

# ENGLISH INSTRUCTORS NAVIGATING DECOLONIALITY WITH AFRO COLOMBIAN AND INDIGENOUS UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

ENSEÑANZA DE INGLÉS Y DECOLONIALIDAD: LA EXPERIENCIA DE DOS DOCENTES  
CON ESTUDIANTES UNIVERSITARIOS AFROCOLOMBIANOS E INDÍGENAS

ENSINO DO INGLÊS E DECOLONIALIDADE: A EXPERIÊNCIA DE DUAS PROFESSORAS  
COM ESTUDANTES UNIVERSITÁRIOS AFRO-COLOMBIANOS E INDÍGENAS

ENSEIGNEMENT D'ANGLAIS ET DÉCOLONIALITÉ: L'EXPÉRIENCE DE DEUX ENSEIGNANTES  
AVEC LEURS ÉTUDIANTS UNIVERSITAIRES AFRO-COLOMBIENS ET INDIGÈNES

**Claudia Patricia Gutiérrez**

*Instructor, School of Languages,  
Universidad de Antioquia, Medellín,  
Colombia.*

[claudia.udea@gmail.com](mailto:claudia.udea@gmail.com)

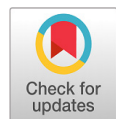
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5651-3687>

**Maure Aguirre Ortega**

*Instructor, School of Languages,  
Universidad de Antioquia, Medellín,  
Colombia.*

[maure.aguirre@udea.edu.co](mailto:maure.aguirre@udea.edu.co)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9153-0116>



## ABSTRACT

As English spreads globally, it continues to displace local languages and cultures at all levels of education. Concerned with this issue, in this article we report our experiences as English instructors attempting to decolonize English lessons to embrace the diverse cultures, languages, and realities of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian students enrolled in English courses at a public university in Medellín, Colombia. To attain this, we framed lessons from a decolonial, critical intercultural (CI) perspective and strived to interrogate language ideologies and cultural power relations by inviting students' languages and cultures to the classroom. The experience suggests that sustaining local languages and cultures through English entails the production of teaching materials that contest the erasure, homogenization, and misrepresentations of Black and Indigenous peoples. It also implies positioning students as experts on their cultures and as text producers, all of which provides a broader understanding of intersectionality in Indigenous and Black communities.

**Keywords:** critical interculturality; decoloniality; translanguaging; indigenous students, afro-Colombian students, ELT.

## RESUMEN

En su expansión global, el inglés sigue desplazando lenguas y culturas locales en todos los niveles educativos. Este artículo responde a la preocupación por este fenómeno y da cuenta de nuestra experiencia como docentes de inglés intentando decolonizar las clases de inglés para dar cabida a las diversas culturas, idiomas y realidades de estudiantes indígenas y afrocolombianos matriculados en cursos de

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inglés en una universidad pública de Medellín, Colombia. Para lograr esto, las instructoras enmarcamos las clases en una perspectiva decolonial, intercultural crítica (CI) y tratamos de cuestionar las ideologías lingüísticas y las relaciones culturales de poder invitando a los estudiantes a usar sus lenguas y culturas en el aula. Esta experiencia indica que defender las lenguas y las culturas locales por medio del inglés entraña la producción de materiales didácticos que cuestionen la obliteración, la homogenización y las representaciones erróneas de las que son objeto los pueblos negros e indígenas. También implica la toma de posición de los estudiantes como expertos en sus culturas y como productores de textos, lo cual provee una comprensión más amplia de la interseccionalidad en las comunidades negras e indígenas.

**Palabras clave:** interculturalidad crítica; decolonialidad; translingüismo; estudiantes indígenas; estudiantes afrocolombianos; enseñanza del inglés.

### RESUMO

Em sua expansão global, o inglês continua a deslocar os idiomas e as culturas locais em todos os níveis de educação. Este artigo responde às preocupações de dois professoras de inglês frente a este fenômeno e relata nossas experiências na tentativa de descolonizar as aulas de inglês para acomodar as diversas culturas, línguas e realidades de estudantes indígenas e afro-colombianos matriculados em cursos de inglês em uma universidade pública em Medellín, Colômbia. Para conseguir isso, nós temos enquadrado as aulas em uma perspectiva decolonial e intercultural crítica (CI) procurando desafiar as ideologias lingüísticas e as relações de poder cultural, abrindo a aula de inglês ao uso das línguas e culturas dos estudantes. Esta experiência indica que a defesa das línguas e culturas locais através do inglês envolve a produção de materiais didáticos que desafiam a obliteração, homogeneização e as representações tendenciosas que sofrem os povos negros e indígenas. Também envolve o posicionamento dos estudantes como especialistas em suas culturas e como produtores de textos, o que proporciona uma compreensão mais ampla da interseccionalidade em comunidades negras e indígenas.

**Palavras chave:** interculturalidade crítica; decolonialidade; translingüismo; estudantes indígenas; estudantes afro-colombianos; ensino de inglês.

### RÉSUMÉ

Dans son expansion mondiale, l'anglais continue de supplanter les langues et les cultures locales à tous les niveaux de l'enseignement. Cet article répond aux inquiétudes de deux enseignantes d'anglais devant ce phénomène et rend compte de notre expérience en essayant de décoloniser nos cours d'anglais pour saisir des diverses cultures, langues et réalités des étudiants indigènes et afro-colombiens inscrits aux cours d'anglais dans une université publique à Medellín, en Colombie. Pour ce faire, nous avons inscrit les cours dans une perspective interculturelle critique et décoloniale et avons cherché à remettre en question les idéologies linguistiques et les relations de pouvoir culturel en invitant nos étudiants à utiliser leur langue et leur culture à la salle de classe. Cette expérience suggère que la défense des langues et des cultures locales, par le biais de l'anglais, implique la production de matériel didactique qui remet en question l'effacement, l'homogénéisation et les représentations biaisées des peuples noirs et indigènes. Il s'agit également de positionner les apprenants en tant qu'experts de leurs cultures et en tant que

producteurs de textes, ce qui permet une compréhension plus ample de l'intersectionnalité dans les communautés noires et indigènes.

**Mots-clés :** interculturalité critique ; décolonialité ; translinguisme ; étudiants indigènes ; étudiants afro-colombiens ; enseignement d'anglais.

## Introduction

English has been advertised as the language for success across the globe and, as such, learning it has become mandatory throughout the education system in a vast number of countries in Latin America. This has imbued an aura of superiority to this language and its related cultures, and has further displaced and endangered the survival of ancestral peoples' ways of being, languages, and cultures (Motha, 2014). In Colombia, the compulsory incorporation of English across all levels of education, along with requirements to demonstrate English proficiency to graduate from any undergraduate program and to access graduate education, have increased researchers' interest in critically analyzing coloniality in language policies and their implications for minoritized communities (De Mejía, 2005; Fandiño-Parra, 2021; Guerrero, 2009, 2018; Henao-Mejía, 2020) and for teachers' professional development (González, 2007). Studies concerned with this issue have addressed the need to decolonize English textbooks (Núñez-Pardo, 2018; 2020), language teacher education (Granados-Beltrán, 2016; Ortiz et al., 2019; Ramírez Espinosa, 2021), English teachers' identity (Castañeda-Peña, 2018), and pedagogy and methodology (Ubaque-Casallas, 2021). The one element that the studies do seem to have in common is that they all call for a transformation of the often uncritical instrumentalization of language teaching that fails to question relations of power between English, Spanish, and students' languages and literacies.

Other contributions to decoloniality in Colombia are the study conducted by Castañeda-Peña (2018) which addressed the need to decolonize teachers' identities in ELT and found that although colonial roots prevail, teachers exercise their agency over prescriptive methods.

Other decolonial contributions to ELT in Colombia have explored the entanglements of coloniality and English language teaching and learning for Indigenous peoples. An instance of

this is the work of Arias-Cepeda (2020), who outlined the complexities embedded in being an Indigenous English pre-service and in-service teacher. This author advocates for a decolonial approach to English teaching that results in an ecology of languages and sustains Indigenous English teachers' identities. The studies conducted by Álvarez-Valencia and Miranda (2022), Cuasialpud-Canchala (2010), Arismendi (2016), and Usma et al. (2018) analyzed the challenges Indigenous students face in higher education, including the lack of recognition of their languages and cultures in academic spaces and the stigmatization of their communities, which lead to students' decision to hide their Indigenous identity. Finally, Álvarez-Valencia and Wagner (2021) visibilized Indigenous students' resistance to coloniality in higher education, and Gutiérrez et al. (2021) engaged Black and Indigenous university students in critical English lessons that challenged the hegemony of English and resulted in the assertion of their ethnic and linguistic identities, and sustenance of their languages and cultures.

Although the field of ELT has been moving in this critical direction, very little has been conceptualized about ELT teachers' experiences when striving to transform their colonial teaching practices. To contribute to this understanding, for this project, we specifically asked: What does it entail for English teachers to teach from a decolonial perspective? Drawing on the tenets of decoloniality, critical interculturality, and translanguaging, in this article we report on our journey as English teachers while planning and implementing an English course for university Indigenous and Afro-Colombian students under this perspective. We also elaborate on some necessary transformations in ELT to sustain students' languages, literacies, and cultures, through English lessons.

## Theoretical Framework

The experience we report here drew, firstly, on decoloniality which calls for "the recognition and undoing of hierarchical structures of race,

gender, heteropatriarchy, and class” (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 17) that still control our existence. Secondly, it had critical interculturality as its base. Critical interculturality is defined by the Indigenous Regional Council of Cauca, Colombia (CRIC) and the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), as a political and epistemic project that calls for a radical cultural, political and social transformation (CRIC, 2014). Finally, it embraced the concept of translanguaging, conceived as the process by which multilingual learners leverage their linguistic repertoires to communicate (García & Kleifgen, 2019).

### Decoloniality

In a pursuit of a more critical education, in which students’ languages, cultures, and ways of being are valued, a significant number of researchers and educators globally draw on the Decolonial Turn. According to Grosfoguel (2007), the decolonial turn lays on the argument that there is no single epistemic tradition nor universality; it questions the effect of colonization and challenges the supremacy of white communities. The decolonial turn aims to “epistemologically transcend, decolonize the Western canon and epistemology” (p. 211). Decoloniality, on the other hand, is a way of being, thinking, and doing that acknowledges unbalanced relations of power intertwined with globalization and coloniality, and strives to deconstruct them (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). As defined by Hernández-Zamora (2019), “En términos simples, el pensamiento decolonial o pos-colonial no es otra cosa que el mundo visto desde la mirada de los otros colonizados, inferiorizados, silenciados, ignorados o negados” (p. 378). Decoloniality is, then, an unavoidable option to dismantle hegemonic power structures (Kumaravadivelu, 2016). At its core, decoloniality strives to challenge colonial ways of thinking to recenter ethnic communities in the Global South: their existence, their languages, cultures, and their knowledges. This implies decentering Western ways of knowing as the only serious epistemic tradition from which knowledge is

produced, thus centering local knowledges and perspectives as lenses necessary to read the world. Put differently, decoloniality validates the knowledges and experiences of marginalized groups that have historically resisted and suffered the impact of capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy (Santos, 2014b; 2018).

To engage in this decolonial work, Rivera-Cusicanqui (2019) warns us that “there can be no discourse of decolonization, no theory of decolonization, without a decolonizing practice” (p. 100). This implies the incorporation in the curriculum of other knowledges, ways of knowing, languages, and methods that challenge mainstream state-sanctioned standards for education. In addition, it requires an epistemological shift “to clear the way for new intercultural communication, for an interchange of experiences and meanings” (Quijano, 2007, p. 177). This intercultural communication is not conceived as the mere contact between cultures or the uncritical learning about the Other (Walsh, 2009) but as the continuous questioning of how some cultures, languages, and literacies came to be in power at the expense of others (Janks, 2000) and how those relations of power can be disrupted; a disruption central to critical interculturality.

### Critical Interculturality

Interculturality has long stopped being conceived as a mere encounter among cultures (CRIC, 2004). Instead, it is an intentional, critical dialogue among cultures and languages, that questions and dismantles hierarchical relations. In this vein, critical interculturality becomes a political project committed to the achievement of a just society founded on respect and dialogue (Godenzzi, 2005). It aims to eradicate imbalanced power relationships (Tubino, 2004) and to interrogate our colonial understanding of race, language, ethnicity, gender, and culture within societies, both in and outside of school settings. Indeed, it contests discourses of anti-Indigeneity and anti-Blackness and the deficit views associated with those



discourses (Alim & Paris, 2017). In this sense, critical interculturality maps a path for the construction of a just society by making visible and strengthening the ways of being, knowing, and doing of those historically oppressed by coloniality.

The aims of critical interculturality are not new in the field of education. In fact, for some decades, scholars from the global south have advocated for the transformation of education, which, according to them, plays a significant role in perpetuating unequal relations. For instance, Valenzuela (1999) has called attention to the fact that students' linguistic and cultural resources often find no place in the school setting. Similarly, Tubino (2005) has insisted that education can no longer be founded on the assimilation of minoritized communities into the dominant ones. However, this issue is not only a concern for scholars in the Global South. Several authors in the Global North have questioned the lack of incorporation of ethnic and cultural diversity in school curricula (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995) as well as the alienating nature of schooling (Ladson-Billings, 2014). These authors contend that teaching would be more meaningful and effective "when ecological factors, such as prior experiences, community settings, cultural backgrounds, and ethnic identities of teachers and students are included in its implementation" (Gay, 2000, p. 21).

Similarly, Gay and Kirkland (2003) underscore the need to include students' linguistic identities in the classroom and to strive for education which results in students' development of knowledge and skills necessary to become critical in the analysis of inequalities in their communities and to act upon them. Finally, Alim & Paris (2017) contend an education committed to social justice should ensure students' access to dominant literacies and cultural practices while striving to foster and sustain their multicultural and multilingual repertoires. In this sense, language education, which has historically served the purposes of coloniality, is called to contribute to the recognition,

respect, and sustenance of ancestral languages and cultures, even if through a colonial language such as English, as this can be used in the English classroom through the embracing of translanguaging.

### Translanguaging

Due to its intimate relation with culture, foreign language teaching cannot be alien to the aims of critical interculturality. In fact, the field of ELT cannot continue to ignore that "Literacy education for multilingual students typically has focused on obligating them to use only the language practices authenticated by schools and school texts" (García & Kleifgen, 2019, p. 8). But, can interculturality really be critical without encouraging students to use their linguistic repertoires and ways of being? Translanguaging proponents claim it cannot.

Just like the tenets of critical interculturality, the notion of translanguaging is not new. Initially introduced as "Lenguajear"/"languaging" (Maturana & Varela, 1984), translanguaging is a process in which interlocutors' social, cognitive, historical factors, and lived experiences interact (García & Kleifgen, 2019). It is not just the act of switching between two separate linguistic codes. Instead, it is the deployment of multiple semiotic resources, such as gestures, words, sounds, among others, that encompass social and cognitive processes, and make use of multimodal resources to communicate meaning (Kleifgen, 2013; Pennycook, 2017). This approach to literacy development pushes the deficit view associated with "mixing" languages and transgresses the political and ideological boundaries that legitimize some languages and literacies over others (Canagarajah, 2014; Pennycook, 2017). In other words, it invites language learners to leverage their full range of linguistic and semiotic repertoires to convey meaning. Furthermore, it disrupts theories of bilingualism and multilingualism which tend to ignore the racial and ethnic tensions in language learning, particularly those of multilingual

learners from minoritized communities (Rosa & Flores, 2017).

Although this approach to bi/multilingualism is beneficial for all language learners, regardless of their first language, it carries tremendous significance for speakers of ancestral languages who have historically been forced to leave their languages and cultures outside of the classroom door (Valenzuela, 1999; Mignolo, 2000). As claimed by García and Kleifgen (2019) “Translanguaging decolonizes these understandings about language, literacy, and bilingualism and incorporates thinking from, and being/listening with, racialized/minoritized multilingual bodies” (p. 5). This decolonization is paramount in the field of ELT given that systematic schooling in dominant languages is implicated in the disappearance of local languages and cultures around the globe (Fishman, as cited in Tochon, 2019).

### Decolonizing the English Classroom

In this section, we report our experiences when striving to decolonize our teaching practice, by drawing on the theories described above. After stating our positionality, we will provide a brief description of the context and participants in this teaching experience. We will then elaborate on our learnings and challenges during the planning stage and we will describe what we learned from the implementation of this English course. Finally, we will draw some conclusions and implications of this experience for the field of ELT.

#### *Our Positionality*

We entered this teaching experience as language teachers who had long been implicated in the uncritical teaching of colonial languages, such as English and French, in both public and private institutions in Colombia. This coloniality, ingrained throughout our entire schooling experience, began to be contested as we sought education in critical pedagogy, critical literacies, and identity construction. As time went by, we became concerned about colonial language policies and

their implications for underserved communities, and grew more committed to the transformation of language education and to the construction of a fair and equitable society. When we entered this teaching experience, we were aware of our limited knowledge about Indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples and their ways of being, doing, and knowing, which have been systematically marginalized from the national education system in Colombia. This awareness made this a humbling experience in which we positioned ourselves as learners as much as facilitators of the teaching experience described below.

#### *Context and Participants*

This teaching experience took place at a public university in Medellín, Colombia, where 10% of students self-identify as members of different ethnic minoritized communities; some of which preserve their Indigenous languages. However, aligned with colonial, neoliberal agendas in education, this university requires all students to demonstrate proficiency in English to graduate from any undergraduate program. As a response to this requirement and to the low ethnic students’ retention rate, in 2019 and then in 2020, we designed and offered an English course intended to create spaces for Indigenous and Black students to contest this colonial language policy by using the English classroom to reposition their cultures, languages, literacies, and identities, as they also developed literacies in English.

Students became part of this research to cope with the English classes offered by the university. They were mainly freshmen, enrolled in a wide range of majors. Additionally, they belonged to a variety of Indigenous peoples such as Embera, Senú, Pastos, Coyaima-Natagaima and Kankuamo, and some of them preserved their ancestral languages and spoke them to various degrees. Some of the participants self-identified as Afro-Colombian and came from different cities and rural areas. Overall, students came from public schools and where English instruction was limited or fully absent,

which brought them more challenges when meeting the university's foreign language requirement.

### Lesson Planning and Implementation

In this section, we report our challenges and our processes of unlearning and undoing colonial traditions in ELT. We also elaborate on what we learned as we planned and implemented English lessons that intended to challenge the hegemony of English by putting students' cultural and linguistic repertoires at the forefront.

#### Undoing Teaching and Learning Traditions in ELT

In the field of ELT, there has long been a tradition of separating and sequencing grammar notions and functions (Crystal, 1986). This is how the present tense is often introduced and practiced before any other tense with English beginners. This simple present tense is expected to allow students to "describe" themselves and their surroundings. With it, teachers ensure that students maintain their learning within the boundaries of this tense to "avoid confusion" and to "practice enough" and "wait until they master this tense" and "are ready to learn another one".

Although the rationale behind this sequential order of grammatical concepts has been challenged (DeGraff, 2001; Macedo, 2019), still, nowadays, when students first come to an English class, all the linguistic notions and functions they will learn and practice are already identified. In fact, students' attempts to communicate ideas about their communities' or their own past experiences or aspirations for the future will often encounter teachers' advice to wait until they get to a higher level, when they will learn to say that. In the context of this public university, this means waiting for at least one year to learn these needed grammar structures. This prescriptive use of language leads students to talk and write about their communities as if they were devoid of history. It also diminishes students' possibilities to account

for their political and historical existence and that of their communities.

This brief context summarizes the way we were taught as English learners and accounts for the way we were taught to teach English. The context also signals our first challenge when planning this space: undoing this long-held idea of what learning and teaching English should look like. That is, it shows our challenge to decolonize our teaching practices (Tochon, 2019), so filled with restrictive pre-set grammar structures and vocabulary.

For us, decolonizing this practice did not mean leaving aside linguistic notions and functions, nor did it mean disregarding the acquisition of basic grammatical structures. This would have done a disservice to students, as they needed them to comply with the university requirement for graduation. Instead, this meant fostering organic grammar and vocabulary learning (Tochon, 2019) in which learning English became a means for meaning making and students' communication could take place not only in various tenses, but in whatever language students were able to express their ideas. It also implied anticipating certain grammatical structures and vocabulary, but also being ready to provide students with multiple linguistic resources in English, as they needed them. This unfixed curriculum created a sense of lack of control, which was necessary as we truly wanted students to express their unique experiences and those of their communities without feeling restricted by a grammar tense or by their emergent English knowledge.

#### Selecting Content Themes

Unsurprisingly, in English classes at this university, prescriptive grammatical structures were coupled with generic, supposedly "neutral" themes, such as daily routines and physical appearance. As evinced in previous research reports (Gutiérrez et al., 2021; Ortiz et al., 2019), students from ethnic minoritized communities in this university often felt those themes did not represent them. In the



previous research reports, they recounted that these classes did little to create spaces for them to talk about their communities and their ways of being. Similar concerns have been raised by scholars in the ELT field, who believe this trend treats languages and cultures as prepacked unchangeable chunks of knowledge (Tochon, 2019). These scholars also critique the abundance of “multicultural” themes that revolve around depoliticized, stereotypical cultural features (Alarcon, 2007).

Challenging this tradition in ELT became our next goal in this planning stage. In this process, we attempted to follow Freire’s suggestion of using generative themes in which the students explore topics that truly matter to them (Freire, 1998). In our first version of this English course, we engaged students in conversations around identity, the hegemony of languages and knowledges, and resistance in their communities. These topics varied in the second implementation of the English course, as we understood there was a need to challenge the notion of ethnicity and intersectionality in Black and Indigenous communities. This understanding emerged from having students voice how their overlapping identities –e.g., being both Black and Indigenous, being queer-positioned them in some in-between spaces rarely accounted for in schools.

The selection and adaption of themes had three different aims: (a) to engage students in critical questioning of dominant languages and cultures, (b) to inspire them to take a socio-political stance toward the hegemony of English (Scollon, 2004) and, by raising their historical and socio-political consciousness, and (c) to have them recognize how coloniality in ELT was tied to discourses of globalization, which reduced national cultures and languages to mere exotic attractions (Vinall, 2012). These aims, which strive to disrupt the marginalization of ancestral languages and epistemologies (Motha, 2014) are often absent from the English classroom, and are replaced with a trivialized approach to content (Pennycook, 1990).

Attempting to connect these aims to our students’ realities and those of their communities, we realized that our knowledge about Indigenous and Black communities in Colombia was extremely limited. To us, this reality seemed to stem from the systematic marginalization of ancestral ways of knowing and doing across all levels of the education system in Colombia, which privileges western knowledge. Since “we cannot teach what we don’t know” (Malcom X, nd), it became evident that our classes could not attempt to teach students about themselves and their own communities. So, instead, we designed English lessons to create spaces for students to unveil the ways in which ethnic communities had historically resisted coloniality. We also created spaces to uplift and celebrate Black and Indigenous communities’ self-determination to sustain their languages, literacies, cultures, and ways of being, while students heightened their sociopolitical consciousness.

### Finding and Designing Teaching Materials

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For English teachers at our university, multimedia and multimodal teaching materials are readily available. These materials, however, mostly focus on allowing learners to practice discrete grammar items or to explore topics about the “target” culture. When these materials do incorporate local cultures, they do so in the form of uncritical homogenizing facts and cultural celebration, such as stating that Black people are good dancers or Indigenous peoples make Colombia a diverse country, but little do they do to address the material conditions of these communities or the diversity within them. Hence, finding materials to support English learners from ethnic communities without invisibilizing our local languages, cultures, and epistemologies was a challenging endeavor.

For a long time, the field of ELT has filled language learning with texts and materials implicated in the reproduction of language and culture ideologies that perpetuate the idea of an ideal English speaker and of an English culture to which students should aspire (Pennycook, 1999). To decolonial

scholars, these texts and materials perpetuate a colonization of being, knowledge, and power (Núñez-Pardo, 2018; 2020), fail to engage students in critical literacy development, and prevent them from disrupting the status quo. They need to increase ethnic, cultural, and linguistic representation so that students' academic development finds a connection between school contexts and their own communities and literacies (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Gay, 2002; Gregg et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014; Núñez-Pardo, 2020; Alim & Paris, 2017)

Vasquez (2004), for example, suggests using everyday texts for critical literacy development given that they carry ideologies and the authors' implicit intentions, regardless of the mode or medium in which they are presented. While we agree with this statement, we believe that representation matters and thus, allowing students to see themselves and their realities portrayed in the materials explored in class became our goal in this planning stage. Because such materials did not abound, we mostly resorted to the creation of our own multimedia and multimodal texts. Given our limited knowledge about Black and Indigenous communities, we relied on students from ethnic communities, who shared their own insights on ethnicity, identities, their territories, and their lived experiences, to inform the creation of those materials. This collaborative design enabled us to realize it was necessary to lead students to critically question their biases about their own and others' communities (Alarcon, 2007). Similarly, it made evident that fostering an inward gaze to students' communities was necessary (Alim & Paris, 2017) to identify ways in which their community practices could be oppressive.

This process of finding, adapting, and creating our own materials was hard, though. It was time-consuming and we constantly faced the challenge of falling into reductionist portrayals of our students' communities that would have ended up perpetuating common stereotypical

or homogenizing representations. This would have certainly been the case had we not collaborated with students from different communities. We also wrestled with ensuring that these materials allow for conversations in the classroom that moved beyond the celebration of cultural differences. To fight this, we constantly revisited the theoretical principles that grounded this implementation to explore themes and materials in a way that enabled students to question relations of power in ELT.

### Implementation: Translanguaging and Literacy Development in ELT

Decolonizing our teaching practices during the lesson implementation was not just a matter of being open to providing linguistic support in English as needed. This small step was insufficient without holding a space for students to display their full linguistic repertoires: Spanish, ancestral languages, and English, coupled with all their semiotic resources that allowed them to enact their cultural and linguistic identities in the English classroom. Incorporating translanguaging was our attempt to surpass monoglossic language ideologies rooted in neoliberal, colonial agendas in ELT (Kubota, 2014; McKinney, 2017; Rosa & Burdick, 2017)

This incorporation of translanguaging is not an easy one in the field of ELT, where English teachers are encouraged to employ multiple strategies to prevent students from speaking languages other than English in the classroom. These strategies range from small "innocent punishments," such as leaving them without candy, to academic consequences, such as getting points subtracted from their grades if English is not used consistently during classes. This is just an example of a long tradition in ELT that treats languages as if they "could be 'added' as separate wholes, without taking into account that true multilingual speakers never behave in this way" (García, 2019, p. 152). Treating languages this way results in the reproduction of ideologies that attribute languages a

hierarchical power, while enforcing the idea that the *language classroom* should limit to the separation of languages to advance *language learning* (García & Kleifgen, 2019).

The dynamic has been challenged by scholars who contend English learning does not have to take place at the expense of students' home languages, whether these are labeled first, second, or heritage languages (Wright et al., 2000). Instead, they become assets as language teachers leverage students' linguistic repertoires and attempt to disrupt the language hierarchies perpetuated by colonial discourses and teaching practices (Mignolo, 2000). From this perspective, language teachers are not in charge of policing students' use of *English only* in the classroom. Instead, they are responsible for ensuring that English learning is not "disconnected from culture, politics, and its colonial history" (Pennycook, 2019, p. 174). On the other hand, learners are resourceful speakers who are at the same time aware of "the politics of language and education and seek to address and transform social, cultural, and economic inequalities" (Pennycook, 2019, p. 178).

In this experience, translanguaging took the form of open invitations to students to communicate their ideas through multiple languages and modes. That meant encouraging students to express their ideas in their ancestral languages, Spanish, and English and through their multiple modes: writing, speaking, drawing, dancing, knitting, singing, or any mode in which they felt comfortable. We made these invitations albeit we knew we would not be able to understand their ancestral languages. By doing this, however, we ensured students did not feel they had to leave their languages and literacies out of the classroom door (Valenzuela, 1999), to assimilate into dominant cultural, linguistic, and literacy practices.

Disrupting ELT and the static notions of language and culture it perpetuates (Tochon, 2019) did not mean ignoring conventional literacy development (Bacon, 2017; Huang, 2011) since these dominant

literacies were necessary for students to demonstrate their English proficiency and obtain their diplomas. It meant enabling them to learn English in an organic and progressive manner. This was possible by exposing students to the multimedia and multimodal texts we had previously designed and by guiding them to create their own texts. Hence, after analyzing such texts, we highlighted some linguistic features, but let students determine the vocabulary and grammar they needed to teach us about their communities and to be able to contribute to the discussions proposed for each session. Encouraging students to articulate their ideas in different languages and to incorporate various English sentence structures and vocabulary, according to their needs and desires, not only challenged our previous teaching experiences of direct prescriptive grammar instruction but also allowed each class, in terms of language acquisition, to take life on its own.

Decolonizing teaching practices this way required finding a balance between holding spaces that centered students' cultures, languages, and literacies while critically teaching a colonial language. This implied a commitment to critically educate English learners who did not have to lose their languages and cultures in the process of acquiring mainstream academic skills (Smith, 2012). Although we were aware that by using the "master's tools" we would not be able to dismantle "the master's house" (Lorde, 2007, p. 35), this attempt to decolonizing ELT allowed us to use English against the English hegemony that displaces ancestral languages and cultures entirely from English classrooms.

### Undoing Coloniality of Being

Our attempts to decolonize ELT at our university created spaces for conversations in our classes that led students to reaffirm their systems of knowledge and ways of being as they interacted with other Indigenous and Black students. However, as we explored questions around the way knowledge is conceived, both in their communities and in

academic settings, we learned that questioning the role academic spaces have played, and continue to play, in the marginalization of certain knowledges and languages did not come naturally to students. In fact, most students seemed to have naturalized the fact that academia was meant to embrace and foster Western-centric knowledge, languages, and literacies, even if that meant theirs were not seen as assets.

The endorsement of these hierarchical relations of power has been defined as coloniality of being which refers to the way lived experiences of colonization impact multiple dimensions such as authority, knowledge, economy, and language (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2003). This brings the production of ontological colonial differences that give way to the creation of symbolic realities. Fanon relates these expressions of coloniality of being to racialized colonial experiences (Fanon, 1967), such as establishing certain social roles and places according to race and power structures, and disqualifying cultural practices. This means that the encounter with the racist Other also shapes the way we give value to certain knowledges, languages, and literacies (Mignolo, 2003). According to Maldonado-Torres (2007), consistent efforts to unveil this coloniality would lead to a critical exploration of language, history, and existence.

This realization contributed to our understanding that the lived experiences of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities are permeated by how they have historically interacted with colonial power structures. Very often, these interactions have resulted in the internalization of colonial beliefs about their own identities (López-Gopar, 2016), as mentioned above for Indigenous and Afro-Colombia communities. This internalized colonization posed a challenge for us as educators as we struggled to deconstruct those discourses and ideologies. At this point, we drew on the tenets of decoloniality which states that “concepts need to be conceived as invitations to dialogue

and not as impositions” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007) and that this dialogue is possible as people’s manifold colonial experiences and epistemic positions find spaces to converse.

As we held these spaces, we strived to make visible the subtle ways coloniality operates in education at large, and in ELT in particular. We also provided opportunities for students to critically analyze the mechanisms that render certain languages, literacies, and knowledges invisible, through systematic epistemic racism (Kubota, 2020). Moreover, we attempted to provide instances of how colonial ideologies influence the production of language and education policies, such as the one that required them to demonstrate English proficiency to graduate. These conversations were coupled with activities that repositioned students’ languages as assets, as we leveraged their full linguistic repertoires to talk about themselves and the ways their communities have resisted coloniality. This teaching practice, which has traditionally been banned from language classrooms, was a small action to contest those colonial discourses of being and knowledge (Lander, 2000; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2003). This practice continues to privilege Euro-American forms of knowledge erasing the knowledge produced by people of color and minoritized groups (Kubota, 2020).

#### Positioning Students as Cultural Experts and Text Producers

Another attempt to decolonize ELT in our classrooms consisted in switching the roles teachers and students have traditionally played in the language classroom, which position English teachers as the ones that hold the knowledge students need to advance in their academic life. Shifting this power dynamic in language teaching and learning led us to reflect on how we, consciously or unconsciously, had been implicated in the perpetuation of language and cultural power discourses (Scott, 2022).

The powerful industry of ELT has a strong interest in upholding discourses of correctness and



expertise that “privilege the knowledge, language and culture of dominant groups and oppress that of minoritized and/or colonized ones” (Scott, 2022, p. 182). To try to revert this, we positioned ourselves as non-experts while positioning students as holders of knowledge and as cultural agents. We knew that, aside from the pressure or eagerness to learn English, students already came to the classroom full of cultural and linguistic knowledge, along with a wide range of literacies, that would contribute to their academic and critical consciousness development (Izadinia & Abednia, 2010; Alim & Paris, 2017), so we decided to explore those knowledges and literacies.

Freire (2005) addresses this shift in power dynamics in the classroom when he states: “the teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn, while being taught, also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (p. 80). This mutual growth was precisely what occurred as we positioned students’ voices in the classroom. Students’ multifaceted identities shaped their lived experiences and expertise on their communities. Hence, holding spaces for students to display that expertise, enabled them and ourselves to interrogate our own understanding of the ways multiple identities, associated with gender, sexual orientation, religion, intersect and shape what it means to be Black and/or Indigenous. ELT rarely reflects this intersectionality (Kubota, 2020) and continues to reproduce homogenizing portrayals of Black and Indigenous communities, on textbooks and teaching materials, which are, in many cases, used as a prescriptive and fundamental element in the curriculum.

Bringing Indigenous and Black students’ full selves to the classroom created spaces for students to unearth painful stories of oppression and discrimination, but also of resistance. This turned the language classroom into a space of solidarity, as we understood that these stories were not isolated instances. Instead, these systematic acts of

oppression and discrimination were the result of harmful discourses against Indigenous and Black communities that abound in Colombia. ELT reinforces these discourses by positioning whiteness and failing to disrupt racialized, imperial narratives that dehumanize Black and Indigenous people, such as sexist, racist and classist ideas about their identities (Santos, 2014a). As we grew even more aware of how oblivious we had been to these realities, as language teachers and teacher educators, we committed to raising students’ awareness of the responsibility for the field of ELT in sustaining racist and oppressive policies and practices seemingly neutral, colorblind, and meritocratic (Wong, 2018). Subsequently, we provided students with the linguistic and analytic tools to critically read their own realities and transform them (Comber, 2001).

In the second version of this English course such tools had to do with the creation of multilingual and multimodal texts that portrayed their stories and lived experiences. These texts (see the examples below) intended to educate others about their communities and to contribute to the contextualized production of materials in ELT. Núñez-Pardo (2020) contends that the creation of contextualized texts, learners’ languages, cultures, and lived experiences infuse the language classroom with myriad opportunities to advance their academic skills development while interrogating the power dynamics at play in their communities and in the global context. Inviting students to bring to life their representations of themselves and their communities, in their own languages and on their own terms, became our contribution to fight the erasure of Black and Indigenous peoples from ELT (Ibrahim, 2008; Scott, 2022). Following are some examples from some of the multimodal and multimedia texts created and presented by these students in our classes:

For us, long hair is like having that strength and it is the extension of our thoughts. Our elders used to say that when we cut our hair, we also cut the dreams we had. Before our elders dreamed a lot and in their dreams they planned how to live more in community,



in unity, then they said that those are the extensions of our thoughts, our long hair. That is why it is important to have it long and keep it like that because it is vital to maintain our inner strength. For us who are part of the indigenous communities of the South, our cheekbones are very marked... on our face we carry our grandmothers, our grandfathers and we have a little bit of everything, and we have a little bit of our ancestors.” (Ana, class session, our translation)

**Example 1** Story work presented by a member of the Pastos people in Nariño

Yach’Akushun means the unit, teamwork to create knowledge and transform our minds. Yach’Akushun is a word from the Quechua that means let’s learn. Lachai is a word from the Inca indigenous community that means knowledge. So, Yach’Akushun building and sharing lachai means let’s learn while sharing knowledge. I would like to learn more about both native and foreign languages. I want to learn foreign languages not as a way to appropriate them and impact my identity, but as a knowledge tool that will allow me to know about the outside world, how the world works, which are the laws that govern outsiders. What we seek, as members of a community, is to learn and spread the knowledge acquired in our territories. We do not want the colonization history to be repeated. Understanding foreign languages will allow us to understand the intentions of those who approach our territories (multinational companies, corporations, foundations, etc.), and to be able to defend ourselves in their own words (Yason, online magazine, 2021, our translation)

**Example 2** Video created by a member of the Embera people in Antioquia

There are always the looks, the comments that people make, the whispers, like the looks of astonishment, and when one establishes a relationship with the members of the university community, one begins to see how prejudices and stereotypes: “I thought that like you were gay, you were more vain”, many stereotypes that people have and I think that happens to all of us, to people like me from the black community, from an indigenous community (J. J., class session, 2021, our translation)

**Example 3** Guest speaker: Student whose intersectional identities conflated Black, Indigenous, and Queer, among others.

This production of texts became an act of resistance against the uncritical reproduction of portrayals of Black people as a homogenous entity deprived of individual expression (Fanon, 1964). It also constituted an act of resistance against portrayals of Indigenous peoples as uncivilized or exotic (Sabzalian, 2019). By positioning students as cultural experts and text developers, we enabled them to make visible the ways in which ethnic communities have historically resisted coloniality, while uplifting their self-determination to sustain their languages, literacies, cultures, and ways of being.

**Conclusions and Implications**

Decolonizing ELT appears to be an incoherent endeavor and we must admit it feels incoherent at times. Is there such a thing as using English against English? We told ourselves that there is and this belief guided our commitment to these students and this teaching experience. But, how does one comply with neoliberal agendas that require all students to learn English to access education while attempting to protect the very same ancestral languages English is oppressing? How do we reconcile telling Black and Indigenous students that English language and culture ideologies are implicated in the oppression of their own languages and cultures while teaching them to speak this language? Are critical language teachers at odds with coloniality in language teaching? Our answers to these questions are not definitive.

Racist and linguistic biases in ELT have long-lasting consequences for all but especially for communities whose epistemologies, languages, and cultures have historically been erased or marginalized in the English classroom. These racialized language ideologies “have long been leveraged to create and maintain social, cultural and economic hierarchies that perpetuate racial and ethnic inequalities” (Scott, 2022, p. 181). To undo this harm caused by Eurocentric, colonial, neoliberal agendas in language learning, ELT has a long way ahead.

From this experience, we learned that some steps toward the attainment of a decolonial ELT are the removal of restrictive and prescriptive grammar sequences as well as the apolitical, uncritical approach to themes and to the development of teaching materials and textbooks. Although it is true that minoritized communities must have a voice to inform the production of these texts and teaching materials, this responsibility should not be left on them alone. Text and material producers, as well as curriculum developers are also called on to undo the perpetuation of harmful power dynamics in ELT that privilege Western knowledge and language practices.

Along with this is the reparation of the erasure, homogenization, and misrepresentation of Black and Indigenous communities which results in the portrayal of their languages and epistemologies as subaltern and devalued (Maldonado-Torres, 2014; Mignolo, 2010, Santos, 2020). Failing to undo this oppressive reproduction of English as the language of success, tied to colonial ideas of what counts as knowledge, perpetuates ethnic and racial inequalities endorsed by language policies and teaching practices.

Overall, from this experience, we learned that language teachers have a huge responsibility in the disruption of colonial power dynamics. To rise to this challenge, we need a commitment to unpack both the ways we have been socialized as language learners and our training as English teachers. Looking at our teaching practice critically should result in giving up the idea that students' home languages are a barrier to their learning. It should also result in explicit invitations of these languages into the classroom, as well as in the creation of spaces in which students' knowledges and lived experiences inform our understanding of who they are and desire to be. Finally, besides letting go of our "power", "expertise", and enforcement of "correctness," all of which are mechanisms of colonization, our critical practice should lead students to uncover the implication of coloniality in

the erasure of their languages and ways of being, and this is only achieved if mechanisms of colonization such as our "power", "expertise", and enforcement of "correctness," are let go.

Finally, given that English is a compulsory subject throughout the education system in Colombia, each and every student, regardless of whether they belong to Indigenous and Black communities or not, is bound to encounter these racialized colonial language and knowledge ideologies. Hence, language teacher education programs have a pivotal role to play in the decolonization of ELT. Firstly, they should create spaces to make visible the systematic erasure of Black and Indigenous people and their languages and epistemologies. English teachers cannot build solidarities with communities they do not even know exist. Secondly, language teacher education programs should create spaces in which pre-service language teachers critically analyze the power enacted through English language policies; who do they benefit? Who do they oppress? What knowledge is privileged? How are issues of power, race, ethnicity, gender, approached in these policies? Failing to do this would result in the uncritical reproduction of these colonial ideologies and in oppressive teaching practices.

In addition, language teacher education programs are called on to decolonize teacher education and the reproduction of language ideologies that attribute hierarchical power to colonial languages and cultures at the expense of local and Latin American languages and cultures. This decolonization would, hopefully, lead these pre-service language teachers to shy away from addressing culture in the form of stereotypical cultural differences that fail to center the historical, political, and intersectional nature of Black and Indigenous communities, their languages, knowledges, values, and strategies to survive coloniality. This could be achieved by bringing to the classroom ancestral knowledges and knowledge systems and by partnering with members of the myriad Black and Indigenous peoples that inhabit our country.

A starting point to envision this possibility is the belief that something of great value exists in the way these peoples have historically produced knowledge and related to the Mother Land.

Finally, as we reflect on our learning and unlearning during this experience, we have come to the conclusion that decolonial, critical intercultural language education should not be just aimed at ethnic minoritized communities. Instead, ALL citizens should be educated to resist the devastating effects of coloniality, which is relentlessly implicated in the disappearance of ancestral languages and epistemologies (Motha, 2014). We have also realized that our minds were so colonized that we failed to consistently address in our lessons the fact that Spanish, as the colonial language that it is, is fully implicated in the oppression of ancestral languages in Colombia, and incidentally has contributed to avoid the construction of respectful interactions between peoples; which makes it necessary to move towards the following proposal:

What I have been proposing is a profound respect for the cultural identity of students – a cultural identity that implies respect for the language of the other, the color of the other, the gender of the other, the class of the other, the sexual orientation of the other, the intellectual capacity of the other; that implies the ability to stimulate the creativity of the other.

But these things take place in a social and historical context and not in pure air.  
(Freire, 1997, pp. 307–308).

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