future and beginning this part of the methodology, *i.e.*, introducing them. Also, it seems that I (as a researcher) should "be transparent" with/for/from them... I mean, I consider that a starting point is to tell them in a narrated way my situations as an observer, what has happened to me at the time of having the training to observe, and the experiences I have had carrying out classroom observations. Being open with them about my feelings, struggles, and thoughts allows me to have a more horizontal approach since I do not ask the participants for information... I share a part of myself with them, from what I have inside.

I wrote some autobiographical chapters at the beginning of my doctoral studies, and I shared those with my team. It has been rewarding to see how these observers reacted to my stories; they also agreed with some aspects and ontological dissimilarities. It is not easy to identify or report people's subjectivities or inquire about their subject positions. Even more so, it could probably be an introspective reflection when I am the only one immersed in this study. These instruments could also be part of my research project's horizontality and data collection.

A Biographical/ Autobiographical Study

It is relevant to work together with the team. We could analyze the observers' position and research in-depth about the observers' living, feelings, and wonders. We will be narrators of our own stories, and it would be interesting to analyze them so that in the future, we could find out hidden subjectivities of the observers, what is not written in the rubrics, and what possibly helps in the field of ELT through the analysis of those stories.

This biographical/autobiographical study aims to reveal evidence about the feelings, struggles, achievements, failures, and other things that observers have from their positions. Identifying some sensations with a biographical/autobiographical narrative not found in previous research papers is possible. My idea is to carry out a reflective journal where the experiences that observers have had in their daily practices are kept and analyzed. I will collect observers' narratives and present hidden subjectivities that have been hidden / invisible in the ELT field in Colombia. To do so, it is necessary to get a preliminary autobiographical narrative of the team to take part in the analysis. Then, the transcription of their subjectivities must be done, and finally, the getting of their interpretations and critical comments for the future.

It is a rigid and structural procedure technique. However, I do not forget that my team comprises humans with their own "beings" who need to be heard by the ELT community, so I intend to reflect upon people's life experiences. One of the uncertain situations in this part of the methodology is confusing the essence of the interviews with the biographical study. As far as possible, I will try to ensure that the techniques or instruments I develop have characteristics where spontaneous thoughts, unexpected ideas, and narratives of the team will become more real than an "ideal" production.

Stories/Life Stories³

I am also interested in writing stories within the methodological process of my research. As Cornejo *et al.* (2008) state, "these stories about how we feel, how we define ourselves or about our position facing a certain theme, they are the first level of interpretation of the experience we live, placing it from a 'narrator' that is us themselves" (p. 37).

These stories define and differentiate us from others, so they play a role in identity construction. In them, there are contradictions, tensions, and ambivalences;

3 The story or life story is a tool closer to the logic of qualitative designs based on the approach of in-depth interviews with a sample of human being(s).

the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves have a dynamic character that is constantly changing but always depending on another story that integrates them and gives them a new meaning. (Cornejo *et al.*, 2008, p. 38).

By using stories in this research, I would work analytically on the account of the observers' positions about themselves or an aspect of their lives. I interpret the production of the narrator, which, in turn, is an interpretation that the observers make of their own.

The story corresponds to a narrator's written or oral enunciation of one's life or part of it. It is necessary to include the life story for its part. In these stories, I learned to see observers' life stories, feelings when the observer is capturing information inside the classroom, achievements, disappointments in the observations, and more, which will be recognized for the analysis and planning of this research project's activities in the future.

One instrument I have thought about for a long time is the classroom observation form. It may be part of a research instrument in the study of the Team, reviewing different points of view, meshing the information obtained, and analyzing with reflections that emerge from the meetings of all of us. I did not include this tool before, as the classroom observation guideline can be discussed in our team's encounters. We may reflect further on these and identify more data in the research to meet both teammates (singular or collective).

Conclusion

This exercise of research in a "different"/"other" way offers a reflective and challenging view. It is difficult to carry out a research project like this since I was used to researching something more structural (which is not bad). Many people do that and get successful results/ to have an impact in the field. However, now I think that researching in a "different"/"other" way enriches me as a professional researcher, and professional. I have gone through struggles, intrigues, happiness, and uncertainties. These uncertainties teach me that there are authentic ways to collect information, where perhaps the story is not part of a methodological instrument or a horizontal provocation does not exist.

Based on my experience, the importance of ontology in classroom observation practices has rarely been discussed. The Observer Subject needs to be related to being, becoming, existence, reality, and their relations. The idea in this methodological chapter, "The ontological is before the epistemological," reflects on this and interprets unexplored methodological research thought. Moreover, giving special attention to the human being in a methodological process is relevant. I discovered that research is important for knowledge development. However,

when this chapter refers to a part of participants as teammates, what I mean is that on “my team,” we create bonds of friendship, and we also share other spaces outside the academic one, so it can be said that there is a quality of life on the “team.” I enjoy sharing with my Teammates who are part of my research, and the theory and reflections should emerge from our encounters since we are narrators of stories, experiences, and subjectivities.

Finally, presenting autobiographies positions me horizontally. Thus I feel comfortable telling my stories as an observer of my feelings and struggles. Also, meaningful experience in this part involves learning to listen... It is not a simple practice, and despite this, my teammates’ stories, life stories, and experiences allow me to enjoy and learn with/from them.

This research has critical, post-structural assumptions and hints into a decolonial project. I can leave it to the readers to inquire about my research position. I want to show here the ways to go around my feelings, the context in which my project is placed, the subjects who interact on this path, and the methodological uncertainties in the Observers’ Subject Positions within ELT class observations.

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