

# Chapter 3.

## The Negotiation of Heritage and Masculinity in the EFL Classroom: The Case of an Ecuadorian Boy

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### Abstract

A more visible cultural diversity is apparent in Colombia today as many children from different heritages have arrived at Colombian schools in the past years. However, most of the time they are asked to act and behave in accordance with the school's prevailing monoculture. This is an example of contemporary epistemicide, as not only their culture, but also their identities, are being exterminated, and are also being asked to follow a pre-established opposite-binary concept of what it means to be a man or a woman; in other words, their heritage, beliefs, and customs are being erased to train them as controlled subjects. Therefore, it is imperative to explore the way in which all children are included in the school community, since cultural diversity is valuable in the school context.

Keywords: interculturality, critical interculturality, intersectionality, EFL classroom, social identities.

### My Locus of Enunciation

I am an English language teacher who graduated in 2008 from the program in Spanish and English Teaching of the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional. My thesis topic was the use of topics of the students' context to develop communicative skills; these topics included working with cartoon or movie characters, for instance. During this time, I learned the importance of working with students' daily life situations, which helped me very much when doing my Master's degree in Applied Linguistics to TEFL at Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas,

which I began in 2014. There I reinforced my ideas about creating lessons based on students' contexts, but during my Master's I discovered the importance of including social issues when creating lessons for students.

That was the moment when I started paying attention to what was happening around me and my students, who studied in a public school. At that time, I decided to work with social identities and gender issues because I realized the richness of my students' discourses when talking about current situations of their daily lives. When they brought to the classroom the experiences from their personal contexts or their relatives', they felt confident when giving their opinions, claiming their rights to be who they wanted to be, and going against preestablished stereotypes in respectful ways.

After finishing the graduate program, I continued reflecting on the way in which the knowledge and experience gained in my studies in public universities, where the decolonial ingredient was always present, could continue growing and impacting students' lives. My parents could not finish their middle school because of economic problems and, therefore, had to start working at an early age to support themselves. The education opportunities I have had in life have led me to think from a decolonial perspective and to look for a way in which I can show my students that the best way to resist Eurocentric practices is by changing ways of acting that lead us to segregate and reject other people.

The following section describes a very touching experience that I lived in August 2019, and which made me realize that there is still a need in schools to allow students to have their voices heard and shared, not only in the English language classroom, but also in the community.

## A Departing Landscape

A male sixth grader arrived at the classroom wearing his hair down and a cap. I asked him for the reason (because wearing a cap is not allowed at school due to disciplinary policy) and he replied that he was losing some hair. However, next class he was still wearing a cap and I asked him again for the reason, and he said he had brought a written excuse by his mother, which I read, but it stated only that her son was letting his hair grow. So, I sent him to ask the discipline head for a behavior monitoring card that granted him permission to enter the classroom, as I realized he had given me a different reason before. Some minutes later, he arrived crying and told me that the discipline head had not given him the card, so I decided to talk to him and ask for the real reason behind his hair longer than usual. This time he said that he wanted to keep his hair long because it is characteristic of his male Ecuadorian ancestors and relatives.

After living this experience with the Ecuadorian boy, I realized that sometimes we do not pay attention to the students who come from diverse cultural backgrounds. Most of the time, children at schools are seen as equal in terms not only of learning processes, but also on their backgrounds, but as teachers we fail to realize that their customs are different. The school's institutional documents have no mention on their diversity and differences because the same rules are set for all students. That was when I thought about exploring the literature on interculturality, critical interculturality, and intersectionality to see what has been problematized in these fields.

## **Interculturality, Critical Interculturality and Intersectionality**

In relation to the concept of interculturality, Saka & Asma (2020) developed a scale for examining intercultural awareness in their ELT students because they did not find one in their research to conduct their research. Ruiz (2011) identified the need to work with interculturality in his institution, as cultural diversity was not exploited enough; he stated that some students and teachers at his place of work were not interested in working on intercultural topics. Putman (2017) sustains that the school curriculum supports whiteness and, also, that some of those white privileges are not named or acknowledged at school. Sierra *et al.* (2010) identified a clear example of colonialism in a school in the municipality of Cristianía (department of Antioquia, Colombia), where children from the Karmata Rúa indigenous community were forced to learn Spanish as an imposition of the school's mainstream curriculum; they saw the importance of changing the school curriculum and of taking into account the necessities and realities of the community, instead of strictly following the traditional curriculum established by government policies. Tajeddin & Ghaffaryan (2020) problematized the fact that teachers' intercultural identities are considered; sometimes, English Language Teaching is seen as a means through which American culture is being imposed and shown to students as the model to follow.

In terms of critical interculturality, Bernardes *et al.* (2019) found out that some institutions tend to tell their students that they include this approach in their curriculum to gain status in the field, when this is really not true; they also state that some pre-service teachers' intercultural practices are not followed-up in the long term to visualize their effects or continuity in the classrooms. Márquez-Lepe & García-Cano (2014) chose three preschool and primary schools in the autonomous community of Andalucía (Spain) and found that the studies they consulted did not include school practices and intercultural topics at the same time; these are seen as separate elements. Gómez (2015) states that learners are

seen as passive receivers and that critical interculturality is seen only as a way to distinguish different nations because it is taught from a superficial level. Hazaea (2020) argues that there is a lack of intercultural skills in EFL textbooks, which makes it difficult for teachers to find a balance between what is presented in the books and the local cultural context. Finally, Moya *et al.* (2018) criticize the fact that sometimes culture is not taught from a deep level and, therefore, is not promoting interculturality in an adequate way.

The former literature made me realize that some authors had once had the same questions that I have today in terms of the inclusion of interculturality and critical interculturality in the English language syllabus. Some of these scholars discuss the need to change the curriculum because it is monocultural, involves a preference for whitening processes, and lacks teachers' intercultural identities; sometimes the intercultural aspect is included in the syllabus, and also in some textbooks, but it is not addressed in the lessons because it does not fit in the students' contexts and needs. However, I also realized that some of these scholars still hold some colonial ideas that can be counterproductive for students in their learning processes. The idea of following measurement systems to evaluate and balance the students' intercultural awareness and competences against the idea of telling teachers that they should teach culture from the ground and not from the surface, show that we still believe in binary concepts that indicate an opposition between what is right and wrong in ELT education. It is important to change these Eurocentric practices with the creation of a classroom-sourced cultural knowledge.

Finally, in terms of intersectionality, Wun (2018) problematizes that harsh school discipline policies were only applied to girls of color, even when white girls committed the same faults. Ocampo & Soodjinda (2016) affirm that there are not enough studies related to students' educational lives and state that, in their study, Asian American gay students suffered from bullying while being in high school; worse, they described experiences in which teachers remained passive when noticing this kind of behavior. Simpson *et al.* (2007) interviewed a group of students from rural areas of Indiana (United States) and found that most of the time there is a lack of opportunities to talk about race in the classroom because students and teachers refrain from doing so. Similarly, Showunmi (2020) conducted research among Black minority ethnic (BME) women in a London college who claimed that they were physically, morally, and spiritually stigmatized by the dominant culture and were not taken seriously on their leadership roles. Juan *et al.* (2016) claim that research based on intersectionality, including aspects such as race/ethnicity and gender, is scarce, and claim it is important to study students' individual experiences related to intersectionality. Finally, Cheon

*et al.* (2020) suggest it would be interesting to have studies that analyze American identity alongside other aspects such as gender, ethnicity/race and social status.

All previous studies state the need to conduct research based on students' life experiences with mistreating during school life. Sometimes children from minority backgrounds must face difficult situations, such as being more punished than their white classmates. Besides, some teachers and classmates normalize bullying situations because of their origin, gender, or race, while rejecting to discuss these topics in classroom. When institutions avoid discussing these issues, they allow students to become passive receivers of information, preventing them from reflecting on what happens around them. This is a clear example of coloniality of power (Quijano, 2014), since schools are trying to hide and avoid discussion about issues that can affect their students' academic and social life.

Teachers should also try to include these issues in the classroom because, though controversial, they can be valuable when letting students express their own ideas freely. Lawrence & Nagashima (2020) suggest that intersectional studies should also be carried out with teachers, because their cultural background may help them create lessons in which social identities may be explored; therefore, by including diversity, the lessons would be more meaningful for students. Teachers' identities can also be affected when experiencing rejection; this usually happens with language teachers who are not native speakers, whose knowledge is not seen as valuable. Ramjattan (2019) shows how some university students complained because they were expecting a native English speaker teacher when taking a language course. This demonstrates the existence of an imposition of Eurocentric knowledge that tends to erase valuable local knowledge. Estrada & Castro (2016) demonstrate how race and gender have been socially and culturally constructed, and how these imaginaries have affected teachers' pedagogical practices. Also, as Francis & le Roux (2011) sustain, there is a need to work on teachers' identities and their impact on social justice at school.

This literature review found that research on the concepts of interculturality, critical interculturality and intersectionality does not often include studies based on students' school life experiences from a non-Colombian traditional heritage. The available literature on the intersection of gender, race, and class in the Colombian school context is scarce. In the next section I will return to the example of the Ecuadorian student who had to negotiate his heritage and masculinity in the school culture, but first I will introduce the context of the study.

## **An Inspirational Context**

The research context is a public school located in the Kennedy locality of Bogotá, one of the biggest of the capital. This school was built in the same place where

US President John Fitzgerald Kennedy laid the first stone of the “Ciudad Techo” housing project when he visited Bogotá in 1961. This stone represents the place where a school, carrying his name, would be constructed later.

The work at school took off informally in 1963, but in 1977 the school became a basic educational unit (*unidad básica*), meaning they received students from first to ninth grade only. In the beginning the school was named “Simón Bolívar School”, but to continue with the nomination of basic unit, the name was changed to “John F. Kennedy Basic Unit”. In 2002, pre-school, middle, and high school levels were implemented, and its name was changed to “Colegio John F. Kennedy IED”, which keeps today. The school has currently six pre-school groups, fifteen primary groups, and twenty groups ranging from middle to high school (9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> grade).

According to the current demographic information at school, there are a total of 2730 students in both shifts (morning and afternoon), of which 1418 are identified as men and 1313 as women. There are 455 (16%) students who belong to non-Colombian traditional heritage communities distributed as follows: 356 (13%) come from other countries and 99 (3%) come from ethnic groups.

In terms of current foreign language skills, students’ English level is low. Although there is an English teacher in primary school, many of the students move to another school when they finish fifth grade. This situation makes it difficult for the school to keep its English level high, as it has been proven that most of the students who come from other schools lacked the opportunity of having English language teachers who studied English at a professional level, while others did not even have had English classes before. In informal talks with students from Venezuela, they said that some schools in their native country do not teach English, as it is thought it represents the dominance of Northern countries over Southern countries.

The John F. Kennedy IED School’s curriculum states that English language is taught three hours a week. In 2018 it was decided that students from 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grades should choose a specialization (*énfasis*) before graduation (Sports, English communication, or Science and technology); nowadays, some students are choosing the emphasis on English communication. Although this may have increased the possibilities for students to raise their results in state exams (Pruebas Saber) at the end of 11<sup>th</sup> grade, there is no proof of this yet as this emphasis follows a grammar-based structure which is seen as an extension of the regular English classes.

## Problematizing Meaningful Aspects

After the situation with the Ecuadorian boy, I thought it imperative to review the institutional sources to look for bases to support his position at school as a boy and as a non-Colombian traditional heritage member. The Institutional Educational Project (PEI), the School's Rules Handbook and the English Language Curriculum were also analyzed.

Firstly, the PEI shows that the school considers the community needs: human quality, leadership, and sense of belonging. It also mentions that its nature is participatory and flexible, which makes it a project in permanent construction, and an integral training of students is presented as a means to carry each administrative, political, and academic action to the fundamental interest of the school.

Surprisingly, this project does not include the 16% (455 students) of the population who belong to other origins, as mentioned above. It is not a secret that children from various parts of the world are coming to Colombian classrooms, so institutions should pay attention to their needs and take measures to include them in institutional statements instead of making them invisible. These children should not feel forced to act and live in the way the majority do, because their cultural background matters and it should become a crucial element in the classroom and community. Since the PEI is permanently changing, it could well include an intersectional view to allow more participation from the community and promote its inclusion. Although the student body is represented as a group of equal subjects who lack race, gender, and nationality, as of today the project presents an exclusion procedure (Foucault, 1970), because diversity is not being considered.

Secondly, the School's Rules handbook, which includes the institution's general rules, was examined. The section on the school uniform states the importance of wearing it as a way of representing an identity, something that would demand dignity and modesty from students and also distinguish them from those at other institutions. It also mentions that, while wearing the uniform, students should behave in and outside the school in a way that demonstrates the education received at school and at home; in the end, there is a paragraph mentioning that using caps in school is forbidden. As in other similar institutions, the uniform is a control system where any divergence from the rule is seen as invalid: all the school's students should behave in the same way and follow preestablished rules; therefore, students are seen as controllable subjects.

The document also contains a description of the uniform which includes distinct specifications of what boys and girls should wear (apart from the uniform for Sports class). The school uniforms are described on the basis of the traditional

binary concept of boys/girls, without bearing in mind that other genders exist and that everyone should be included in the decision on what to wear in school. According to Lugones (2008), gender and sex are also constitutive elements when talking about colonial power; heterosexuality, for example, has been historically used as a tool of domination, with women and men being shown as binary/opposite and their social roles changing in line with western models. The handbook also states no rule forbidding the use of long hair among boys, which invalidates the punishment on the student. This is the kind of situation that makes coloniality prevail in schools. We as teachers continue thinking that our students need to learn that rules were established just to be followed, not criticized. This could represent, following Foucault (1970), an internal procedure, because it works as a control on students' behavior. Although the School's Rule Handbook mentions no rule on long hair among boys, those who represent the school's authority created a rule to be followed and believed in.

Thirdly, the English language curriculum, whose main purpose is to develop students' communicative skills on the English language, was also reviewed. According to the document, the development of said skills will enable students to feel closer to other cultures and ways of thinking, to extend their capacity to integrate knowledge, understand global reality and perceive its importance in the Colombian context. The document also mentions the importance of developing communicative and linguistic competences in English speaking and writing, which will prepare them for the immersion in English language contexts as well as new cultural dynamics. Related policies such as the Curricular Standards in Foreign Languages, which include topics like linguistic, pragmatic, and socio-linguistic competences, are also mentioned. These policies consider Spanish as the students' native language and English as their second language, which is problematic when we realize there are students from Indigenous communities who have their own language and that there are children who have never been taught English at school or home.

The curriculum states the importance of including different cultures in the classroom, but the only one considered is the North American. The important thing in the English class, according to the document, is to include the Northern cultures, the ones that represent countries whose people speak the target language, as it is the culture that represents the dominant group (colonizers' culture). The document states that the aspects to reinforce in students who learn English are those related to their language competences and to the goal of achieving high English levels within the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and the National Standards (in this last one, grammar is still the most important aspect). Assessment is linked to two distinct aspects: the CEFR (because it follows



the framework's language classification levels) and the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, which were presented for the first time in the United States and state the need to leave contents aside and master the necessary skills to succeed. Both evaluation methods come from other countries, showing that they were imposed for political and economic interests and, hence, fail to reflect the country's real context for the learning of a foreign language.

Mignolo (2008) refers to the coloniality of knowledge as the imposition of Eurocentric thinking, directed to the extermination of indigenous epistemologies and practices. This situation also demonstrates that most of the time people think that what comes from Northern countries is better than what we already have or produce in Southern countries. The fact that national policies in these last countries state that we must be evaluated by international organizations demonstrates that we are permeated by a colonial way of thinking which makes us believe that our institutions are not able to produce English language quality tests. What is more, they make us believe that we need to be evaluated to demonstrate our knowledge of the foreign language because we are not native speakers.

The institutional documents mentioned before show a monolithic view of reality and fail to grasp the diversity found in the school's population. According to the school's demographic information, 16% of the students (455) belong to diverse racial and ethnographic groups, which means there is a need to work with a different perspective and to include students from different backgrounds; this openness to diversity should be present not only in institutional documents, but also in the lessons. The documents may use the word "diversity" frequently, but they are only written paper because, in fact, the lessons fail to address the goal of including students of non-Colombian traditional heritage, other genders, and other social classes.

According to Quijano (2014), racial/ethnic classification has to do with the idea of defining ourselves as inferior when comparing to the European economic and knowledge standards, and that this is the main characteristic of the coloniality of power. The English language was chosen as the international language to be taught in Colombian schools, without considering the existence of a mother language, which most of the times is not even Spanish. The Ecuadorian student and many others from Indigenous cultures are not being considered as relevant subjects in the teaching of a foreign language because what matters is to impose a language that brings more advantages in a globalized world. In conclusion, the three institutional documents analyzed specify only one native language (Spanish) and only one identity (Colombian) when stating the rules for the student body as a whole.

Overall, in Colombia there is still a tendency to normalize colonial practices of extermination. Considering that none of the documents mention children from other cultures, they become symbols that institutions use to generalize and eradicate diversity. When we as teachers reinforce what is said in these documents, we act in a colonial way, as we contribute to the elimination of other identities by making them inexistent; in other words, we fail to integrate other identities, races, gender, and social classes, be they from the same country or from other countries, which are not considered normative by colonial thinking.

This tendency toward discrimination is also evident in situations among students in which they attack each other, verbally or physically, to segregate classmates who are classified as marginal. In some of the research studies mentioned above, various authors (Ocampo & Soodjinda, 2016; Ruiz, 2011; Sierra *et al.*, 2010) claim that some teachers prefer to refrain from talking about minorities in the classrooms, while others prefer to limit themselves to the curriculum and others, finally, remain passive when witnessing this kind of behaviors. When institutional documents, teachers, and students practice a monocultural discourse, they promote discrimination, which, in a way, is also promoting various kinds of coloniality. For instance, Maldonado-Torres (2007) mentions the coloniality of being, which is related to the way in which human beings were exterminated in the past for not being white: they were considered as slaves with no religion, language, education, or culture, and, therefore, were seen as inferior and mistreated. The human being is disembodied to create a subject that consumes knowledge, and thus, becomes a follower of Eurocentric practices who is stripped of everything that made him or her a diverse being. The result, unfortunately, is a subject who does not fight back these practices because they become common, normal, and acceptable, and who believes that rejection and vulnerability based on his/her condition (gender, race, social class, etc.) is justified.

Seeing students mistreating other classmates due to race or gender made me think that we know very little about the learning experiences of students in Colombia that belong to non-Colombian traditional heritage. Some scholars (Juan *et al.*, 2016; Ocampo & Soodjinda, 2016; Showunmi, 2020; Simpson *et al.*, 2007; Wun, 2018) mention that we need to pay attention to students' lives and identities, to listen to what they have to say in terms of what they are forced to suffer because of being considered as part of minorities. It is also important to consider the situations these students must face daily when learning a foreign language that they barely know about, but which is included in the Colombian school curriculum as a mandatory subject. We must pay special attention to students from Indigenous communities, as they already struggle learning Spanish, and even more with a foreign language they do not see as useful.

In addition, we need to consider that teenagers and pre-teens are a very vulnerable population because of the different problems that can disturb their personal lives and school performance. We know that these students' feelings can be affected very easily, and that discrimination can lead them to undesirable situations. After reviewing intersectional studies and the school's institutional documents (which demonstrate a lack of inclusion of the current population's characteristics), I can say that students' learning experiences are invisible in the literature related to intersectionality. Aspects such as gender, race, socio-economic strata, origin, and nationality, among other, are not being considered in these sources, and their relation to the students' own experiences in learning English in Colombia are also inexistent.

## What to Focus on

At the beginning of this chapter some research studies on interculturality and critical interculturality were discussed, which allowed me to focus on other related elements. For instance, I found that intersectionality could become the main characteristic of my research, as it considers aspects such as gender, social strata, and nationality, apart from race; these aspects can be grouped together to analyze what happens in the English classroom in terms of diversity.

The addressed studies allowed me to identify the gaps in the literature, especially in the Colombian context. Some studies are based on aspects such as gender or race, but there are few studies that include both in a single research project. Furthermore, there are a few studies that discuss intersectionality in school settings, but very few of these studies discuss students' identities and experiences related to intersectionality.

## Conclusions

Bearing in mind the input gathered from the institutional documents, the episode of the Ecuadorian boy and the scholarly research identified in the literature review, it is imperative to start changing colonial practices in English teaching in Colombia. To do this, I recommend the following research questions and objectives for future study in this area:

- Which learning experiences are constructed by non-Colombian traditional heritage students in the EFL classroom?
- How do non-Colombian traditional heritage students negotiate aspects of gender, race, class, and nationality in the EFL classroom?

### Objectives:

- To identify the learning experiences that students from non-Colombian traditional heritage have in an EFL classroom from an intersectional perspective.
- To describe from an intersectional perspective the English learning experiences of non-Colombian traditional heritage students.
- To analyze the relationship between non-Colombian traditional heritage students' experiences and foreign language learning.

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