

Subjectivity and Resistance Practices in the ELT Field

Pilar Méndez-Rivera

*Where there is power, there is resistance.
(Foucault, 1978, p. 95)*

Introduction

My research into Teachers' struggles and resistance practices in Colombia has been shedding light on some actions teachers have taken to challenge and resist some practices (linguistic policies, standardization, certification). It has made the pervasive effects of some hegemonic and normalizing discourses evident (English as a must, Bilingualism as English-only, B2/C1/C2 as musts), that is, in relation to an ideal English language Teacher, and provokes/prompts comparisons between Native English Speakers and Colombian Language English Teachers, bilingual practices and immersion practices, certified teachers and noncertified teachers, certified native speakers and graduate teachers, English teaching in public schools and English teaching in private schools, bilingual schools and non-bilingual schools, among others; all of which affects the ways society in general thinks of Colombian English teaching and English Language teachers in Colombia. As can be seen, the way these comparisons place subjects and objects on the same level aggravates an objectification process that dehumanizes and totalizes the construction of identities and the comprehension of realities, which inevitably threatens other subjectivities and other existing conditions of possibility.

It is not a secret that English teaching and learning education has been historically affected by marketization practices (Ramos, 2018) that society in general tends to have normalized due to the effects of these hegemonic discourses (English as a must, a native-like command of English, English-only) and also due to the reduced visibility of other ways to understand English teaching and learning that are not aligned with the marketing of its learning and the control and objectification of teachers' lives. Our recent research into English teacher subjectivity and English teaching in Bogotá (Méndez, Garzón, Noriega, Rodríguez, and Osorio, 2019) found us compiling an archive to trace discursive and non-discursive practices in these domains: subjectivity and subjectification in ELT. The analysis of these domains shows, on the one hand, the productive power to position one's self and others in a system of beliefs presented as the ultimate truths (Walls, 2009) and, on the other hand, the subjects' capacity to obey or resist these "truths" as part of their reflections, decisions and actions. In this particular project, we wanted to shed light on what Colombian English teachers think of themselves as subjects of a practice (subjectivity), sometimes in alignment with the official rhetoric, but in some cases by rescuing specific bodies of knowledge and the ownership of English with meanings that oppose the learning of English as a commodification.

In this chapter, I would like to reflect upon some of my findings and those of my colleagues and students (concluded or in process) in order to broaden this discussion and enhance my reflections. In doing so, I would like to draw your attention to some events in the history of the teaching of languages when we abandoned or lost sight of something. The significance of this historicity will allow us to see what has been there but has been ignored or neglected. I'm interested in showing the black and grey areas of what is regarded as a perfect practice: The success of English in Colombia.

Stolen Chances and Neglected Possibilities for Other Subjectivities

A review of the memoirs of some Ministers of Education and some newspaper/magazine articles, among other sources, shows us that interest in learning a foreign language has long been a concern in Colombian education. In the past, the teaching of other languages at secondary schools in Colombia was rich and varied. For instance, special courses in Latin, English, German

and French featured in the curricula of schools between 1930-1950; later, in 1970, they focused on English and French, until 1998-2000, when French was dropped and the dominance of English teaching was officially established in the public sector. This means that from a varied repertoire of languages students could learn, we turned to a unique option. Students who depended directly on the State thus had fewer options to learn a foreign language (and learn about a different culture).

In fact, in the early 2000s a number of laws, decrees, and programs about the learning of a foreign language strengthened this pact with English. However, it is mistaken to say that the pact was sealed by the power of the law, because by that time Colombia's population had already been influenced by the hegemonic discourse that depicted English as the language of progress and success. Some education programs for language teachers in Colombia which prepared them to teach French and German were also affected by this decision. There were fewer positions for them in public schools, so they had to teach Spanish or learn English.

I still remember the fear, sadness and anger this caused in my classmates who were studying French and German when I was an undergraduate at the Atlántico University in 1998. The lucky ones got a job teaching the language they loved in private institutes, but the others were forced to adapt and shape themselves to the new demands. Language Teacher Education programs also began to focus more on English than on other languages. Although, at the present time, some of these programs still offer other languages (different from English) in their main curricula or as options, the job market is more competitive nowadays and those who teach, French for example, have become an elite.

As can be seen, this situation is a clear indication of the effects of the law and the type of wounds that can be inflicted on people who relate differently to other languages and to education. The history of the English Pact in Colombia has neglected these other professionals and ignored their struggles to win recognition. And it has also ignored the blighted pasts and future possibilities for different subjectivities and forms of bilingualism.

Hidden behind the laws and regulations there is a mechanism of control which favors the creation of identities that subject students and teachers of foreign languages to prescribed ideologies (Popkewitz, 1984). That means that a very few arrogate to themselves the right to define and shape what

kind of teacher is needed for a certain kind of society. The study of policies is pivotal for revealing how the promotion of a particular policy may hinder the autonomous creation of one's own identity.

In this respect the studies of Guerrero, C. (2010a; 2010b); De Mejía, A. (2011; 2012); González, A. (2007; 2010); and Usma, J. (2009), among others, have problematized the ways linguistic policies in Colombia have been imposed on the population, privileging an elite bilingualism which disdains other foreign languages and favors the teaching of English in the country. They introduce a critical line of thought to explore the ways in which such policies lead to exclusions and injustices and place local practices of ELT in an inferior position. In my view, these studies call on us, as teachers and scholars, to reflect on and expand our understanding of bilingualism.

Bilingual National Plan: A Legacy of Subjections

Once the Bilingual National Plan (BNP) was launched, an entire system of subjections came into effect. I would like to comment on some of those subjections. The most notorious were aimed at Colombian English language teachers (CELT). The BNP diagnosed them as deficient (because of their poor command of the English language) and lacking adequate methods of teaching (because of their use of Spanish in the classrooms). Consequently, a shadow of doubt, disbelief, and suspicion fell on English language teachers and their professional and linguistic formation in Language TE programs. As the native English Speaker model became the new ideal to assess the appropriateness of CELT, a dichotomy (NESTs and NNESTs) spread its assessing influence among different types of practices: teaching practices, recruitment practices, the social consideration of teachers, to name a few. Let's dig deeper and elaborate more on what has been ignored in some of these practices.

Teaching practices in schools. The *Only English* mode of teaching became the rule for teaching English in classrooms and defining and understanding bilingualism in Colombia. For the NBP, the use of Spanish was penalized, and local teachers were forced to move away from their Spanish-English methodologies to follow the new conditions. A traditional technology was restored. Classroom observation practices were implemented to guarantee compliance with the program guidelines and obtain an effective class (Martínez, M., 2021, this volume). Somebody has asked what it means

for an experienced teacher to contradict his/her own ideas about teaching and the implications of this obedience for his/her own well-being. It is not easy to follow a course of action which limits your teaching conditions and possibilities for governing your own classroom. That aside, what is the meaning given to observation? Can the observers and the observed negotiate the meaning of an “effective class”? Martínez’ problematization of classroom observations and the ways these subjectivities are prescribed offers a new angle on denaturalizing, coercive and corrective practices and gives them a more humanistic perspective.

Training programs. Another device created by the Colombian Bilingual Program is a number of Immersion Programs (IPs), which are designed to show teachers how to do their job and improve their level of English. It seemed to me that the “making” of teachers in these scenarios needed to be problematized in order to tackle the *system of reasoning* (patterns, norms, ideas) behind these types of artificial scenarios and in this way understand the stakeholders’ aspirations “to inscribe a certain selectivity as to what teachers see, think, feel and talk” about English (Popkewitz, 1998, p. 5). The study of Ayala, J. (2021, in this volume) pays particular attention to the relation between training and power, more precisely between English Teacher participants’ subjectivities and the ways they relate, negotiate, and position themselves in this training. Teachers are not “empty vessels”, and even though they voluntarily participate in these IPs, they do not wholly submit their free will to the training.

Policy-making beliefs. Behind the *only English* teaching focus there is a monoglossic view of bilingualism. Why call a program “bilingual” if the use of Spanish in our classrooms is not seen as correct? In doing so, the program privileges a source of knowledge distant from our realities. There are cases where bilingual models have been adopted with success to maintain the balance between both languages as teaching languages and not mere subjects (Garcia, O. 2009). In Colombia the work of Guerrero, C. (2010) and de Mejía, A. (2012) has stood out for pinpointing this erroneous conception of bilingualism and the injustice of disdaining other languages so, I will not expand on this as you can read these studies yourself. But for me, this construction of reality represents the dissemination of a false belief, which influences the general understanding of a phenomenon and normalizes a particular view of it. In fact, it constitutes a new form of social pressure which affects not only language teachers and education programs, but society in general by means of a self-fulfilling prediction, which may be expressed as

follows: “Citizens who choose not to learn English become responsible for their lack of progress” (Macedo et al., 2005, p. 24).

The turn to certification. Once the policies which made the C2/C1/B2 levels a “must” in for a (good) teacher with a great command of the language were implemented, a university teaching degree was discarded in favor of an English proficiency test certificate. Teacher Education programs were forced to include a C1 language proficiency certificate as a fundamental prerequisite for awarding degrees (Colombia, Res. 2041, February, 2016). Some B. A. programs have long resisted this certification practice because they regard it as typical of a market logic that favors the racialization of a teacher’s identity (Castañeda-Peña, 2018; Rosa & Flores, 2015; Kubota, R., & Fujimoto, D., 2013) and ignores the potential of pedagogy to shape English teachers’ subjectivities as educators. Davila (2018, p. 224) asks how such English Language Educators think of their roles as teachers of teachers? What epistemological and pedagogical stances do they adopt in order to train the next generation of language teachers?

Such questions are pivotal for casting light upon the subjectivities of a humanistic and pedagogical logic that subverts the idea that a command of the English language is the only condition for being a good teacher.

Recruitment practices. As a consequence of the turn to certification, the divisive effects of the NESTs/ NNESTs dichotomy have increased. A recent study by Martínez, Y. (2018) explores the ways in which this dichotomy pops up in English Language Recruitment practices. It notes that the native speaker approach sets the standards for the recruitment of teachers. It further reveals “that while some local teachers resisted the normalization of tests and certificates as [a] mandatory and indisputable requirement to participate in employment selection processes, other local users in fact supported the idea of using them as a filter to accept teachers who have reached a native-like proficiency level and reject those who have not” (p. 84). These findings highlight the dispute revolving around a contradictory system of ideas about English language teachers’ identities in which these subjects must become entrepreneurs of themselves to fit into the system’s classifications (Castro-Gómez, 2016, p. 14). Viáfara’s study (2016) is also useful in showing how “nativespeakership and associated ideologies” affect the self-perception of prospective English teachers, insofar as most were afraid of the drawbacks of failing to achieve native-like abilities in English, while as Spanish speakers they felt self-confident (p. 21).

We cannot ignore that this ideology involves a teaching hierarchicalization that places local teachers in an inferior position regardless of their professional preparation as English Language Teachers. We cannot ignore either that disadvantages, discrimination, differentiated scale payments and stereotyping are emerging as part of this market logic in which some English language teachers (local and foreigners) are attacking each other, with feelings of hatred.

At the institutional level, this market logic also attacks/reverses the meaning of teacher education through the creation of power-subjectivity. Being a professional in the teaching field implies a high commitment to learn how to think, theoretically and pedagogically, and to act as an educator in the ELT field. This power-knowledge emerging from pedagogy -as a fundamental discipline to educate English language teachers- leads “teachers to reason and enact their teaching in various instructional situations for different pedagogical purposes” (Karpov, 2003, in Johnson, E. and Golombek, P., 2016).

Depending on our understanding of teaching as a profession, we can accept or resist these practices of teaching hierarchicalization and social competitiveness. To me, testing is a colonization technology of the market-ratio-logic that contributes to the de-professionalization of the work of teaching in the ELT field and affects the social treatment of teachers. We need to resist this ideology and the pervasive effects of its objectification and rescue the humanistic vision of education in order to understand the struggles of both English language teachers and English language learners.

The Educator Embodied Subjectivity as a Resistant Identity

When we reviewed the academic publications of English language teachers (schoolteachers, university teachers, scholars) we noticed that some teachers regard themselves as educators and not simply as instructors or teachers of the English language. This enunciation of themselves as educators (implicit or explicit and declared) can be traced to concerns that go beyond the teaching and learning of English as a curricular subject, and thus reaches into multiple areas of education. There are a lot of studies devoted to discussing ELT as a means to attain other kinds of knowledge and reflect upon broader social and political problems. These writings say more about the English Language teachers’ subjectivities than any profile, law or label because they subsume the real making of the teachers into actions and reflections.

The social and political idea that English language teachers are mere instructors that just teach the code is contradicted by the type of work done by many English language teachers, who struggle to open up different spheres of action for themselves in their workplaces in order to subvert the limits imposed by some restrictive methods of positioning identity. For instance, Aldana, Y. (2021, in this volume) brings to the surface the subjectivities of some English language Teachers who are working for the construction of peace, in which English is one of the tools with a potential to transform the school culture and have a positive impact on students' lives. Aldana is able to show how the prescriptive and canonical calls on teachers to work on peace projects reinforce their instrumental role as educators and the ways they think of it.

Conclusion

In this chapter, subjectivity is seen as an empirical reality and not just a discursive production and clearly reveals struggles, injuries and also contradictions. I agree with Munro (1998) when she claims: "We cannot limit subjectivity to being solely shaped by discourse because we may be limiting the experiences that individuals can articulate" (p. 34). This notion enables us to notice the work that teachers have done to ensure for themselves forms of being different to those imposed by a norm, a label or a tradition. In other words, subjectivity seen as the "last trench of resistance against the advance of neoliberalism"⁴ (Castro-Gómez, 2016, p. 18) and its forms of domination. Although it is not easy to resist the new demands of a competitive world justified by aspirations to globalization and naturalized by "must be" discourses, subjectivity is a space in which subjects can work on themselves and try to heal the wounds left by the antagonistic forces that turn us into subjects of a practice.

I would like to conclude by saying that no one has considered the power that desire and the construction of one's own subjectivity has to promote actions and relations in the teaching and learning of English, which is linked instead to one's own will to be and, in the case of some teachers, shapes their struggles to be educators or intellectuals even in incredible times.

4 (original in Spanish)

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