

What Does this Journey Look Like?¹

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*Walkers, there is no path,
paths are made by walking*

Machado (1912, p. 88, original in Spanish)

Introduction

Research and life go hand-in-hand because, as human beings, we always desire to understand and give significance to what we do, feel, or experience. When I do not understand a situation, I reflect, chat with people, read, and do whatever is in my hands to get to know from different perspectives what is happening. Then, I make decisions or take an action. In fact, this study originates in the school where I spent half of my life, my second home. However, I have noticed that when discussing academic research, most people find this complex, unreachable, and even painful. Now, I want to share how I have planned this journey and some of the steps I have walked to place research in our everyday lives, keeping in mind that I should follow certain protocols that the doctoral program requests regarding methodology. In this chapter, I introduce the journey I have undertaken to explore this world called *Public Primary School Teachers' Stories about English Language Teaching*. I use the word journey to refer to this complex but awe-inspiring action of doing research. Along these pages, you will find a description of the very short path I have walked so far in terms of my destination, my companions, crossroads, itinerary, and some of the ways I have thought to walk this path. I hope this piece of writing encourages readers to find their ways of doing research.

1 The title of my thesis is *Public Primary School Teachers' Stories about English Language Teaching*.

Memories from My Research Path!

*Decolonial thinking is not a method to apply
but a way of being in and thinking the world*

Walter Mignolo (2014, p. 62)

I studied for a B.Ed. in English, and a Master's in Applied Linguistics to teach English as a Foreign Language. Now, I am studying for the Inter-institutional Doctorate in Education at the District University Francisco José de Caldas. I have taught English for more than twenty years, and now I would like to explore the dynamics of teaching English where I work. This part outlines my trajectory as a student/teacher/researcher from my undergraduate studies.

In 1994, I decided to do my final undergraduate work for my B.Ed. with an indigenous community called Nasa (better known as *Paeces*), who have lived in Puerto Rico, Caquetá, in Colombia for many years. One of the chapters of this thesis was devoted to the characterization of this community because they needed this description to get some financial support from the State to carry out their projects. Since then, I strongly believe every study has to leave something beneficial for working people and sharing their knowledge and life with researchers. Furthermore, researchers suggested the inclusion of the learners' grandparents' ancestral knowledge (e.g., language, religion, knitting) in primary school to motivate young people to speak Nasayuwe, their mother language. They encouraged them to speak their native language at school to preserve their culture. Speaking Spanish at school is one of the mechanisms schooling uses to homogenize people by imposing a single way to talk, teaching Spanish as the official language.

My teaching experience at public schools started in April 2001. I chose a semi-rural school located in the south of Bogotá. I had a large class of fifty-one sixth graders. Students motivated me to continue my studies due to the number of questions related to English Language Teaching (ELT henceforth) that came to mind in those circumstances. Consequently, I initiated a Master's Program in Applied Linguistics at TEFL, keeping in mind this beloved group. At that moment, I explored the intercultural awareness of adolescent students when using culture-based materials during English class. This work opened my eyes to a broader perspective on culture and identity, and this also provided me with ideas and reflections on how materials with cultural content could be created, used or adapted to contexts and specific needs.

Additionally, the social studies teacher and I created some material in English about historical facts from Colombia that gave us insights into the students' understanding of cultures. I agreed with López-Gopar (2009) when he stated that "children became teachers and linguists" (p. 3) because, during our classes, when my students were writing, they used different strategies to learn (e.g., inventive spelling). So, if the teachers do not reflect upon those students' learning processes, they can misunderstand those ways of learning as errors (Castañeda-Usaquén, 2012, p. 41).

Between 2010 and 2011, I developed a project with seventh graders, and at the end, they created their books, read them aloud, and recorded their voices. Our experience was recognized, and students became the authors of their English Books. These activities show how teachers and students can work together to understand their practices from their roles, contributing to teaching and learning. Seventh graders and I learned from each other. Accordingly, there is not only one way of being or knowing but multiple ways.

In 2011, in one of my experiences as a university teacher, I joined a private university research group focusing on developing competencies among the students there. I had to follow the techniques proposed by the main researcher due to their already having presented the project, and we had to adjust to the project. I did not feel comfortable doing quantitative analysis, applying progress exams to my students/participants, and comparing results between the control and experimental groups. In conclusion, I believe this was a way to promote standardized exams in the department.

Then, in 2012, I became a coordinator in the primary section of a public school located in Bogotá. I had not been in elementary settings for more than fifteen years. To perform my new role best, I studied a specialization in educational management in 2014. There, my colleagues and I carried out a research study that compared a charter school and my school, having as a core the occupations of the graduates.

After eight years as a coordinator, I wrote reports, presented statistics, and did activities that took me away from the educational field. Yelicich (2019) argues that school directors work to fulfill the market needs. For instance, "evaluation which does not revise the procedures, because this is a control mechanism; accountability; control and supervision; achievement pointers and rankings; good practices; coaching, [...]; incentives related to productivity; and marketing at school" (p. 237). This is to explain that those tasks are not questioned at school, they have become natural, and so Yelicich encourages school directors to "reposition education as the core of school tasks" (p. 240). I also felt the need to organize a group with teachers to transform our realities in terms of ELT. Thus,

Kuramavidelu (2002) explained that teachers (*i.e.*, teachers-coordinators) “organize themselves as a community of educators dedicated to the creation and implementation of forms of knowledge that are relevant to their specific contexts” (p. 14). But how could I contribute to transforming ELT in the school without knowing this in-depth? I realized that I needed to know myself, read our school dynamics, chat with teachers, study, and do research.

The Destination I Want to Understand

Knowledge comes from learning.

Wisdom comes from living

Anthony Douglas Williams

This research looks into teachers’ practices when facing English Language Teaching. ELT policies are made without paying much attention to our realities. Implementing ELT policies dehumanizes our community because these do not consider students’ and teachers’ backgrounds and ways of knowing. Thus, school tends to homogenize people and takes for granted that all public elementary school teachers have studied English during their training, that they like English, and that they can teach this language. This condition represents a critical area that has not been examined in depth. Accordingly, analyzing these circumstances and their interpretations could contribute to understanding teachers’ emotions, decisions, frustrations, and actions taken when teaching English to children. The results of this study could enrich our educational community’s points of view, increasing the reflection upon cultures and visions of the world that ELT encompasses. In other words, WE (my companions and me I-henceforth) would understand our teaching experiences as human beings within our own stories, which embrace knowledge, emotions, and ways of doing.

What Does this Journey Involve?

*Life is a succession of lessons
that must be lived to be learned.*

Anonymous

De-colonial way of doing research has to do with the human being who dares to look for footprints to be followed, to learn from them, and to be able to modify the path. A de-colonial researcher is a person who thinks, feels, knows, acts, communicates, and behaves, distinguishing colonial traits given by family, school, religion, media, work, friends, hobbies, and so on. A de-colonial researcher follows, adapts, or creates paths, procedures, and techniques to conduct research. Here, I describe my conception of consent forms and how I have modified them; I share my experience with piloting data collection techniques, and I show my attempt to do research in my manner. This is how I have lived methodology in this journey.

My ancestors came from different places in the world. I have heritage from Asia, Europe, and my beloved indigenous people. Some of these phenotypic characteristics are evident in my mother, who was called “little Japanese girl” when she was a child because she had Chinese-like eyes; my father has blue eyes; and one of my last names is Usaquén, which implies that my grandmother belonged to an ethnic group located in Cundinamarca. So, I am a mestiza who spoke Spanish and studied a career to be an English teacher. I taught at private and public institutions at different educational levels for over two decades. Now, I am a coordinator who wants to explore the dynamics of ELT in a public primary school where elementary teachers have to teach English to their students.

I began all this with a short story about who I am and what I have done to introduce the approach selected in this study, the biographical-narrative approach proposed by Bolívar (2012). Accordingly, the interest in understanding the lives of the subjects and how they have been built personally and professionally as part of the culture in which they develop (biographical research), to reach, finally, the subject and how s/he narrates her/his own story as a way of understanding the world in which s/he lives (Rivas *et al.*, 2012, p.16).

Teachers’ stories “are presented with names, places, moments, and people close to us daily. We are faced with a myriad of common knowledge, actions, stories, myths, experiences and senses that involve contradictory aspects of our experiences, but which magically make up our lives” (Rivas *et al.*, 2012, p. 53).

Doing research in a de-colonial way entails adjustments to data collection methods. To do so, I began by modifying impersonal consent forms into special invitations, I had to pilot the interviews as a request for one of the seminars, and I ended up having moving conversations with my companions. In other words, my purpose is to place research in our daily lives.

Invitations to this Journey

From my perspective and the values taught at home, I would not need a consent form; just my word and commitment would be enough. I would not need to sign any document supporting my promise. I honor my word. In research, consent forms are created as formats for everyone. However, when I had to write a single consent form as a requirement to be able to publish what my colleagues had shared with me, I felt the need to make this format more personal because I am convinced that a consent form is an invitation to start a trek shoulder to shoulder.

Consequently, I wrote a customized invitation letter for each of my fellow collaborators. In this letter, I include the date, the name of my companion, the actions my companion has taken related to the English language or ELT that have called my attention, my promise that each of them would know what is going to be shared before anyone else, the yes/no question about her willingness to be part of the research, a space to write her pseudonym and the signature. However, I think I betrayed my idea of placing research in our daily lives when I asked for a fictitious name because we do not use it in real life. I do not want to anonymize my colleagues; on the contrary, I need to honor their voices. Luckily, I wrote (optional) next to a pseudonym. One of my companions has a pseudonym; two want to appear with a short form of their names, as they are called with affection; four composed a name using letters of their full names, and the rest have their proper names.

WE are sharing our stories about the English language and ELT in our context; these stories constitute the knowledge WE have. So, the question is: Why do WE have to create a pseudonym? When a reader/researcher finds something interesting to cite, s/he quotes my name or the pseudonym. This means the person who shares her knowledge is not recognized as the co-author of that idea. It is right to think that I carried out this research, but my colleagues made it possible for the whole process to be finished. After all, as Windchief and Timothy (2019) claim, “honor the people that have worked with us” (p. 43). I have in my hands pieces of our lives; they do not constitute that so-called data.

I wrote an invitation letter to each of my colleagues, expressing my motives to work with them and letting them know that this study could not have been possible without their support. Now, having my companions’ acceptance to share our stories, it is time to approach my companions with emotions: “curiosity, gratitude, trust, compassion, love” (Calvo, 2019, p. 70) and they are there knowing something that I do not, and I learn from them, and vice versa. Going beyond that, Suárez-Krabbe (2011) uses the concept of proximity from (Dussel, 1996), which incites uncertainties and makes me feel down to earth because we rely on

each other independently; proximity is “approaching fraternity, shortening the distance to someone who can wait or reject us, shake hands or hurt us, kiss us or kill us” (p. 200). At this point, the professors and I (the student researcher) did not know how “conversations” instead of interviews would work. They asked me to pilot data collection instruments.

Piloting: Recognizing the Terrain

In some of the first student cohort presentations, I witnessed their nervousness when asked about the relevance of piloting in a de-colonial way of doing research. I was puzzled about this reaction and asked myself: Do I have to pilot my conversations? Of course, I have to pilot the “instruments” in this doctoral program. I will tell the story of this academic activity here:

After being reluctant to do the piloting exercise because I was not convinced of its benefits, the pandemic appeared in our academic life. Hiking, one of my passions, helped me find meaning in this piloting exercise because when you go hiking, you need to make some arrangements and recognize the terrain before starting this journey you want to have a lovely experience. So, piloting was like exploring the terrain in this research adventure.

I invited two friends of mine (coordinators) to talk. Both agreed! I set up the meeting via Teams. Luckily, the Secretary of Education offered a video conference about how to use “Teams”! We need a computer with a microphone, a camera, and a good Internet connection to record videoconferences. We were curious to use “Teams” because we knew that soon, we would have to use this way of communication to organize meetings with teachers. This was perfect! As I would like to know about teachers’ relationships with the English language, our conversations (learning paths) were centered on our childhood at school and life experiences regarding English. I used Children’s Rounds or Nursery Rhymes (hiking Poles) because we usually played and sang in my little school. So, nursery rhymes or children’s rounds remind us of past life events. Later, I attended a conference where some songs were played, and suddenly, many memories came to my mind. That is why I prepared some videos with nursery rhymes to provoke chats.

My companions for this piloting exercise were Leo and Sun. I met Leo 13 years ago in a preparation course for the First Certificate in English Examination. Since then, we have met up in several academic courses and events, and shared influential moments in our lives. One day, a group of friends and I talked about our childhood. This moment was a very moving for some of us because many had had unpleasant experiences in elementary school. Leo talked about the year he studied far from his home and family. I remembered this, and I got anxious.

I asked myself, “What if Leo does not want to talk?” With these concerns, I prepared the “piloting exercise.” I sent the invitation named “Escuela” (primary school). Leo was very punctual, as always. In the beginning, we chatted about the situation in our schools and what we had been doing, but as soon as I set the topic, “let’s go back to our primary school.” There were some moments of silence, which, for me, were minutes. I panicked when he exclaimed: “I have a very bad memory, Mireyita. I don’t remember anything”.

Quickly, I suggested: Let’s listen to some songs! Maybe this will make us remember something about our early years at school. I read the titles and chose *The Bridge is falling down* (El Puente está quebrado). Then, he described school life events in the third and fifth grades. He also expressed his opinions about public education in primary schools. In the last minutes, we discussed the “piloting exercise” regarding his feelings, opinions, and suggestions. This was a marvelous experience to be repeated!

I felt secure to do another “piloting exercise.” So, I invited Sun to a meeting. We could schedule it after solving a problem with her e-mail. I met Sun 14 years ago at Juana Escobar School, where she taught Math. We worked together for five years and have been friends since then. We chatted about different topics, but I had no idea about her childhood. She has had bad experiences when studying English. She does not like being video recorded, and neither do I. I was impatient with Sun, and we were sharing many issues from the schools where we work, but she was delighted to share ideas and, as she confessed: certain? (I can let it all out, can’t I?) We talked for more than an hour... I pretended not to be in a hurry, but certainly, I was. Then, I remembered that we were video recording. When I commented that we did not need the camera, she turned it off and started discussing our childhood. She exclaimed: “I have a bad memory,” and I suggested listening to children’s rounds. I read the titles and she shouted instantly: “Any of those rounds except the bridge is falling” (Any of those rounds except “bridge is falling”) and asked why? “Because it brings back bad memories” (Because it brings back bad memories)

Sun talked about such poignant moments that I couldn’t avoid crying ¡oh, no! I felt she was sharing intimate moments of her life. She admitted she hadn’t talked before about this with anyone. For her round, she chose “The elephants were swinging.” (The balancing elephants), but I had technical problems because I couldn’t share the link. Immediately, she shared the video on the screen. Laughing, she said: “I am learning and taking advantage of you, too”.

We continued with our relaxing conversation. I learned about her school life since we talked about our lunch boxes, our behavior at school, our English classes, and her talent (I did not know that she played the *Quena*, an Andean flute).

I also wanted to know about the “piloting exercise.” How did she feel while we were talking? And if she had any suggestions to consider for a future conversation. Our meeting lasted an hour and thirty-nine minutes; however, our chat about our childhood at school lasted twenty/ one minutes and thirty/ four seconds! We had an amazing conversation!

Things to Keep in Mind to Continue this Research Journey

Sun suggested that I record the audio because she was distracted by the images of the YouTube video on the screen. Also, I should: practice sharing documents or links before having a conversation with someone else, leave my agenda free when I have conversations, be attentive to my companion’s reactions, and be patient and open-minded to expect the unexpected. Furthermore, Leo encouraged me to continue working on this project because it is engaging and interesting! Before starting our conversations, I have to ask my colleagues about the video recording because they may not like being video recorded. I had planned to audio record our conversations when we were face-to-face. Now, we could agree to have a video conference and an audio recording.

Leo, Sun, and I did not feel in an interview during this piloting exercise. We felt confident and free to talk. I hope the same happens throughout our conversations on this journey. On the other hand, I perceived that using Children’s Rounds helped us remember, but this was an artificial component in our chats.

Haste Makes Waste!²

One of the data collection methods is “interviews, which are more or less open about those issues that interest the researcher on various aspects, and their contents must be agreed upon” (Bolívar, 2012, p. 7). With my purpose of placing research into our daily lives, I propose conversations instead of interviews because WE are going to talk, which is an activity that corresponds to our daily realities. Choose Educate (2017, July 27) conceives conversations as the essence of our lives. Conversations also provoke horizontal relationships, which tell us about the action of accompaniment and active listening (Rivas *et al.*, 2012, p. 12). I do not want to be an interviewer who obtains information from interviewees by asking open-ended questions or a formalized list of questions. WE do not have to prepare questions or answers; WE agreed on discussing our relationship with the English language and our experiences in ELT.

After chatting about our academic trajectories or life experiences regarding English, WE would share our emotions, suggestions, and impressions that arise

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2 “Dress me slowly because I’m in a hurry” is a popular saying!

because it is very important for me to know how WE feel during our meetings. Afterward, I have planned to create a narrative based on our conversations because “thinking comes from conversations and dialogues, from being with people in different contexts [...] Making dialogue explicit in writing makes it more alive, more human and more capable of convening” (Walsh, 2019 in Sycorax, p. 7). Then, WE can read and comment on our stories as a group. “It can be said that through research with life stories and narrative research, a public construction of knowledge takes place, from dialogue and intersubjective relationship” (Rivas et al., 2012, p. 17).

Before Starting to Walk: Are There any Crossroads?

Reading different authors, I feel at a crossroads because I have to write about the methodology, but “the research process can only be explained once the investigation has already finished” (Borsani, 2014, p. 165). This idea made me destabilize mine, and I started tottering on slippery and uncertain terrain. However, I will describe this research effort, keeping in mind that eventualities can occur.

The first contingency appeared on the way, being that these days, the world and our country have been locked down because of the pandemic. Consequently, WE worked on this project using a computer or smartphone and the “Microsoft Teams” conference tool and Internet service to carry out this project. We continued conversing; these chat sessions were video or/and audio-recorded. What a pitiful situation! I prefer having face-to-face conversations to looking at screens.

The second event occurred because initially, I had written four invitation letters; However, during the project defense, jurors suggested that I have a larger number of participants, and Professor Mario asked a question, which made me reflect upon the voices that I had left aside: were they not relevant? Therefore, I wrote invitation letters to the whole group of primary homeroom teachers on the morning shift. I find it fascinating that you know how the invitation to accompany me took place and how my companions reacted, felt, and thought when receiving or hearing about this invitation. Some thought the letter was for a personal event, a work problem, or an academic assignment. Consequently, the invitation generated gratitude, curiosity, anxiety, remembrance, a feeling of being important/recognized, willingness to be part of the project, expectations to be helped at school, determination to do something, and the need to express opinions, feelings thoughts, abilities regarding the English language itself, and ELT too. I was elated because there were 20 of us on this journey!

Finally, anything can happen when you are on a journey, and your itinerary can vary depending on the circumstances. Therefore, I synchronized my schedule

with that of my companions. They chose the day and time for our conversations, where WE could value our voices, so WE were placed in a preferred location. In this study, teachers are “at the center, but not as an isolated entity, but as being in a relationship riddled with multiple links immersed in a social, political, and cultural context” (Rivas *et al.*, 2012, p. 16).

Overall, WE will build our stories that emerge from this research process, and my colleagues “will be the first ones to know about the findings of this study” (Rivas *et al.*, 2012, p. 53). In a way, WE can decide what will be shared.

What I Have Learned So Far!

*[inicio de epígrafe]The knowledge of life always surpasses
the knowledge of institutions.*

Walter Mignolo (in Giuliano & Berisso, 2014, p. 65)

I enjoy learning, and most of us enroll in this doctoral program due to the education process that has taught us to use universal knowledge, memorize grand narratives, listen to the big names to learn the truth or solve a problem. Conversely, in Mignolo’s words, “to think about one self’s signifies to think from the recognition of the colonial difference that constitutes us” (in Giuliano & Berisso, 2014, p. 69). In previous studies, I prepared semi/structured interviews, asked students their opinions about the materials, or requested participants to say certain expressions in Nasayuwe. I had conversations with my students and with the Nasa people. I learned much from them besides the “research tasks,” but I did not include them in my final document. So, during this time in the doctoral program, I realized that some instruments to collect data leave out the human part. This person is there living with us in contexts like school and community.

Consent forms are ways to invite people to walk together. Those invitation letters are opportunities to express to others my gratitude, respect, and curiosity to learn with them in this daily teaching event. These letters imply a strong commitment to sharing our time, emotions, personal/professional lives, beliefs, and ways to know my companions and myself. This is to say that invitations go beyond a standardized format that researchers hand out, the participants sign, and the researchers collect to support the participant’s approval. Thus, invitations are personal and filled with emotions, hopes, and uncertainties.

Conversations are a freer way to share emotions, ideas and learn daily, as I did in the piloting exercise. In other words, what is institutionalized are the interviews, surveys, and assessments that, once again, are formats that leave out the essence of daily life. Conversations are unique! All in all, we are stories worth being told.

To be continued...

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