

Chapter 1.

“Tangled up Together”: Our Journey Towards Decolonial Research as an Educational Project*

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Summary

This chapter accounts for three researchers’ stories from the School of Sciences and Education of the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas. Although the teachers come from three research traditions —gender studies, discourses, and practices from an archeological viewpoint, and the critical analysis of discourse—, their stories intersect along the way and engage in an alternative research and educational perspective on the field of English Teacher Education in Colombia. Their paths meet when Harold Castañeda-Peña invites Pilar Méndez-Rivera and Carmen Helena Guerrero-Nieto to join him and develop a major in English Language Teaching (ELT¹) in the Doctorado Interinstitucional en Educación at the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas. This chapter briefly introduces the ELT doctoral major and includes a group of short autoethnographies written by the authors.

The intersection of the stories brings together a collaborative autoethnography that shows what it has meant for the authors to undertake, as researchers

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1 ELT (English Language Teaching) is the teaching of the English language that includes not only instructing, but also educating teachers in the area.

and tutors, a decolonial path in research and doctoral education. Our learning, unlearning, and relearning processes in a new and uncertain paradigm that has implied, among other things, a series of deep epistemological reflections, aimed at building a personal and collective coherent discourse.

Introduction

The fundamental purpose of the Doctorado Interinstitucional en Educación at the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas is to

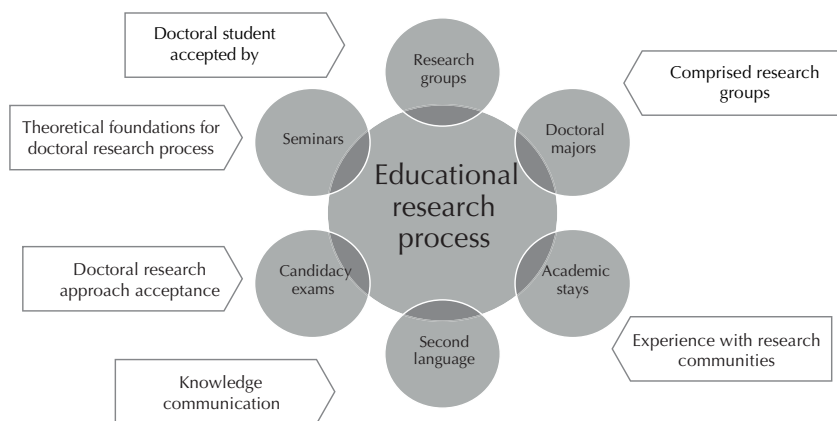
Contribute to the consolidation of a school of the highest educational, pedagogical, and didactic thought in the interinstitutional, national, and international spheres. This also aims to reinforce researchers' education from an individual and collective perspective within the educational and pedagogical field. These researchers are to build up the capacity to influence the sociopolitical and educational transformation of communities and regions, consolidating, at the same time, national and international groups and networks of trans/interdisciplinary research programs in educational topics. These groups are expected to integrate different universities in the country and the region. (DIE, 2017, p. 25) (own translation)

The doctoral major degree has five educational majors: the most recent, ELT Education, was created in 2016 and is aimed at English language teachers' education. This major is based on two lines of research: the first is Second Language Teacher Education and aims to prepare, qualify, and raise awareness of second language teaching professionals to understand and transform teaching practices by investigating the phenomena that impact these professionals' initial and continued education. The second is EFL² Identity(s): Power and Inequity, and seeks to analyze, study, and understand the interface of English learning experiences with identity, power, and inequity in a diversity of socio-cultural contexts, both inside and outside the ELT classroom.

At a general level, the doctoral major, as part of an institutional program, offers educational research processes, as illustrated in Figure 1.

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2 EFL means "English as a foreign language".

Figure 1. Doctoral educational process



Source: DIE (2017, p. 27).

Teacher-students join a research group that supports the ELT Education major. By being part of short academic stays, students choose to have internships to become familiar with academic communities in Latin American and European countries. They present candidacy examinations based on the publication of articles and book chapters within the major’s internal editorial program. They also attend other majors’ seminars, which are Emphasis, Education and Pedagogy, and Research; the first two host national and international guests. To date, the ELT Education major has incorporated three cohorts in 2016, 2018, and 2020.

This formal introduction of the program is complemented with an epistemological position from the South. Such assumption allows teachers and students of the program to find fractures in the field of applied linguistics to English teaching and teachers education, despite the presence of domains in the critical perspective. Therefore, in this brief autoethnography, and as professors of the ELT Education major who were involved with the intellectual complicity of most of the students we have welcomed—and who have welcomed us—, we captured this collective experience. We want, then, to show how an academic tapestry begins to weave itself, not only from our own experiences, but also from our belonging to the new ELT Education major within the doctoral program.

My Transition from the Critical to the Decolonial Thought: A Road still under Construction (Carmen Helena Guerrero -Nieto)

One of the aspects that attracted me to the decolonial turn was the possibility it gave me to discover the researcher's positionality. This meant establishing, from the beginning, the point from where one speaks as a researcher to set the necessary borders and understandings that are relevant to comprehend what, how, and why something is said. I want to start, then, by talking about my researcher positionality, where I come from, and where my epistemological and political positions arise.

I was born in a town in Colombia; I could say it was "a small city", but I think it would sound pretentious to say so. I do not think that many of what we call "cities" in Colombia are, in fact, cities. This fact, in my opinion, contributes to making critical aspects of our society invisible, which, from this point of view, is largely rural. I attended public schools to complete my primary and high school studies in pre-neoliberal times. This kind of education allowed me to receive quality education, regardless of my parents' economic capacity; not being able to access education due to economic problems is a reality that many people in the country must face. My pre and postgraduate university studies also took place in public schools. I received my undergraduate and master's degrees in Colombia and my doctorate degree in the United States.

I have developed my professional career mainly in public schools. This enormous privilege makes me very happy, as it has allowed me to be where I am today and to achieve what I have built so far in professional and personal terms. This is why I believe in and defend public school education and promote it as a social setting where cognitive justice can be created (de Sousa, 2009).

I am the daughter of parents who did not finish their primary education. However, such a circumstance did not prevent them from developing knowledge independently. My mother, for example, loves to read and keep updated on several topics, and she is also a political activist in virtual and non-virtual social networks. As for my father, since his retirement he has spent his life taking photography courses or taking classes in art-related subjects. Both are a great inspiration to me because they have fueled their intellectual freedom despite the harsh economic conditions they lived in for a long time. I grew up surrounded by my maternal uncles and aunts, who had revolutionary ideas from an early age; they believed in social justice. Their actions were always consistent with those beliefs: listening to and seeing them committed to those ideals influenced my ways of seeing the world and interacting with it and in it. I think that my decision

to become a teacher was not only influenced by this environment: it has also been enriched throughout my professional career by multiple actors and events that have led me to a borderland position, that is, one that is constantly coming and going from the certainties to the uncertainties of knowledge and research in ELT education.

After presenting my positionality and placing my family background within a social justice perspective, I would like to skip my story for a moment to describe my first research project (carried out after my Master's thesis work), in which I recognize some decolonial traces. It is worth mentioning that the ELT field has been relatively colonized³: we can think, for example, of the varieties of the English language that we as citizens must speak and the cultural experiences that we must have. Therefore, the "must be" of field research was focused on the instruments, testing methods, techniques, and strategies to teach more and better English. Arguably, our field has been isolated from the social problems of our environment for a long time. That said, I decided, along with a very dear colleague and with whom I have developed research work, to carry out a research project in critical pedagogy. We were inspired by Paulo Freire and authors such as Henry Giroux, Michael Apple, Ira Shor, Joan Wink, and Peter McLaren, among others.

What we were looking for in this project was to see if there was any possibility to "translate" some principles of critical pedagogy into ELT pedagogy. The aim was to challenge the traditional forms of English teaching in school contexts, and, thus, delve into other possibilities of being and existing as English language teachers. The participants in the research project were students of a Bachelor's degree in basic education who were majoring in English and conducting their teaching practices in the city's public schools. In the end, they responded to the challenge with very innovative proposals where the English language was analyzed not as the object of study, but as a tool to mediate with the world (Guerrero-Nieto, 2007) and re-signify it with their school-students.

A few years later, when I started my doctoral work, I re-encountered critical discourse analysis. By the time I went to the United States to start my doctorate studies, the implementation of what was called the National Bilingualism Program (NBP) in Colombia had begun. Thanks to my participation as teacher at a public university and as a member of the Colombian Association of Teachers of English (ASOCOPI), I had the opportunity to participate in academic discussions

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3 For the idea of ELT as a colonized field I draw, first, on Pennycook's work in the book *English and the discourses of colonialism* (1998), and later on the reflections and conversations we have held in the doctoral program, where we bring to the center of our epistemological reflexivity the fact that the field has been constituted from and by the global North (teaching practices, contents, methods, etc.).

on the subject. I decided to carry out a critical discourse analysis of one of the documents produced by the Ministry of National Education for the NBP program. Though I must confess that conducting this study was a painful process, since the chosen methodology led me to scrutinize and learn about my country's harsh realities concerning inequality, violence, linguisticism, and poverty, among many other things, it also exacerbated the social sensitivities that had inhabited my skin and my conscience since I was a child.

I wanted to address three topics in my doctoral dissertation. The first was related to the meaning of "bilingualism" in the context of the NBP program. Until then, whenever bilingualism was discussed in Colombia, it meant only Spanish and any other language, whether Indigenous or modern. However, from that program on, this meaning of bilingualism was reduced to merely speaking Spanish and English, as a demonstration that English was constituted as an element of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991) and reified as the language of being, knowledge, and power (by that time I used similar categories, but I was not aware that I was already entering decolonial lands). The second topic I explored in my doctoral work was the place of Indigenous languages in the program and the way they were addressed in the document. Sadly, the main finding was the carelessness with which Indigenous languages and other minority languages spoken in Colombia had been treated since colonial times. Lastly, the third topic was the way teachers were represented in official discourses. The results showed that teachers were negatively constructed and were even made invisible in several instances.

My doctoral work's findings paved the way for other subsequent research studies, where I was mainly interested in several topics related to English language teachers and teaching. In these studies, me and my fellow researchers sought to establish the relationships between educational policies and teachers from a bottom-up perspective; in other words, we used a research lens that focused on teachers and bilingual policies to understand how the former appropriated, adapted, or resisted the latter.

Along this path, some authors began to inspire me. We would locate them in what is currently called the "Global South" but who are in the geographic North. One of these authors was Alastair Pennycook (1998), who has become a critical and *avant-garde* voice in the field of applied linguistics. In his book *English and the Discourses of Colonialism*, he narrates the influence he received from Walter Mignolo and Lynn Mario de Sousa after an academic stay in Brazil. This is paradoxical because, in our colonized field, it was in a talk by an Australian author that I heard about the topic of coloniality for the first time and not through Latin American theorists, who have been building the so-called "decolonial turn" for

about 30 years (the same happened to me with Freire's teachings, which came to me first in English in a doctoral course in the United States).

It was in this context of intellectual challenge where our paths crossed: Harold's, Pilar's, and mine. For me, it was the chance to find a way of understanding the world, an understanding that would allow me to name what I had already noticed in my research on the critical paradigm, something that was still in a gray area in my mind, as I had no way to put a name on it. In this transition from the critical to the decolonial I have understood that it is not enough for a researcher to have an open agenda and to explicitly take sides with those who lack the power; instead, we must go further and begin to dismantle the power relations that place us as those who know and control everything. This kind of power also places us in a role in which we are expected to offer unilateral interpretations of reality, without taking into consideration how our participants make sense of the world.

Being part of this decolonial project in the Doctorado Interinstitucional en Educación, and particularly in the ELT Education major, has posed significant epistemological challenges for us as researchers, mentors, and doctoral students. It might seem contradictory to be part of an ELT community while problematizing it, but this is precisely the value of this path. The spread of English and all matters associated to its teaching has allowed us, as English teacher-educators and as academics—body and geopolitically located in the global South—to claim ownership of a profession that is a central part of our identities and to have a say in how things are done, have been done, and could be done. This short trajectory has represented a change of skin for everyone; we learn while we do. Arguably, although this decolonial bet is still under construction, we are proud to be part of this process, mainly in what is related to ELT.

Autoethnographic Commentary: Rescuing the Teacher's Struggle, a Historical and Decolonial Lens (Pilar Méndez-Rivera)

As an educator who goes beyond ELT, thinking of myself constituted an epistemological and strategic framework to access teachers' particular history in Colombia. This is also a path to identify myself with the somewhat alien and distant struggles of teachers of English in my country. My doctoral thesis, published in the book *Sujeto maestro en Colombia, luchas y resistencias* (Méndez -Rivera, 2017), allowed me to return to past times to understand the present—a typical movement of the field of archeology (Foucault, 2005). This doctoral program made it possible to recognize a series of struggles that are currently being problematized,

making evident what it means for Colombian educators to be teachers at the level of subjectivity. This also meant the ability to comprehend the struggles and resistance that are not always victorious in raising the teaching profession's status. This program also raised a discomfort I had as I dared to leave the ELT field and move into a general one, that of education. I did not perceive the limits imposed by applied linguistics as a discipline and the English language limits; instead, it meant daring to divest myself of disciplinary forms and, instead, to learn from other disciplines and epistemes.

When I received the invitation to participate in the ELT Education major of the Doctorado Interinstitucional en Educación at the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, I considered in my mind the idea of making my colleagues, and the field itself, feel uncomfortable. This thought emerged in my mind as I thought of the importance of teachers' struggles and the weight of their actions throughout history as binding elements to review how English teachers think of themselves in the context of education. It was an emplacement exercise that proposed an approach to situations from the *fold* (Deleuze & Guattari, 2008) to warn about other possibilities, especially in the epistemologies of the South, which is geographically close to the field of ELT in Colombia, but epistemologically distant.

Some years later, I reviewed the dataset file⁴ that was built to inquire about the impact of the bilingualism project in Colombia and the ways of seeing and thinking about the English language teacher. Revisiting the data in detail brought up a series of alienating subjection mechanisms or ways of exercising power over teachers (Foucault, 1982) that objectify/control teachers to the tenor of some language levels and structures that are easily identified in the reform discourses of English. However, even within the entrepreneur's machinery that dominates contemporary times, English language teachers resist these logics and entrench themselves in communities and projects that raise their status as educators. This has allowed them to show that sometimes the act of resistance operates within the same system: it relies on their same tactics, but instead, these are resignified. One example of this can be traced in the ways some ELT journals opened spaces for pre-service teachers, schoolteachers, and emergent scholars to publish their reflections and research work in indexed journals. Although the publication system values citation indexes, the ways in which Colombian journals are merging publication and citations practices entail a politics of knowledge production of community recognition.

As a result, the book *English Teacher: subjetividad y enseñanza del Inglés en Colombia* (Méndez et al., 2020) leaves a series of fissures and cracks that help to

4 Published in the book *English Teacher: Subjetividad y enseñanza del inglés en Colombia* (Méndez et al., 2020).

understand the need to investigate these modern nature struggles, as is the case of struggles within programmed identity and hierarchy in a field. Finding out about such struggles could shed light on colonial practices that have been naturalized and promoted by modernist, universalist, and liberal discourses. In short, this allowed us authors to affirm that what happens to English language educators today, whether due to their active or passive role during these struggles, demands the power of a critical-decolonial project. Harold Castañeda-Peña, Carmen Helena Guerrero-Nieto, and I, Pilar Méndez-Rivera, have committed to this project.

We think of the educational project that is carried out in the ELT Education major of the Doctorado Interinstitucional en Educación as a political project (Freire, 1993) built with others and not only for others. This allows us to revisit the discourses and practices that bother us and that we experience as teachers and students, as individuals that feel, think, suffer, laugh, cry, and enjoy. The serendipity of our conversations in class invites us to problematize knowledge as situated and embodied, both historically and geopolitically determined (Grosfoguel, 2011); this encourages us to think from our realities and experiences. In fact, appreciating what each of our doctoral students in the doctoral program brings with them is part of a heuristic work resulting from shared reflections that are subjected to criticism and humanized understanding.

From my positionality as a woman, mother, teacher, and academic, who graduated from a public university in the night shift, I have always believed in the importance and role of education in human beings. However, I am aware that educational institutions have historically had a transcendental role in neutralizing these human conditions (being a woman, mother, mestiza, black, etc.), using them to maintain the system's constraints. This brings forward an epistemological endeavor that claims to highlight the struggles, pains, sufferings, and wounds we fight as individuals, which would mean building another subjectivity in a world of a colonizing nature. In short, the major in ELT Education seeks to make visible the forms that English language teachers have established as places to resist discourses and domination practices. I believe that as members of educational institutions, our commitment pursues this feeling and this thought.

Autoethnographic Commentary: Gender in Dispute, The Missing Piece. From Here I Continue the Journey! (Harold Castañeda-Peña)

As an academic-researcher, one of the most critical activities for me was the Gender, Language, and Identity elective course that I used to teach at the undergraduate level in a private higher education institution. In line with Harris

& Watson-Vandiver (2020), this pedagogical practice made me understand that educational environments rooted in critical discourse can provide information on how societies are gender and race-structured. It also led me to share several cohorts of a diploma course with preschool teachers who taught English through pedagogies based on artistic expression and to become the author of materials for such schooling level. In these two contexts, gender was present throughout varied discursive manifestations.

Before the publication of the book *Masculinities and Femininities Go to Preschool: Positioning Gender in Discourse* (Peña, 2009), I spoke with several feminists on the topic of the epistemological trap of universal determinism and post-structural relativism (Francis, 2001). In such a theoretical conversation, I opted for understanding the concept of gender as multiplicity. LeMaster *et al.* (2019) would say that,

To conceptualize gender as a galaxy is to consider not only the multiplicity of gender subjectivity (the hundreds of billions of galaxies/gender potentialities), but also the contextual potentiality in theorizing gender subjectivity (the billions to trillions of stars within a single galaxy/contextual gender performances and choices). (p. 353)

Based on such multiplicity, I understood how gendered identities unceasingly fluctuate in their discursive constructions based on daily interactions in the classroom (Castañeda-Peña, 2010). However, I was still questioning the practical achievement of following this line of inquiry within the field of Applied Linguistics to English language teaching and within the education and professional development of educators. Something was still missing.

Some years after the book's publication and after giving advice to undergraduate degree projects and master's and doctoral dissertations about gender, learning English as a foreign language, and teacher education (Castañeda-Peña, 2021), I was given the opportunity to draft a proposal of a major in ELT Education for the Doctorado Interinstitucional en Educación at the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, with the help of José Aldemar Álvarez (Universidad del Valle) and Luis Fernando Gómez (Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, who passed away). After the approval, Pilar Méndez-Rivera and Carmen Helena Guerrero-Nieto joined the team and shared with me the same ideas that haunted my mind. I identify with Hooks (1994) when she claims that "understanding and appreciating our different locations has been a necessary framework for the building of professional and political solidarity between us, as well as for creating a space of emotional trust where intimacy and regard for one another can be nourished" (p. 132). This has been a significant learning in the epistemological path that I have traveled in my

professional life and its unstable paths. The lesson I received from the recent work with my colleagues is that "To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences" (Hooks, 1994, p. 130).

I believe that a part of the missing piece I was looking for was mentioned in the paragraphs above. I found myself in the framework of professional interactions where I could feel vulnerable and find therapeutic value (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) beyond teaching and research; however, these were kindly integrated into me. I had been educated in post-structuralist feminisms in which, borrowing the words of Rhedding-Jones (1997), I exposed to the gaze of others my inner thoughts, my struggles, and my tears. Yet, universal narratives still flowed through me, emerging from a heteronormative matrix. This seemed inevitable.

Nevertheless, and similar to Wiesner's (2018) experience, I have been making "a continuous effort to use reflexivity, as the main tool was therefore necessary for me to be able to trace my complicated positionality in the field" (p. 343). Following my concern for the decolonial turn and after taking a course on decolonial feminisms, I began to interact with new questions. I also started to recognize fractures in the feminist theory prevalent in the literature.

Certainly, my positionality is that of a person who cares about healthy learning environments for language students and teachers who possess non-normative sexualities and gender identities. I try to get closer to their lived experiences to understand pain and opportunities in educational contexts of language learning and teaching that have been deafened and blinded by identity deprivation mechanisms. I share with Lugones (2008) the criticism of the heterosexual male voice that dominates a share of the decolonial theories. Following Mendoza's work (2020), I believe that it is not about such localized decolonization, but about "decolonization [being] trans" (p. 57). It is from here that my twisty journey continues!

Crossroads

Carmen Helena

Argentinian writer Julio Cortázar was once asked if he believed in magic, and he said that he did not believe in it as something that happened sporadically; instead, he thought that everything was magic and that he saw magic everywhere and all the time. Me too, as Cortázar, see my world inhabited by magic. To think that Harold, Pilar, and I come from such distant epistemological places and that we did not have the slightest chance of meeting one another, and yet, we are

here today, walking together this path that we are discovering, inventing, and reinventing together. Even though our paths cross in many ways and at various points, I can see that our shared path reside in us: an epistemological and social rebellion led us to think about the field of ELT Education from other angles and to propose other ways of being and existing as teachers of English and as researchers.

Pilar

Thinking, researching, writing, and feeling with others have a robust power to help people unlearn how to live in our centrality and understand our unique vision, limits, and biases as English language teachers. By reading what my colleagues have written, I have learned to recognize the complexity involved in thinking about ourselves together and our shared conditions as English language teachers and educators. At the same time, I have relearned the ways our differences and research interests enable us to map the paths. This is interesting for the ELT field and our own lives.

Harold

The act of crossing to “get tangled up” has allowed us to cultivate ways of meeting, getting lost, and meeting again as insubordinate subjects who try to reveal the subject and our denied, forgotten, or deprived discourses from various traditions. I think that teaching and learning English still requires a deep dive into those kinds of explorations. The exploration gives us the possibility, as in the *transitare* of the Latin language, to traverse and fracture, to go from one place to another, with an ethical sense of understanding the human subject’s condition. Transiting does not go in a straight line, and the horizon is not a fixed point. Instead, it is about intersections that are continually entangled in a profuse and endless action.

Conclusions

As authors, this autoethnographic writing exercise allows us to give confidence to this research approach and use our own experiences to criticize and analyze directly the meanings acquired by the constitution of academic communities with epistemological affinities and tensions in the framework of the doctoral education of teachers of English. This exercise also repositions the pedagogical task at this level of education, not as a curricular imposition, but as a possibility of meeting to learn, both together and voluntarily, through the conjunction of epistemological reflexivity exercises. In this context, learning means unlearning

to relearn. As teachers, we have learned that research is not a monolithic, uni-directional finished practice, and the new research approach has led us, in turn, to unlearn, to leave aside the aseptic nature of research, and to relearn that our social responsibility as researchers goes beyond denouncing inequality to act and change the conditions that provoke it.

The fortunate crossing of our paths in this educational, investigative, and intellectual project has allowed us to give real meaning to the various meanings of "community", enabling us to see, read, listen to, and write to each other from our enunciative strategies. All these actions combine our convergences and divergences, in an attempt to exist decolonially as beings.

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