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Toward More Equitable Language Learning and Teaching Frameworks for Our ELT Community: Moving from EFL to ECL to CE[1]

Hacia marcos más equitativos de aprendizaje y enseñanza de lenguas para nuestra comunidad ELT: Pasando de EFL a ECL a CE

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Abstract

Over the past decade, different scholars in ELT have raised questions about the notion of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and the growing issues related to inequity that such a framework has raised. Our field in Colombia needs to interrogate the very frameworks and concepts we use to define the language and how those definitions will include us or exclude us from the larger global conversations in the field of ELT and related ones as a way to remain active and relevant in years to come. This article proposes moving from English as a Foreign Language (EFL) into English as a Colombian Language (ECL) as the intermediate step toward Colombian English (CE). This article will first problematize EFL as a segue into detailing the transition and some considerations involving our views of English and teacher education.

Keywords: Colombian English; language equity; ELT; English as a Foreign Language

Resumen

En la última década, diversos académicos en ELT han hecho interrogantes sobre la idea de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera (EFL) y los problemas que siguen surgiendo con relación a la inequidad que este marco ha creado. Nuestro campo en Colombia tiene que interrogar los marcos y conceptos que usamos para definir el lenguaje y cómo dichas definiciones nos incluyen o nos excluyen de las conversaciones a nivel global en el campo de ELT y otros aledaños como una forma de permanecer activos y relevantes en los años venideros. Este artículo propone pasar de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera (EFL) a Inglés como Lengua Colombiana (ECL), como paso previo hacia Inglés Colombiano (CE). Este artículo primero problematizará EFL para pasar a detallar dicha transición, así como unas consideraciones que involucran nuestra visión sobre el inglés y la formación de docentes.

Palabras clave: Inglés Colombiano; equidad en el lenguaje; ELT, Inglés como Lengua Extranjera

Resumo

Na última década, diferentes acadêmicos em ELT lançaram interrogantes sobre a ideia de Inglês como Língua Estrangeira (EFL) e os debates sobre as inequidades que este âmbito criou. Nosso campo na Colômbia precisa interrogar os âmbitos e conceitos que utilizamos para definir as línguas e como estas definições nos incluem ou excluem das conversações no campo de ELT e outros próximos a nível global como a forma de permanecer ativos e relevantes nos próximos anos. Este artigo propõe uma transição de Inglês como Língua Estrangeira (EFL) a Inglês como Língua Colombiana (ECL), como passo intermédio para o Inglês Colombiano (CE). Este texto primeiro problematizará EFL para depois detalhar a transição e algumas considerações que envolvem nossas visões do inglês e a formação de professores.

Palavras chave: Inglês Colombiano; equidade na linguagem; ELT; Inglês como Língua Estrangeira

Introduction: The Collective Challenge for ELT

The field of ELT, both in Colombia and around the world, is facing a moment of reckoning, amplified by recent events that bookmarked the beginning of the third decade and the new societal and political configurations in our country in years to come. We are rethinking ourselves as both a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and affinity (Black, 2009), which also implies raising deeper questions about how we will frame and define language moving forward. We need to carefully interrogate how the frameworks we use will include us or exclude us from the larger global conversations in the field of ELT and related ones while considering who is included and excluded as part of these conversations. We must therefore keep in mind the "edu*poli*tical" (Willis, 2009) consequences of these terms as the incoming governments lay out their language curriculum and policy proposals.

One of the ideas that requires careful revision is how we talk about *English* in our documents and whether an idea such as "foreign" language should be the way to go moving forward. I am fully aware that going after a concept so deeply entrenched in the very fabric and DNA of the profession is a risky move, one fueled by a mutual feeling of iconoclasm and hope. Nevertheless, as the world begins to rethink our views of society and education in the aftermath of the pandemic (e.g., Reimers, 2021; Sutton & Jorge, 2020; Yi & Jang, 2020) and, back to our local context, we will wrestle with the new societal challenges ahead of us, these are not times for neutrality after all. This is the overall purpose of this article, framed both as a proposal and a manifesto (Denzin, 2017, 2018; New London Group, 1996). This article proposes moving past the ESL/EFL binary (Mora, 2013, 2021), less as a rupture (although it is) and more as a transitional process that leads us to talking about *Colombian English* (CE), where I suggest using the notion of *English as a Colombian Language* (ECL) as a bridge, where we can also revisit the relationship among English and the other local languages present in our context from a deeper ecological perspective (Reyes, 2009).

To help propel this transition, I rely on ideas and theories drawn from language ecology (e.g. Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009), World Englishes[3] (e.g., Canagarajah, 2006), Critical Applied Linguistics (e.g. Pennycook, 2001), Critical Literacy (e.g., Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999;), as well as recent discussions around translanguaging (e.g.,

[3] I chose to use World Englishes (WE) instead of other frameworks such as English as a New Language (ENL) because from its inception WE has taken on a larger sense of global advocacy as we move away from the traditional conversations about US/UK varieties. A further survey of the literature on ENL showed me that this concept seems to be too specific to the US context and related to particular issues of migration. That said, I do appreciate how the reviewers pushed me to unpack my choice of using WE over other frameworks such as ENL.

García & Li, 2014). These ideas, all ingrained in socio-critical views of language in society, aim to break existing power relations across languages while also seeking equitable views of language use that do not marginalize language users or less dominant languages in local contexts. They serve as conceptual foundation to profile the transition to CE and profile this equitable view of English vis-à-vis the other local languages in our communities.

Before I introduce my arguments here, a caveat: I have centered the discussion around English due to its larger global appeal and therefore a careful analysis of how we frame it is warranted. This emphasis does not intend to ignore or diminish the role and influence of Spanish, indigenous languages, or other languages historically present in our context (e.g., Portuguese, French, etc.), nor does it intend to recognize the official status of Spanish and the indigenous and minoritized languages in our land. If anything, this conversation about how we frame languages in Colombia should happen across the board and this exercise with English might provide a blueprint for other languages to follow or critique.

I will develop my argument for the transition in three moments: A first moment will (re)problematize the notion of EFL, if only because, as Alastair Pennycook shared with me, "a good critique of all this stuff would be useful." (Personal Communication, Sept. 20, 2017). The second moment will provide a rationale for the transition and its meaning. Finally, the third moment will introduce three main considerations to make a successful transition "from EFL to ECL to CE."

First Moment: (Re)Problematizing EFL

After my return to Colombia from my graduate studies back in 2010, I have devoted a considerable part of my scholarship (Mora, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014e, 2015; Mora, et al., 2019) to question the inherent social and curricular inequities that the notion of EFL entails. Let us begin from the very notion of "foreign": EFL is problematic even from the actual definition of "foreign" (Mora, 2012, 2013). In one of my earliest conversations (Mora, 2012), I showed the synonyms of "foreign," according to several thesauri. If one does a very quick Google search for "synonyms of foreign," one would find the following results, among several others: distant, remote, external, outside, alien, strange, unfamiliar, unknown, exotic, outlandish, odd, peculiar, bizarre, weird, irrelevant, inappropriate, unrelated, and unconnected. Now, I suggest readers to try changing "Foreign" for one of its synonyms and ask themselves how they would feel teaching English as an *Alien* Language, English as an *Unfamiliar* Language, English as a *Strange* Language, English as a *Bizarre* Language, or English as an *Unrelated, Unconnected* Language. Even from this semantic vantage point, EFL begins to look a bit, bizarre, does it not?

That said, I do not want to turn this problematization into an issue of word choice or mere semantics, as the synonyms are, to me, just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. EFL does have much larger issues underneath the surface. Take, for instance, the existing blind spots present in the notion of EFL, which are woven in the geographical dimension of its constitution, as Kachru denounced when he proposed his concentric circles (Kachru, 1990; Rajadurari, 2005). EFL, as any part of a binary does, operates in absolutes. That means that issues present in the borderlands, including issues of interlanguaging present in some of the research on translanguaging (de los Ríos & Seltzer, 2017; Hornberger & Link, 2012), are not part of this framing. The EFL construct also seems to overlook what happens in regions where there are multiple languages in full contact, as I have pointed out happens to us in the province of San Andrés, Providencia, and Santa Catalina. The presence of Spanish, English, and Creole, all of which have strong social, religious, cultural, and even political ties to this region create what I have described as "The San Andrés Paradox" (Mora, 2015), as you really cannot call any of these languages the "foreign" language in that region since they are equally valuable and they coexist (I will return to this idea at the end) for multiple purposes in the local communities.

Another big question surrounding EFL has to do with language ownership itself. This issue goes back to the discussion of synonyms I brought up in a previous section. When I first brought up the issue of the meanings of "foreign" back in 2012, one of my students raised a question that still remains relevant to this discussion, "How can I teach a language that is not mine?" (Mora, 2012). This issue of detachment and lack of ownership, whether we want to acknowledge it or not, is germane to the idea of EFL. Students can not truly be engaged in a language if they do not see themselves as part of the language communities said language seems to endorse.

Highly related to the ownership issue, there is also the outward status of English (and other second and even minoritized languages by extension). By outward, I mean that we keep perpetuating the idea that cities in Colombia are fully "monolingual" and thus we need to "insert" other languages in the cities (Mora, Pulgarín, Mejía-Vélez, & Ramírez, 2018), which is the goal of several policies, aimed at turning cities or provinces "bilingual" (see Mora, Chiquito, & Zapata, 2019, for a brief analysis of Medellín and Antioquia). This outward view is deeply problematic, for it continues to overlook the possibilities to use, for instance, English to better understand the local culture (e.g., Cruz Arcila, 2018; Ramos Holguín, Aguirre Morales, & Hernández, 2012; Zuluaga Corrales, López Pinzón, & Quintero Corzo, 2009).

Finally, an even more problematic situation is the reality that the EFL/ESL binary is very present as a source of social inequities (Mora, 2012, 2015). We cannot deny that learning English is still associated with issues of privilege, even stemming from what varieties we learn or never get to hear from, as well as who gets to teach certain courses, decisions oftentimes less guided by pedagogy and more by nativespeakerism (Ramjattan, 2017, 2019). We know there are stark disparities between the kind of

instruction that students in rural areas or from minoritized communities get to receive versus what happens in affluent areas in our cities, in terms of quality of teachers, instructional load, and overall access to target-language resources. Just because we have "standards" or official statements declaring English as a *de facto* foreign language does not mean all social and curricular practices operate in a level-playing field.

This unevenness in the curriculum is one situation I have lived and witnessed first-hand as a teacher and teacher educator. I am sure the following scenario is familiar to teachers elsewhere: Think about a school that employs teachers who are either native or near-native, in smaller groups than the other classes in the school curriculum (whereas a social studies or Spanish teacher would host 30 students, the English teachers would host between 10 and 15 students), with access to technology and online resources, sometimes in a special building for English classes, and taking between 10 and 15 hours of English instruction per week (in some cases, more because they also take content area classes in the target language). Also, let us not forget that students in these schools can afford to go on study abroad immersions, have parents who may be bilingual themselves, and have access to language resources outside of school.

This scenario is a polar opposite to what many public school students face in terms of instructional time, class size, and human and physical resources. We know stories where schools must resort to assigning another teacher from a different subject *just because they took several courses at language institute* to teach English in several grades. We also know that in inner-city and rural schools, English teachers are under-resourced. In a situation like this, where we have a first scenario that resembles something closer to what an ESL curriculum would look like and a second that is even far from what EFL is supposed to be like, we need to raise questions about the kinds of unspoken privileges that a hidden ESL curriculum is affording to students in very restricted socio-economic groups have such affordances.

It is this analysis that has led me to question whether it is worth sustaining such an inequitable framework such as the ESL/EFL binary, to decide that it is not worth it anymore and, thus propose in this article/manifesto a transition that moves us past EFL into a more contextualized and equitable framework for our land.

Second Moment: What Does it Mean to Go from EFL to ECL to CE?

Before we go into the rationale for the transition, a second caveat: As I said in the introduction, I am in fact suggesting a transition as opposed to a full-frontal rupture with EFL. The idea here, despite the critical tone, is to trigger a conversation where we can reach common ground toward this transition. I know that there are teachers and scholars out that still use EFL not because they fully agree with the concept but because the leap to other concepts seems extreme (Mora & Golovátina-Mora, 2017).

Why do we need a transition? As I stated in the previous section, my central argument is that the notion of EFL as our ELT community has traditionally conceived it is falling short to address the realities of language and literacy practices in Colombia (Graddol, 2006; Mora, 2013) and in many cases, it has become a "convenient shortcut" (Matsuda, personal communication, Sept. 19, 2017) to avoid the deeper conversations about language inequity and access that we need to have as we project the future of ELT (Kubota, 2020; Ortega, 2019). I agree with one of the reviewers that the issue is much larger than nomenclature and it has to do with addressing real meaning-making issues. That said, when a framework is so deeply ingrained in colonial views of language, the name shift is not just a cosmetic move. It is an invitation for a much-needed paradigm shift that makes us rethink why we learn, teach, and use languages within deeper levels of social consciousness.

We need the transition because we need frameworks that do not leave our students in public/urban/rural schools, our indigenous populations (Escobar Alméciga & Gómez Lobatón, 2010;; Uribe-Jongbloed & Anderson, 2014), and students with disabilities (León Corredor & Calderón, 2010;) at a disadvantage. This transition is necessary because we need flexible, adaptive frameworks (Tochon, 2009) that acknowledge what users do with English in urban (Mora, et al., 2018) and virtual spaces (Mora, Gee, Hernandez, Castaño, Orrego, & Ramírez, 2020), in their communities (Rincón & Clavijo-Olarte, 2016; Trigos-Carrillo, 2019), and in their personal lives. Finally, this transition is urgent because, as I tried to explain in the First Moment, English is not "foreign" to quite a few people in our land and for others, it should not be any longer.

ECL and CE: Two working definitions.

To aid the transition, I will now offer two working definitions for *English as a Colombian Language* and *Colombian English* (Note: I will just go over the definitions here. The deeper conversations about how this framework may promote equity are the object of the next sections). I see *English as a Colombian Language* as any existing variety of English (e.g., American, British and beyond) that local people can relate and see as part of their existing linguistic repertoire. In this sense, ECL considers English in general as a resource that language users can rely on for everyday communication and for realistic purposes. ECL would be then the first step toward pushing against the backlash around English in certain urban and rural communities (e.g., Bonilla Medina & Cruz Arcila, 2013).

In the case of *Colombian English,* we are talking about a move past the traditional varieties of English, becoming instead a variety of English, analog to those already present in other regions of the world such as Singlish (Forbes, 1993), that acknowledges the local values (Higgins, 2009) and the diverse situated narratives (Rajagopalan, 2010) that English, as part of a collective language tapestry, can help promote, but framed

within language ecology (Mora, 2014d) and equity principles (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996). Colombian English would then be a move from the traditional ways to frame English in Colombia, usually circumscribed to American or British, into a more organic (Gramsci, 1971) approach to language use. In this sense, I think of Colombian English as an umbrella term that considers all the different ways in which we speak English in Colombia, including already existing homegrown varieties (González, 2010), and others that keep emerging as different folx in Colombia experiment with English for multiple purposes in our cities (Mora, et al., 2018)

Third Moment: Three Considerations to Implement the Transition from EFL to ECL to CE

A transition from EFL to CE, besides gradual, would need to have some specific considerations related to what one should keep in mind. In this section, I offer three guiding points as we get the transition started:

***Consideration 1: The Transition Is About* Glocal Advocacy.**

A move toward CE means that we should build our English language curricula keeping in mind how the local counternarratives (Bamberg, 2004; Mora, 2014c; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) would use it to share their voices in local and global milieus. This as part of a move toward moments of *glocal advocacy* (Mora, 2016), understood as

> the recognition that today's practices are part of an increasingly global society that brings people from different backgrounds together. However, it also bears in mind the need to ensure that some agents are not lost in the midst of the global waves. (Defining the Term, pa. 2)

A glocalized perspective also provides a moment to carefully discuss the colonial nature of English. ECL and CE defy traditional ideas about the neutrality of English and English instruction (Pennycook, 2001). In order to think about transition, it is necessary to interrogate all our practices in the past few decades and how we have been complicit (whether overtly or tacitly) in the promotion of these colonial values in the language (that, I admit, is a question I have wrestled with over the past decade, and I am still dealing with in all my work) and what new ways of framing our instructional practices are necessary to give our views of English a true, critical turn. Without reflecting on how we break those cycles of reproduction, the change will not be anything less that a performative, cosmetic move where we may end up just, as the expression says, recycling old wine in new bottles.

Thus, a glocalized perspective does not frame notions such as ECL or CE as monolithic in nature. Doing so may fall prey to the trap of making them synonyms for *Standard English* Instead, this perspective assumes both notions as permeable (Dyson, 1990) terms that need to be in constant examination so that they fulfill the purpose of celebrating the existing linguistic and cultural diversity in our regions as the building block of the needed common ground. In this sense, the move toward ECL and CE wishes to move the fields of English Education and ELT in Colombia past the traditional L1/L2 binaries (Mora, 2013), as part of an extended palette that also features the indigenous, the borderlands, and other second languages present in our communities (Mora, et al., 2019).

Consideration 2: There Must Be a* Critical Perspective *Framing the Transition, Which Involves Teacher Education.

At this point, it is important to point out that this proposed transition is not just the result of my individual musings. I propose this inspired by all the different questions about how we frame English in Colombia that we have noticed in recent years. This is a response to all those questions about the relationship between English and gender, socio-economic status, policies, and instructional practices (e.g., Mora, Cañas, Gutíerrez-Arismendy, Ramírez, Gaviria, & Golovátina-Mora, 2021). Making the transition to ECL and CE is part of that ongoing conversation about how we teach and use English in Colombia. In the case of how we teach it, the transition is an invitation to look at the new ECL/CE curricula as a space for *conscientização* (Freire, 1979; Mora, 2014a), or

> The understanding of social realities from both epistemological and critical perspectives as the basis for the effective and sustainable transformation of said realities […] an invitation to take strong critical stances about history, society, and even politics as the first step to meaningful change. (What is it? pa. 1)

Rethinking our frameworks for English in Colombia begins, therefore, at the teacher education level, both preservice (*licencitaturas*) and inservice (advanced and continuing education) teacher training and professional development. Tertiary teacher education programs would have to develop curricula that balance the rigor in terms of language instruction with a commitment to defy cultural biases and question language neutrality (Pennycook, 2001). We will need teacher education programs that foster powerful literacy (Finn, 2010) curricula across all contexts (urban/rural/exurban) that aim "to analyze social fields and their systems of exchange—with an eye to transforming social relations and material conditions." (Luke, 2012, p. 9). These curricula also need to mobilize prospective and practicing teachers to "mobilize existing linguistic, cultural, and cognitive resources to support them in gradually becoming a critical language user [and teacher]." (Lau, 2012, pp. 329). In addition, as Ko (2013) argued, "The curriculum is to use materials from the everyday world as text and analytic tools to deconstruct these texts to lay bare their ideological workings

and power relations; therefore, the instruction is situated, interrogated and counter-hegemonic" (pp. 92-93). This also involves (re)building ELT teacher education programs (undergraduate, master's, and doctoral alike) to keep in mind the realities of our local communities (Cuasialpud Chanchala, 2010). We need to customize curricula where we keep in mind all those stakeholders beyond teacher education and how we incorporate their input. We need to hear more from minoritized communities and add their voices to our courses. The good news is, we already have structures in place to do so, both at the Macro level (e.g., the Ministry of Education's Basic Learning Rights or the conditions for accreditation our *licenciaturas* must comply with) and the micro level (e.g., professional development). We just need to act more decisively on those actions and give them a stronger presence in our teacher education programs.

***Consideration 3: A Transition to CE Relies on* Language Coexistence.**

The idea of language coexistence (Mora, 2018; Mora, et al., 2018) draws heavily from language ecology, or the application of ecosystems theories into languages in societies. In this sense,

> The ultimate goal of a language ecology perspective is to ensure that the promotion of any one language, in the name of globalization for example, does not mean that all other languages that have historically been part of local societies do not become casualties, but instead become empowered as the result of broader social interactions with the world. (Mora, 2014d, What is it? pa. 2)

A language ecology perspective, therefore, means that a move towards ECL and CE needs to be deeply ingrained in the sustainability of the Colombian language ecosystem. It operates from the belief that any language policies and curricula under this umbrella cannot promote practices that erase and marginalize local, indigenous, or sign languages (Guerrero, 2009). A view of language coexistence also promotes a move from the traditional view of *language interference*. The transition proposal seeks to understand how languages (sometimes organically) find ways to fit in the existing linguistic ecosystems and how English is not isolated nor can we isolate it from other languages in our communities (Sharkey, Clavijo-Olarte, & Ramírez, 2016), as sometimes our policies and curricula seem to frame it (Chang-Bacon, 2021). Rather, a transition to Colombian English stems from the recognition of the multiple languages (both indigenous and European) that have been part of our communities for a very long time. It means, as I mentioned before, that we will need to carefully revisit the purposes of English, from the very notion that it is a colonial and colonizing language. Languages can be decolonized, so long as we decenter their practices from the traditional knowledge centers (Mora, et al, 2020).

In this sense, advocating for *Colombian English* means acknowledging the varieties of English that will come to light as a consequence, varieties that will not necessarily

adhere to traditional understandings of what certain registers should look like (Flores, 2020) or that continue using idealized models of language speakers as the only way to validate what Colombian English speakers should look or sound like (Brittain, 2020; Guerrero, 2009; Rosa, 2016; Rosa & Flores, 2017). Finally, a view of language coexistence also implies creating equitable frameworks so that our communities can use English to make other stories visible to different audiences everywhere. We already have relevant examples in the literature about how local communities have come together to give English a truly contextualized social and communicative purpose to talk about issues in our neighborhoods (e.g., Medina-Riveros, Ramírez-Galindo, & Clavijo-Olarte, 2016). We have research that keeps exploring how the relationship between English and urban dwellers is transforming the cities (e.g., Mora, et al., 2018) and salient examples of how indigenous communities use it to promote their local cultures and crafts (e.g., Jaraba Ramírez & Arrieta Carrascal, 2012). As we keep compiling these examples, this will enable us to refine the features and purposes for this nascent construct called Colombian English.

Coda: From EFL to ECL to CE – A Final Word and an Invitation

Our future as educators is only possible if we frame our profession around issues of language sustainability and equity, research, and strong educational advocacy. This is a futurology essay, where I took a bold, iconoclastic stance around a concept such as EFL, thinking that our Colombian ELT community can propose something different and closer to how we may envision the role of English and other second languages in our country. This essay is nothing but an invitation for others to join the quest that must begin after I write the last sentence. I have said these words, first in the plenary and now here, because I have a strong conviction (Mali, 2012) that there is a blueprint here that could guide the next steps.

However, I do not believe that one single person can build such a framework as this. I am just proposing a viewpoint, but this is the beginning of a longer conversation. I am sharing these lines to invite other scholars and practitioners *in* and *from* Colombia who are deeply invested in the future of English Education in our country, to engage with these words. I especially invite (paying tribute to the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu) those who disagree with these ideas or have deep concerns about the extent of my proposal, to join me in conversation. This is a blueprint, this is work in progress and I imagine some ideas will morph as we read them together. I know some of these ideas may be controversial, but I welcome the controversy, not to pick fights, but to cross bridges. At the end of the day, whether we fully agree on this manifesto, I am fully aware that we do share one common cause: building a better future for ELT in Colombia, a future where our students and communities can own their second languages and not only use English *in* Colombia but English *for* Colombia.

Author's Note:

This article collects ideas from three keynote addresses between 2017 and 2021: *From EFL to ECL to CE: Seeking more equitable language learning and teaching practices for our ELT communities and teacher education programs* (Forum on the Future of the ELT Profession in Colombia, 2017), *What will it take for us to have bilingualism in Colombia? A blueprint for the incoming decade* (Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira, 2019), and *Landscaping English literacies in Colombia... or why English isn't foreign to us anymore* (ASOCOPI Annual Congress, 2021). This article is also the result of many conversations around the subject with my students at Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, as well as colleagues in other universities in Colombia.

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