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Challenging Colonial Legacies in ELT: A Reflection on Practice and Pedagogy

**Desafiar los legados coloniales en la enseñanza
del inglés: una reflexión sobre la práctica y la pedagogía**

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ABSTRACT

This reflection paper examines colonialism in English Language Teaching (ELT) and the continuing effects of these legacies on language instruction. In order to subvert monolingual ideas, it addresses important decolonial ELT strategies and principles, such as translanguaging and critical multilingual language awareness, which propose the idea that monolingual views should be attacked, and multilingual learners have to be given a voice. Along with highlighting present trends and future prospects, namely, the incorporation of theories like Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Decolonial Feminism, the study also analyzes the difficulties faced by decolonial ELT, such as opposition from established structures. Consequently, the paper affirms that decolonizing ELT is a social justice movement, and it actually serves the purpose of reclaiming control of language learning, as a tool for freedom and empowerment.

RESUMEN

El presente artículo de reflexión examina el colonialismo en el contexto de la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera y los continuos efectos de estos legados en la instrucción de la lengua. Con el fin de subvertir concepciones monolingües, se abordan estrategias y principios claves de la enseñanza del inglés decolonial, como el translingüismo y la conciencia crítica multilingüe, que proponen que se deben cuestionar las perspectivas monolingües y que los estudiantes multilingües deben tener voz. Además de destacar las tendencias actuales y las perspectivas futuras, como la incorporación de teorías como la teoría crítica de la raza y el feminismo decolonial, este estudio también analiza las dificultades que enfrenta la enseñanza decolonial del inglés, como la oposición de estructuras establecidas. En consecuencia, el artículo sostiene que descolonizar la enseñanza del inglés es un movimiento por la justicia social y que, en realidad, cumple la función de recuperar el control sobre la educación lingüística como medio para la libertad y el empoderamiento.

Keywords:

Colonialism, decoloniality, English Language Teaching (ELT), linguistic imperialism, multilingualism.

Palabras clave:

colonialismo, decolonialidad, enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera, imperialismo lingüístico, multilingüismo.

INTRODUCTION

Decolonizing English Language Teaching (ELT) entails a profound and critical re-evaluation of the traditional methods of teaching and learning rooted in colonial history. It requires educators, institutions, and stakeholders to critically examine the historical baggage associated with ELT, acknowledging the enduring influence of colonialism on language education. However, this is not merely an academic exercise but a call for a fundamental shift in perspective, moving away from a historically entrenched Western-centric approach towards one that embraces inclusivity, equity, and cultural responsiveness to honor the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of learners. Decoloniality in ELT requires not just the acknowledgement of historical injustices but also an ongoing effort to identify and dismantle the hierarchical structures rooted in race, gender, heteropatriarchy, and class that continue to shape today's teaching and learning practices (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

Decolonial thought aims to perceive the world through the perspective of the other colonized, marginalized, silenced, ignored, or denied (Hernández-Zamora, 2019). Decoloniality in ELT, then, is a fundamental transformation in the way we experience being, thinking, and doing that recognizes the enduring power disparities brought about by globalization and the historical dynamics of colonialism and is deeply committed to overcoming them. This theoretical framework seeks to reshape how English is taught, particularly in contexts with a colonial past,

by actively challenging linguistic ideologies that often subtly elevate European culture as superior while simultaneously undervaluing local customs and traditions (Altamiranda et al., 2023).

Instead of an abstract concept limited to theoretical debates, decoloniality is rather a concrete viewpoint, a conscious stance, and a thoughtful proposition for how we think, analyze, interpret, perceive, create, act, feel, and exist. It is practical and action-oriented, essentially entails actively reversing colonial influences, and establishing fair and equitable conditions. In the context of language teaching, decolonization means embracing critical reflections aiming at re-signifying teaching practices and challenging colonial ideologies and power dynamics, as well as emphasizing collaboration, subjectivity, plurality, and community engagement (Borelli et al., 2020).

When considering how ELT has historically been tied to colonialism and imperialism, it becomes evident that teaching English frequently acted as a means of imposing the cultural, social, and linguistic norms of the colonizers. The phenomenon, however, is not new. ELT is a byproduct of colonialism in that it created the initial conditions for the spread of English, and it promoted many of the contemporary Western cultural ways of thinking and acting (Pennycook, 1998). As a result, indigenous languages (and even sometimes 'traditional languages') have been marginalized and local identities have been eroded.

In light of the ongoing influence of colonial structures in language education, this paper aims to critically reflect on pedagogical practices in ELT from a decolonial perspective, with the purpose of questioning the colonial legacies that persist in curricula, teaching methods, and dominant language ideologies. From this perspective, it also seeks to identify ways in which these pedagogical practices can be transformed to promote more equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive approaches to language education.

This reflection offers a critical engagement with decolonial theory applied specifically to the field of ELT, a perspective that remains underrepresented in mainstream ELT discourse. By bringing together central concepts such as coloniality of power, linguistic imperialism, and multilingual resistance, this article is part of an expanding literature that challenges the hegemony of Eurocentric norms in language education. It offers a critique of how colonial legacies continue to shape pedagogical assumptions, while also proposing alternative frameworks founded on linguistic diversity and epistemic justice.

COLONIALISM AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF ELT

ELT historical development, pedagogical practices, and ideological presuppositions are intricately intertwined with colonialism's origins. In colonial projects, English was imposed as a tool for control and assimilation of native cultures. For instance,

English instruction was sometimes used to 'civilize' colonized populations, as can be seen in policies like those of J.D.C. Atkins in 1888, which framed English as a means of eradicating native traditions and substituting colonial standards (Hsu, 2017).

In this context, language served as a subtle but highly effective method of promoting the colonizers' beliefs and undermining indigenous identities, enabling them to establish a favorable market for their cultural and industrial products (Sayedayn, 2021). Many African and American indigenous languages disappeared because of forced assimilation policies, including enfranchisement and residential school systems (Meighan, 2025). Consequently, the identity of the colonized population became deeply tied to the mastery of the colonizer's language.

Nowadays, despite the formal dismantling of colonial empires, English persists in perpetuating colonial patterns of language and power dynamics. According to Zeng et al. (2023), English global dominance is largely due to its role as a worldwide lingua franca. This hegemony is primarily evident in its function as the primary language for global communication, as well as its commercial importance and its significance in academic research and education.

The colonial construction of Self (often associated with native English speakers from Western imperial centers) and Other (typically speakers of other languages from postcolonial regions) is still found in several aspects of ELT. Thus, the widespread usage

of English today, along with prevailing teaching practices and textbooks, can be perceived as a continuation of historical neocolonial relationships (Soto-Molina & Méndez, 2020), perpetuating monolingual ideologies and the notion of ‘native speaker superiority.’

KEY PRINCIPLES AND DECOLONIZING PRACTICES IN THE ELT CLASSROOM

Decolonial ELT compels us to rethink approaches to teaching and learning languages that have historically prioritized monoglossic ideologies, Western modes of thought, and the notion of white speech as a linguistic ideal. At its core, decolonial ELT aims to deconstruct the dominance and the historically privileged status of English, particularly its standardized varieties often argued to be the epitome of linguistic competence. This approach resonates with Phillipson’s (2017) concept of linguistic imperialism, examining ELT historical role in maintaining power structures and global inequality. Furthermore, decolonial ELT challenges the widely held myth that English is a de-territorialized language and a decolonizing tool, exposing the subtle ways it can perpetuate colonial ideas and power imbalances (Rice, 2021).

One of the pillars of decolonial ELT is the recognition and active embrace of learners’ inherent multilingualism, with the promotion of the effective use of their mother tongues together with English. From this perspective, bilingualism and multilingualism are

expressly viewed not as deficiencies but rather as valuable assets to the language learning process and, as such, the binaries emphasized by the colonial heritage on language use are eliminated. Here, translanguaging, a dynamic pedagogical approach that involves the strategic and flexible use of multiple languages by multilingual speakers, is a key principle of decolonial ELT in direct opposition to the traditional monolingual bias in language instruction. Indeed, decoloniality in education promotes multilingualism by explicitly valuing Indigenous and minoritized languages and challenging the historical dominance of colonial languages (Phyak et al., 2023).

Another fundamental principle is incorporating local knowledge and valuing diverse cultural perspectives. Decolonial ELT also seeks to enrich cultural diversity in classrooms, broaden students’ understanding, foster respect and create a sense of belonging to their own cultural identity (Altamiranda et al., 2023). Moreover, decoloniality promotes interculturality as an ongoing process of discovering and including diverse ethnocultural elements, questioning the notion of transmitting a superior culture through English.

Inclusive and culturally relevant ELT practices can be achieved by integrating learners’ cultural backgrounds and realities into teaching materials, which enhances engagement and agency (Deng & Wang, 2023). Adapting curricula and materials to reflect students’ social realities, while also incorporating diverse voices and digital

tools, creates richer and more accessible learning environments. Additionally, assessments should foster dialogue and critical inquiry, positioning students as co-creators of knowledge and challenging traditional power dynamics that often marginalize diverse learners.

Fandiño-Parra (2021) proposes three decolonial initiatives in the context of ELT:

1. Spaces of speech: opportunities for the ELT community to engage in open and pluralistic discussions that foster the recognition of diverse perspectives and the construction of new knowledge.
2. Flattened hierarchy: activities that redistribute epistemic authority within the ELT community, challenging traditional hierarchies and promoting more balanced power dynamics in knowledge creation and dissemination.
3. Teachers' agency: a commitment to encourage teachers to take ownership of their roles and promote collaborative knowledge-sharing.

Additionally, fostering critical digital literacies is essential for promoting decolonial practices in virtual or blended English language education. These literacies equip learners to navigate digital spaces thoughtfully and resist dominant narratives that often reflect colonial ideologies. First, critical thinking enables students to question and challenge information, recognizing the sociopolitical biases embedded in digital content. As Polizzi (2020) argues,

critical digital literacy involves the ability to question online content and dominant ideologies and it is essential for producing alternative content that challenges dominant ideologies, highlighting the importance of recognizing and interrogating sociopolitical biases in digital environments. Media literacy helps them understand how meaning is constructed and communicated through language and narrative choices in online media. Developing cultural awareness fosters an understanding of how technologies shape and are shaped by cultural values and identities. Moreover, examining power dynamics allows learners to identify how digital tools can reinforce or challenge systems of representation, access, and control. Finally, embracing social responsibility encourages ethical engagement with technology, emphasizing justice, inclusion, and equity. Together, these literacies form a foundation for more reflective, equitable, and decolonial digital learning environments.

From our perspective, ELT should be seen as a social and cultural practice. On the one hand, teaching practices should challenge social power structures commonly reflected by ELT and foster community engagement and social cohesion by incorporating local issues and perspectives into the curriculum. On the other hand, ELT is a powerful tool of cultural transmission and promotion of learners' cultural values and identities.

In considering the importance of challenging Eurocentric paradigms, incorporating local knowledge, embracing multilingualism, and reconceptualizing materials and curricula

in ELT, it becomes evident that all of these elements collectively lay the groundwork for a decolonial language education. By fostering inclusivity, respect for linguistic diversity, and integrating culturally relevant practices, educators can dismantle colonial hierarchies embedded in traditional ELT frameworks. These transformations not only empower learners but also create equitable spaces for diverse voices and epistemologies to thrive. Decolonization in ELT is not merely an epistemological approach, but a praxis ensuring that ELT becomes a tool for liberation rather than perpetuation of colonial legacies.

CRITIQUES AND CHALLENGES OF DECOLONIAL ELT

Whereas decoloniality offers a crucial paradigm for reconsidering ELT one must also note the academic criticism raised. There are concerns about the potential for superficial adoption, with some scholars noting a 'decolonial trend' where the term might be used without genuine commitment, sometimes for career advancement rather than real transformation (Browning et al., 2022). Some of the criticism points to the pragmatics aspects of decoloniality in ELT, with potential conflicts between decolonial ideals and learners' needs to acquire standard English for societal demands (Kubota, 2022). In addition, overemphasis on reforming curricula alone has also been criticized by researchers concerned about institutional appropriation as a superficial sign of inclusivity (Neville, 2024).

The actual implementation of decolonial ideas in ELT classrooms often encounters challenges. One aspect to consider is the deeply ingrained colonial structures and beliefs within educators, parents, administration, and learners, which can also hinder real decolonization. Also, one might also face difficulties in translating certain concepts into concrete teaching practices, which leads again to traditional or entrenched practices inside the classroom. However, where possible, teachers could encounter some issues altering content due to pressure from administrations, parents, standardized exams, and even students with internalized beliefs about English (Canagarajah, 2023).

It is necessary to consider the limits and potential pitfalls of decolonial practice in ELT for its effective and ethical implementation. Decolonization demands substantive action to address deep-rooted power disparities, not just superficial diversity promotion. While 'decolonizing the mind' through critical reflection is valuable, it may not be sufficient without attention to material and structural inequalities (Browning et al., 2022). The very term 'decolonization' risks superficial adoption without actual commitment to reversing colonial relations of power and, hence, reinscribing colonial practices rather than truly centering on alternative perspectives.

Overreliance on curriculum reform may also be insufficient, since wider systemic barriers can inhibit meaningful change (Neville, 2024). Firstly, many educational systems and policies are deeply embedded in

Eurocentric perspectives, making it difficult to shift toward more inclusive and locally relevant knowledge. Secondly, teacher training and professional development play a crucial role in both promoting and sustaining meaningful changes. That is why learner agency and community engagement are essential. Decolonizing ELT requires not only curricular adjustments but also active participation from students, educators, and communities in shaping knowledge production.

CURRENT TRENDS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

There is increasing interest in exploring the potential of decolonizing language learning in online and digital environments, with researchers studying the way technology can empower learners and challenge traditional power dynamics (Galante et al., 2024). These trends can be seen across various domains, including indigenous knowledge preservation and language revitalization (Meighan, 2021), digital decolonization through art and media aiming at challenging colonial narratives (Das et al., 2024), online activism (Mariano et al., 2025), and resistance to digital colonialism.

One major trend relates to the development of critical multilingual language awareness (CMLA) in teacher training courses, aiming to equip educators with tools to recognize linguistic diversity and address social inequities (De Costa & Van Gorp, 2023). Considering the growing issues stemming from colonial heritage in schools

worldwide, CMLA serves as a guideline in upholding equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive language pedagogical practices. Teachers' agency plays a crucial role in fostering CMLA. In that sense, Putra (2024) outlines three key areas of teachers' agency in constructing translanguaging practices: first, adapting language use to align with students' English proficiency levels as a process to guide and help them in classroom discussion; second, developing relational and critical attitudes through the use of the whole of linguistic resources to help students negotiate various communicative contexts; and third, promoting fair and inclusive education opportunities that allow students to freely employ their semiotic repertoire.

In addition, decolonial theories are increasingly being explored in the context of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), where scholars are critically questioning the prevailing notion of native speaker superiority (Da Silva Pardo, 2024). Researchers like Seidlhofer (2013) call for a paradigm shift that recognizes non-native speakers as legitimate users of English, rather than perpetual learners striving for conformity to native norms. Decolonial perspectives enrich ELF by interrogating the Eurocentric dominance in language knowledge production and advocating for Southern epistemologies that value multilingual and multimodal communicative practices holistically (Matsumoto & Kubota, 2023). Such approaches challenge hegemonic constructs of purity and normativity, while promoting more egalitarian perceptions of English as a democratic global resource shaped by diverse set

of linguistic communities (Rosa & Duboc, 2022). The above analysis not merely validates diverse language identities but also promotes equity and inclusivity in global communication.

Potential future directions for decolonial ELT involve a deeper and more complex exploration of the intersections between decoloniality and other critical theories and social justice movements as they apply to language education research and practice. Future research can also benefit from greater attention to the often-overlooked dimensions of emotions, affect, and embodied learning within the process of decolonizing language learning and teaching. Greater emphasis needs to be placed in incorporating learners' perspectives and lived experiences in the design and implementation of decolonial ELT initiatives.

Additionally, CRT is a major paradigm for addressing the intersection of race and language hierarchies, challenging the dominance of standardized English as a tool of systemic marginalization (Mcfarlane, 2017). Likewise, Decolonial Feminism emphasizes the importance of addressing gendered and racialized forms of oppression within ELT, advocating for pedagogies centered on the lived experiences of marginalized women and communities, intersecting coloniality, racism, gender, geospatial location, and modernity (Zerai et al., 2023). By weaving together these critical approaches, decolonial ELT can overcome neoliberal

ideologies of individualism and competition, instead fostering collective empowerment, healing, and social justice (Carvajal Medina et al., 2022). This intersectional paradigm not only enriches ELT research but also redefines pedagogical practices to affirm the identities, agency, and power of both learners and educators.

Finally, future lines of research on decoloniality in ELT should prioritize critical praxis, epistemic pluralism, and contextualized methodologies to dismantle colonial legacies. Building on the call for local pedagogies and materials development, scholars could explore how decolonial frameworks empower teachers to design curricula that center marginalized epistemologies (Granados-Beltrán, 2018), particularly in Afro-Colombian and indigenous contexts (Álvarez Valencia & Miranda, 2022; Gutiérrez & Aguirre Ortega, 2022). Bonilla Medina and Finardi's (2022) analysis of racialized ELT practices in Brazil and Colombia highlights the need for intersectional studies linking raciolinguistic justice to classroom resistance against monolingual ideologies. Additionally, it is urgent to provincialize English and reimagine teacher education through situated praxis, both in virtual education and in-person learning, challenging Eurocentric norms while amplifying pluriversal knowledge systems. Further research could also examine policy reforms that disrupt linguistic imperialism and foster critical interculturality, ensuring ELT becomes a tool for epistemic liberation rather than cultural erasure.

CONCLUSION

Decolonizing ELT is a substantial task of critically analyzing and challenging the colonial underpinnings of language training. Historically, ELT has been shaped by power dynamics that privilege Western orientations towards language use, often marginalizing diverse practices of language and local systems of knowledge. By recognizing these historical roots, instructors can create more democratic and inclusive language training approaches.

Decolonial approaches in ELT classrooms offer promising pathways for transformation. Practices such as translanguaging and critical multilingual language awareness work to empower learners by recognizing their linguistic repertoires and challenging monolingual ideologies. Not only do such approaches enhance language learning, but they also foster a sense of strong identity and agency in multilingual students. However, the implementation of such approaches is faced with challenges, such as resistance from traditional educational systems and the need for more nuanced understandings of decoloniality in diverse contexts.

Looking ahead to future advances, decolonial ELT is likely to move forward by integrating critical theories with social justice movements. Intersectional approaches that incorporate perspectives like CRT and Decolonial Feminism will be crucial in addressing interconnected forms

of oppression in language education. Future directions point to a continued emphasis on fostering pluriversal pedagogies that honor diverse epistemologies and advocate for systemic changes for more equitable language policies. Ultimately, the project of decolonizing ELT is part of a broader social justice movement that seeks to reclaim language education as a site of empowerment and liberation, and to reflect the complexities and richness of human linguistic diversity.

Finally, decolonizing ELT in Colombia offers significant benefits by recognizing and valuing the country's rich cultural diversity, including its indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and other local communities. This process challenges the dominance of global North epistemologies and cultural norms that often marginalize local identities and knowledge systems. By integrating ancestral knowledge, languages, and cultural perspectives into English language teaching, educators can foster more inclusive and empowering learning environments that reflect Colombia's unique social realities. This approach not only promotes critical awareness of power dynamics embedded in language policies but also encourages transformative teacher identities and pedagogies that support social change and personal adaptation. Finally, decolonizing English education in Colombia can help dismantle colonial legacies, affirm local cultural singularities, and create spaces for dialogue and solidarity across diverse communities.

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