

# Exploring the Grounds for the Study of the Identity of Indigenous English Language Teachers in Colombia<sup>1</sup>

Explorando las Bases para el Estudio de  
la Identidad de los Profesores Indígenas  
de Inglés en Colombia

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## Abstract

This article addresses the invisibilization of the existence of indigenous teachers in the Colombian ELT (English language teaching) field. Their existence, which is admittedly a phenomenon that lacks quantitative saliency, offers opportunities to reflect on the epistemological asymmetries that traditionally have linked the Colombian ELT field to an instrumental mainstream bilingualism, often ignoring the conditions of linguistic and cultural diversity in the country. Besides, there is an exploration of how the study of indigenous teachers' identities might contribute to the re-signification of pedagogy; this paper elaborates on the idea that scholars in the Colombian ELT have already built some horizons of understanding between the ELT and the diversities and epistemic privileges of Colombian indigeneity. The article is part of an ongoing research on the identities of indigenous teachers in the Colombian ELT being carried out within the Interinstitutional Ph.D. in Education at Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, Bogotá.

**Keywords:** Indigenous English language teachers, teacher identities, decolonial thought, cultural diversity, linguistic diversity

## Resumen

Este artículo aborda la invisibilización de la existencia de los profesores indígenas en el campo de la enseñanza de inglés. Su existencia, el cual es un fenómeno que carece de prominencia cuantitativa, ofrece oportunidades de reflexionar sobre las asimetrías epistemológicas que tradicionalmente han conectado el campo de la enseñanza de inglés con un bilingüismo instrumental dominante, en el que usualmente se ignoran las condiciones de diversidad lingüística y cultural en el país. Además, hay una exploración de cómo el estudio de las identidades de los profesores indígenas pueden contribuir a la resignificación de la pedagogía. Este documento elabora la idea de que los académicos en la enseñanza de inglés en Colombia han construido algunos horizontes de comprensión entre la enseñanza de inglés y las diversidades y los privilegios epistemológicos de la indigeneidad colombiana. El artículo es parte de la investigación continua de las indigeneidades de los profesores indígenas que se desarrolla en el Doctorado Interinstitucional en la Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas en Bogotá.

**Palabras clave:** profesores indígenas de inglés, identidades de profesores, pensamiento decolonial, diversidad cultural, diversidad lingüística

## Resumo

Este artigo trata sobre a invisibilização da existência dos professores indígenas na área do ensino de inglês. Sua existência, o qual é um fenômeno que carece de prominência quantitativa, oferece oportunidades de refletir sobre as assimetrias epistemológicas que tradicionalmente têm conectado a área do ensino de inglês com um bilinguismo instrumental dominante, no que usualmente se ignoram as condições de diversidade linguística e cultural no país. Além disso, há uma exploração de como o estudo das identidades dos professores indígenas podem contribuir com a resignificação da pedagogia. Este documento elabora a ideia de que os acadêmicos no ensino de inglês na Colômbia têm construído alguns horizontes de compreensão são entre o ensino de inglês e as diversidades e os privilégios epistemológicos da indigeneidade colombiana. O artigo é parte da pesquisa contínua das indigeneidades dos professores indígenas que se desenvolve no Doutorado Interinstitucional na Universidade Distrital Francisco José de Caldas em Bogotá.

**Palavras chave:** professores indígenas de inglês, identidades de professores, pensamento descolonial, diversidade cultural, diversidade linguística

## Introduction

The study of teachers' identities in the ELT (English language teaching) field has subtly shifted from a major focus on the multiple dimensions that constitute identity to an understanding of the performative elements that such constitutive elements have as causes and consequences of the acts of educating. This means that the conflux of factors such as teachers' culture (Clarke, 2008), their language(s) (Joseph, 2004), their spiritual beliefs (Joseph, 2004), their ethnicity (Alexander, 2003), their profession (Swain, 2005), and their gender (Escudero, 2008) has become relevant not only because they constitute subjectivities for teachers, but also because increasingly these factors become sources for pedagogy and social agency (Morgan, 2017). This means that the multiple and diverse dimensions of identity do not constitute just the dimension of the being of teachers, but also have an effect in their doing, acknowledging that teachers' intentionality and positioning becomes pivotal in the praxis at the classroom (Varghese, Morgan, Johnston, & Johnson, 2005).

This shift into the inquiry of teachers' identity, in turn, has brought into play the use of alternative methodological approaches such as auto-ethnographies, narratives, autobiographies, and story-telling. These alternative approaches do not just work for research purposes but also become the vehicle by which teachers understand, author, and re-author their experiences and envision them towards the future (Barkhuizen, 2016). Thus, a recognition of agency in teachers' construction of their identity, also results in a certain agency in the forms in which scholars are resorting to more emic perspectives towards research.

The Colombian ELT has also opened spaces for the academic dialogue around the study of teacher identity, and its agentic dimension. This emerging object of inquiry has disputed spaces of recognition against the more traditional research topics such as the disciplinary studies and the canonical pedagogy that were almost exclusively entrenched into the local scholar production in the field. The inclusion of diverse research interests allows the problematization of aspects that, by being constitutive of the Colombian ELT teacher identities, are also connected to extended societal aspects such as equality, gender and power issues.

Examples of how the inquiry into teachers' identities has started to gain terrain in the Colombian ELT field, defying scholar traditions, include the disclosure of queer identities by means of narrative explorations (Lander, 2018), or the documentation of bottom-up instances of teachers' agency in more vulnerable conditions. This latter is the case of rural Colombian ELT teachers' enactment of wisdom practices and personal theories (Cruz, 2018), or the Colombian EFL primary teachers' construction of their identities as oscillating within the colonial shadow and their autonomy as decision makers regarding top-down policies (Quintero, & Guerrero, 2013). Colombian ELT teachers' agency as social and cultural beings (Quintero & Guerrero, 2013) implies

the use of politics of location to rearticulate identities in front of existing discursive practices, and bring up fights that are social in nature, and that formerly seemed to be rather absent from the scholar dialogue in the field.

The visibilization of such topics makes it apparent that the Colombian ELT has participated of an epistemic reflection which attempts to promote the intercultural reconstruction of the human dimension in the field, and, by means of a sociology of absences (De Sousa, 2010), end with the discrepancy between the theory and the social practices. The scholars in the field seem to be addressing a transgressing and insurgent positioning in research to demonstrate that what does not exist in the academic dialogue has been actually constructed as non-existent, as a spendable alternative, invisible to a hegemonic world reality. In this reconstruction of Colombian ELT teachers' identities, the divergence is an asset that has gained terrain over the being/not- being binary distinctions (Mignolo, 2000). Heterogeneity and phenomena like gender, power, inequality, and identity are being chosen as objects of study in the Colombian ELT not just because there is an epistemic interest, but also because their existence has to do with the ontology, and ultimately the ethics of human beings.

It is in this politics of location that it makes sense to draw the attention of the field to a phenomenon that, due to the coloniality of knowing and epistemic violence (Castro-Gómez, 2005), has often been overlooked, and has been invisibilized: the existence of indigenous teachers in the Colombian ELT field. There are English language teachers or English language teachers in formation who identify themselves as having an ethnic origin rooted in a particular indigenous group. Links between the indigenous identities and the ELT field do not seem to be easily located in the educational field. This can be explained mainly because it involves multiple situations of co-existence of languages and cultures that are not 'the norm' (but rather the exception), either because of their lack of quantitative saliency or because of practices of invisibilization towards minority groups (De Sousa, 2010).

The emerging criteria to locate an ontology of indigenous English language teachers in Colombia, besides the fact of participating of formation processes typical in the field (such studying language teaching majors), show three dimensions of indigenous identification.

First, there is an ingroup identification which could be determined by their lineages (as in the case of Wayuu peoples), this is an approach to heritage and territoriality that links them metaphysically and relationally with their motherland and their ancestry (Suárez-Krabbe, 2011), and, sometimes, an agentic role in the processes of re-indigenization of their in-group identity (Jackson & Warren, 2005).

The second dimension is an identity configuration against essentialisms. The fact that they have chosen or have been driven to become English language teachers might seem a challenge to the essentialist identification of their indigeneity given by the

Corte Constitucional (1998), which basically established a continuum for autonomy and territoriality which labels grades them as traditional, semi-traditional, or uprooted –based on their mestizaje and contact with the ‘white’ society. The existence of indigenous English language teachers in Colombia embodies encounters and disencounters between the nation’s grand narratives of modernity/ coloniality (which includes the instrumentality of mainstream bilingualism for the purpose of insertion into the global village), and the overlooked existing ethnic and cultural diversity of the country.

Finally, there is an oscillation between determinism and agency: The conflux of indigeneity in the Colombian ELT field is the living manifestation of a series of epistemic obediences and disobediences (Mignolo, 2013) in response to the coloniality and its white supremacy project of marginalization and invisibilization of the border beings (Sium, Desai, & Ritskes, 2012). The challenge is to understand to what extent their becoming English language teachers becomes an act of obedience of the tenets of coloniality and modernity, and to what extent it is an act of rebelliousness.

These emerging criteria of identification become referents against the conditions of their invisibilization, which threatens to seclude the Colombian indigenous English language teachers to the zone of non- being (Ndlovu, 2014), and can be explained by colonial mechanisms such as: i) epistemological asymmetries in the Colombian ELT field that make the conflux and embodiment of the ethnic bilingualism and he mainstream bilingualism in indigenous English language teachers [Mignolo’s (2013) anthropos and humanitas] as virtually non-existent; ii) the oblivion of the valuable contributions that studying the interfaces between Colombian ELT and the Colombian indigeneity could bring to pedagogy, and society at large, and iii) the vacuum of documentation of existing action-oriented counter hegemonic strategies (Escobar, 2003) that acknowledge the multiple versalities and horizons of understanding between the Colombian ELT field and the indigeneity.

## **Colombian indigenous English language teachers: from epistemic asymmetries in the ELT field to epistemic disobediences and epistemic rights**

Framed within a modern/colonial world system (Quijano, 2000; Castro-Gómez & Grossfoguel, 2007; Maldonado-Torres, 2017), in which power, agency, and inequality are often overlooked by educational researchers, the Colombian ELT field is subjected to what Clausen & Osborne (2013) and Bourdieu (2000) call institutionalized cultural arbitrariness, which implies the entrenching, standardization, and subtle imposition of elements of the cultural capital backed up by the hegemonic social sciences emerging from geopolitical territories that differ from ours (De Sousa, 2006). The national education policies, and bilingualism programs construct discourses and practices of

disdain toward Colombian EFL teacher agency (Guerrero, 2010), at the same time, premises of citizenship and competitiveness (Dussel, 2005) have become the driving forces in shaping social groups' knowledge and identities. These practices, participate in a preemptive testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007) by which the voices and practices of Colombian EFL teachers are not only lessened in terms of their credibility, but are often even silenced.

Progressively scholars like Bonilla (2017) have explored the ethnic dimension in connection with educational practices in Colombia, and how whitening and othering discourses continue to generate asymmetries and epistemic violence. Yet, among the researchable inquiries in the Colombian ELT field, almost nothing has been said about Colombian indigenous EFL teachers and their identities. Regardless of the adoption of the post-structural, the critical, and the cultural turns, Colombian indigenous EFL teachers are being epistemologically and ontologically secluded to the zone of non-being (Ndlovu, 2014); they are constructed outside the ELT field. The multiple ethnic heritages, the enactment of race, the cultural positionality and the performance of identity, share the fate of not being genuinely welcome within the institutionalizing confines of the classroom (Warren, 2001), let alone within the institutionalizing discourses of the Colombian ELT. Racism and whiteness have been constructed subtly, often eluding scrutiny and detection, and, unless there is an understanding of the principles of the colonial/modern world system, the realities that are written in the margins of the 'grand narratives' (Baxter, 2003) of the ELT might remain invisibilized.

The Colombian ELT field, particularly after the economic openness to the global village in the 1990s (Cárdenas, 2018), has developed an intrinsic indissoluble relation with the concept of mainstream bilingualism. Colombian ELT scholars have questioned the assumption of English language learning as a guarantee of competitiveness in globalization (Bermúdez, & Fandiño, 2012). However, as de Mejía (2006) claims, equating Colombian bilingualism to the learning of English (and later French) as a foreign language, is a reductionist perspective of what the historical ethos of bilingualism in the country really has been like.

Colombian condition as a plurilingual nation, with 68 living languages (64 of which are indigenous peoples'), implies that such rich linguistic diversity cannot be taken out of the equation of what constitutes the discourse of bilingualism of the nation. However, such autochthonous linguistic diversity has been almost surgically detached from the nationhood project by means of an 'abyssal thinking' construction (De Sousa, 2010) of the concept of bilingualism. The binary distinction between 'mainstream bilingualism' (Spanish- English) and 'ethnic bilingualism' (Uribe-Jongbloed, & Anderson, 2014) has resulted in an almost total mutual blindness between the ELT field and the socio- historic ethos of Colombian multilingualism (ethnic bilingualism, was thought as the teaching of Spanish to speakers of indigenous languages, but often indigenous peoples were already bilingual in a second indigenous language).

The invisibilization of the indigenous identity in the ELT field does not only have to do with its lack of quantitative saliency but also, framed within the idea of mainstream bilingualism and ethnic bilingualism as mutually exclusive, emerges out of a logic, a culture, and a structure of the modern world-system which constructs hegemonic traits (Maldonado-Torres, 2017), and re-enacts a coloniality of power, a coloniality of knowledge, and a coloniality of being (Castro-Gómez & Grosfoguel, 2007). The logics of knowledge production and transmission framed within the coloniality invisibilize the divergence (De Sousa, 2010). Epistemologically speaking, there is a distinction between the knowledge that is important for the teleological advance of a country in its paths towards modernity -the knowledge of the ‘humanitas’ (Mignolo, 2013), which is equated to a desired ‘mainstream bilingualism’, for which the Colombian ELT field plays a pivotal role, and the knowledge that is expendable since it is rather useful to safeguard alterities and diverse cultures - the knowledges of the ‘anthropos’ (Mignolo, 2013), which in this case is embodied by the ethnic bilingualism.

The institutional approach towards bilingualism also embodies an epistemic injustice by constructing an abyssal thinking (De Sousa, 2007) between the bilingualism of the *humanitas* and the one of the *anthropos*. On the one hand, there is a strong institutional support for mainstream bilingualism Spanish- English (the *humanitas*’ English additive pursuing the modernity of the country); on the other hand, ethnic bilingualism has institutionally been constructed through a discourse that promotes that the speakers of any indigenous language as their mother tongue add up Spanish to their linguistic capital (the *anthropos* is being expended for the sake of the *humanitas*). Despite the fact that indigenous peoples have historically had an ethos of bilingualism, their experiences are expended in favor of foreign epistemologies of what being bilingual in Colombia should be like from the colonial mindset.

This epistemic injustice (González-Arnal, 2015) permits dialogues between ‘the two bilingualisms’ if grounded on a distorted image based on prejudices that dehumanize individuals, objectify ‘the other’, and question the other’s capability as giver of knowledge. Coloniality explains the construction of the “other” or *anthropos*, who does not exist ontologically, but it is rather a discursive invention in opposition to ‘the *humanitas*’. The *humanitas* has been given the agentive role to construct the *anthropos* as ontologically inferior (Mignolo, 2013). This implies the risk of an epistemic extractivism (Grosfoguel, 2016) by which the agents of the intended mainstream bilingualism resort to the indigenous peoples and their historic *de facto* bilingualism to colonize and subject their knowledge of bilingualism and subject their ideas and practices in favor of the parameters and interests of a western hegemonic epistemology and culture.

Yet, the existence of Colombian English language teachers who identify themselves as indigenous poses a challenge to the existing abyssal thinking (De Sousa, 2007), and might as well be the result of epistemic (dis)obediences (Mignolo, 2013). An



ELT field in which there is space for the border-beings causes dissonance to the cultural horizon that produces market- regulated identities, values, and practices (Giroux, 2005). The border-beings (Dussel, 2013) rebel to their having been classified as underdeveloped economically and mentally. This ‘colonial wound’ (Mignolo, 2009), resulting from the epistemic injustices associated to languages is better understood in the following quote:

What could a person that was not born speaking one of the privileged languages and that was not educated in privileged institutions do? Either he or she accepts his or her inferiority or makes an effort to demonstrate that he or she was a human being equal to those who placed him or her as second class. That is, two of the choices are to accept the humiliation of being inferior to those who decided that you are inferior or to assimilate. And to assimilate means that you accepted your inferiority and resigned to playing the game that is not yours, but that has been imposed upon you – or the third option is border thinking and border epistemology (Mignolo, 2013, p. 134).

Given that the coloniality in the Colombian ELT field has constructed an essentialist grand narrative of Colombian EFL teachers’ identity that condemns Colombian indigenous EFL teachers to ‘the zone of non-being’ (Ndlovu, 2014), there is the need to go deeper than multicultural education in acknowledging that Colombian indigenous EFL teachers are not only likely to contribute to the epistemology from the periphery, but also by being part of the peripheric social formations, they are the ones that give nest to the authentic philosophy of liberation (Restrepo, & Rojas, 2010).

The recognition of their epistemic rights (Mignolo, 2009) and their epistemic privileges as border beings (Dussel, 2013) is fruitful in making evident the alternatives to the grand narratives (Grossfoguel, 2011) of what the Colombian ELT has traditionally been like, and can add potency to the critical decolonial responses that nest multiversalities in the Colombian ELT field. Ultimately, there is a need to admit that peoples, languages, and cultures “have the right to be different precisely because ‘we’ are all equals” (Mignolo, 2000, p. 311).

Approaching the ontology and epistemology of the Colombian ELT field by acknowledging the epistemic and ontological rights and privileges of indigenous EFL teachers is, as Mignolo (2009) would say of the decolonizing knowledges, one of the “...necessary steps for imagining and building democratic, just, and non-imperial/ colonial societies” (p.2). In the pursuit of such a society, it is important to establish an ‘ecology of knowledges’ (De Sousa, 2007) and thus, as Loomba (2000) warns us by criticizing the anti- colonial edge in the understanding of identity, avoid transforming resistance into new forms of oppression. If there is not a genuine attempt towards horizontal dialogue, the risk is that “in the process of exposing the ideological and historical functioning of such binaries, we are in danger of reproducing them” (Loomba, 2000, p. 104).

It implies that in the ELT field, teachers can, as Iedema (2003) puts it, resemiotize their current identities, and recognize themselves as descendants of decolonial practices, establish dialogues between their own indigenous historicities and those of their students and acknowledge how there is still a colonial context in which descendants of indigenous peoples might at times play complicity with the rules and explanations of the dominant culture (Gallegos, 2005), sometimes moving from the “public transcript”, (which they play because of fear of the reactions that their defiance might cause in the surveillance sphere enacted by society at large) to the engagement with transgressive performances, and “hidden transcripts” that diverge from the performance disclosed by and to the ones in power (Scott, 1990). There are interfaces resulting from ‘crossing the borders’ (Giroux, 2005) of what has been established as the norm in education, and finding junctures between mainstream bilingual education and indigenous peoples, ELT field and diverse identities, English (and other mainstream languages; namely, Spanish) and indigenous languages

## **The recognition of indigeneity in the ELT strengthens a pedagogical vindication of the right to be different**

Understanding that the ELT field (and particularly its naturalized binary core-periphery discourses) has been constructed by means of regulatory discourses of what is considered knowledge, science, and research implies that it becomes an academic space of struggle where the local social realities might be likely studied from the point of view of theoretical and analytic structures that have been built by hegemonic social sciences in geopolitical territories that differ from ours (De Sousa, 2006). Despite this, in the ELT there has been an emerging and growing trend toward relativism not only in regards to teaching and learning methodologies, but also in establishing emerging practices, emerging knowledges, and favoring the dissemination of the scientific knowledge of the field. This has made teachers play a more agentive role in the continuum (that looks rather as a path) often as the passive technicians, more recently as the reflective practitioners, and every time closer to becoming transformative intellectuals (Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

The attempt to fit in the positivistic paradigms of imported scientificity, still cause a yearning for objectivity, often resulting in the absence of the voice and the lack of self-representation in the production of knowledge- and of social realities. This is another colonized space that needs to be decolonized, and a progressive path towards the recognition of the self is recently emerging in the ELT field. A space for the acknowledgement that we constitute language and language constitutes us, as an emblem of belonging (Craith, 2012), that there is an identity that poses the being on equal terms with the knowing and the doing. Such space in the ELT field is gaining ground thanks to the conciliation with identity and with difference, and the principles

of the critical, the intercultural and the decolonial approaches to pedagogy (Granados-Beltrán, 2016).

The post-structuralism and the emergence of the critical theories in education have triggered the shift of the focus of attention from the methodology to the questioning of the knowledge and the very epistemologies behind the knowledge choice- be them cultural arbitraries (Bourdieu, 1986), epistemological injustice (González, 2015), and/or epistemic violence (De Sousa, 2010). Individuals in education (both teachers and learners) wrestle within the logic of conventions of the societal deterministic forces to reproduce ourselves abiding by such arbitraries. In doing so, we re-signify the future, but we also re-signify the past –also, as Iedema (2003) puts it, we resemiotize our current identities, based on the retroactivity of performativity (Zizek, 2002).

Language minority students' cultural, cognitive, and linguistic diversity should not be considered just as strengths that are instrumental to the foundation of their learning of English and through English (Carrasquillo & Rodríguez, 2002), but rather such instrumentality, which is present in the scholar discourse, might need to be countered with a more activist role within the decolonial thought. After all, "It is ... an enormous human impoverishment when a language, with all its collective wisdom, beauty, and richness, falls ussilent" (McCarty, Skutnabb-Kangas, & Magga, 2008, p. 298).

The study of the identity of teachers (particularly the study of indigenous teachers' identities) needs an understanding of pedagogy as a social act par excellence, and as such pedagogy cannot be detached from an epistemological positioning in favor of the ecology of knowledges, of teachings, and of languages. The necessary approach towards pedagogy, then, is a highly political one. Pedagogy actors need to bear in mind that in heterogeneous communities the study of language education becomes a study of political struggle (Phillipson 1992). When we deal with languages, there is more than a construct of grammatical structures; there are linguistic hierarchies that need to be mitigated (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1996). There is, also, a mother tongue, whose use as a medium for education is a human right in itself- a 'linguistic human right' (LHR), and it has a paramount role in the generation of a distinct identity and in the right to reproduce that identity (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2001).

Some of the Colombian institutionalized attempts to create bridges between languages and rights by means of education, at times end up giving room to a paradox. While a militant intellectual like Skutnabb-Kangas (2001) coined the LHR (Linguistic human rights) term to propel the protection of minority languages and linguistic diversity worldwide, the Colombian schooling system came up with the concept of 'Derechos Básicos de Aprendizaje de Inglés' (English language basic learning rights) (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2016), which, although does not intend to coincide with the nature LHR, does equate the learning of English into the category of rights, instead of acknowledging the fact that English bilingualism is rather an imposed cultural arbitrary that has permeated the schooling system generating distinctive

asymmetries regarding the idea of being bilingual because of using minority languages or because of mainstream languages. A depth scrutiny shows that those 'basic learning rights' are barely more than a set of descriptors of standards for learners' linguistic competence.

The case mentioned above, which could easily be considered a quintessential example of cognitive extractivism (Grossfoguel, 2016), urges the understanding that the possibility of a linguistic human right approach needs to be embraced as a discourse, but also as a sociocultural practice which should genuinely be given room in the mainstream education institutions in the pursuit of protecting cultural diversity, instead of secluding it under labels that, although politically correct, classify and discriminate. To that respect, the fact of making binary distinctions (like the case of ethnic bilingualism and mainstream bilingualism) through grand narratives can be counterproductive, and fails to recognize a latent reality in which populations that were once considered in opposite sides of the equation are currently *de facto* coinciding in relational spaces of contact.

Therefore, labeling the realities of ethnically and culturally divergent populations as suitable under an umbrella term like 'minority education' would be a mistake, since, as Skutnabb-Kangas (2001) asserts, minority education can become complicit of linguistic genocide by promoting the adoption of the dominant language and forcibly transferring children of the minority group to another group. This subtractive approach to the individuals' mother tongue, causes mental harm to members of the minority group. The standardization of languages and their constructed prestige can be understood as the result of traditional institutionalized education (schooling), which also is creating expected convention on how people should think and what people should think about, mainly based on economic premises aligned with the 'civilized' globalization (De Sousa, 2010). Consequently, the binary ingroup- outgroup ideologies, that also apply to academic contexts, create 'barbarian thinking' or 'border thinking' which is the thinking that is distant from models that were once unselfconsciously and uncritically considered to be universal (Mignolo, 2000).

Education should nurture subjects that 'theorize from the border', who despite being from a different epistemological and geographical location are willing to create bridges with 'civilized theorizing' (Menezes, 2005). Education understood in that way embraces a Bakhtinian (1981) perspective of giving voice to those who "have been precisely subalternized and placed in the margins by the very concept and expansion of European civilization" (Mignolo, 2000, p. 309) and provides spaces for their agency (Bourdieu, 1986). The individuals' constant conflictive role between the deterministic reiteration of the habitus (the social, cultural, and political structures that determine them) can be wielded, formed, or transformed by their agency (Huddy, 2001).

Out of the agonistic trends of power, the agentive drive is a trait that comes already in the essence of the individual, and that it is also through life experiences that one can

fluctuate between the public and the hidden transcripts. However, during the process, the subject can face up experiences of “othering” which might make individuals feel like “impostors” (Bourdieu, 1991). For example, an English language teacher from the periphery (let alone a teacher coming from an indigenous group) might think of himself or herself as an illegitimate speaker of English because of the center- periphery discourses.

However, the contradictions that the subject has to face, are welcome in a critical approach towards the construction of identity. Block (2005), for example documented how personal and professional identity can become a space for convergence and resistance. This hybridity (Papastergiadis, 2000) is thought as the result of constructing identity through negotiation of difference, with space for fissures, gaps and contradictions. Identity is not accumulation of traits but an energy field of different forces. Hybridity is not confined to a cataloguing of difference. “Hybridity is both the assemblage that occurs whenever two or more elements meet, and the initiation of a process of change.” (Papastegiadis, 2000, p. 170). This hybridity also challenges the single-naming in the choice of a microcosm, which should not result in the homogenization of multiple ancient peoples within a reductionist category ‘indigenous peoples’ (Niezen, 2003).

Niezen (2003) claims that globalization has resulted in contestation against the forces of cultural uniformity and against the appropriation of indigenous peoples’ sovereignty by states. States are a threat to indigenous/ancient peoples’ ownership of their lands, and by educating their children in state schools end up suppressing their rights to their languages, and usurping their own systems of justice and conflict resolution. States, even if it is through covert de facto enactment of policies, are imposing a gray uniformity on indigenous’ humanities, cultures, and natural environments.

The indigenous locus of enunciation is at times indissoluble of their knowledge of the land (McCarthy & Zepeda, 1999), and their role as ‘custodians of the land’. “For Indigenous peoples, territories and lands are the basis not only of economic livelihood but also are the source of spiritual, cultural and social identity” (Gilbert, 2010, p. 31). Historically and all throughout the world indigenous cultures are facing land dispossession due to globally economic imperatives (which threatens their politics of location where the land is the space for a sense of socio- economic, cultural and spiritual anchorage). This situation urges for the emergence of both Narrative and Indigenous Approaches to living and learning (Cardinal, & Fenichel, 2017) that intend to co-create curriculum in ways that would make justice to a dialogical pedagogy built upon deep relationality and decolonization.

Indigenous approaches to education differ to westernized epistemologies in that their relationality transcends the human sphere, and views the whole creation as interwoven and interdependent; thus curriculum should also consider the inclusion of animals, plants, the air, the mountains, the directions, etc. The indigenous pedagogies

claim for the appropriation of a locus of enunciation. There is a link to territoriality, a link to the collective spiritual self, a recognition of the collective history and stories. “We carve out and nurture space for students to come into awareness of how their history, living, and relationships informs them as teachers, and we work to weave these ways-of-being with the subject matter of the course in as organic a way as we can (Cardinal & Fenichel, 2017, p. 245).

The historical positioning concede a pivotal role to the intergenerational manifestations of the indigenous cultures, since, as Dixon & Senior (2011) claim, indigenous and narrative foundations embody self-reflective pedagogy that “privileges the co-construction of knowledge and meaning in collaborative environments of mutual respect, attentiveness, reciprocity, and humility. It is also awake to intergenerational connections as well as connections with -and responsibilities to- the broader living world” (p. 247). This intergenerational understanding of the indigenous heritage is vital to fight the vernacularization and self-consciousness resulting of the colonial discourses of the nationhood progress. Insofar as the meaning ascribed to indigeneity is concerned, Menezes (2005) claims that traditionally indigenous peoples have been considered ahistoric, primitive, and in need of protection. From the “border thinking,” or “border theorizing”, however, the search for totalities is to be rejected. Acknowledging the hybridity, the agency, the difference is a step forward towards the de-articulation of the colonial binaries. A step that is necessary towards the understanding of indigenous EFL teachers’ identities as being the materialization of multifaceted concepts of languages, cultures, and learning.

The case of Brazil multilingualism, which is a space for the clashing between local knowledge and expert knowledge (Rajagopalan, 2005), has also witnessed how the indigenous identities can contribute to new epistemologies (Menezes, 2005). The Yube-anaconda myth, claims Menezes (2005), embodies the ethic of “openness to the other” of the Kashinawá peoples of Brazil. The Kashinawá peoples consider the contact with the one who is different as both dangerous and desirable, since it is always transformational. When being in contact with someone totally different the Kashinawá allows himself to transform into that ‘other’, reducing the alterity. Then the Kashinawá returns home and becomes himself again, only that not the same self that departed, since there is with him new power, strength, and knowledge and becomes again himself, just like what happens when an anaconda changes her skin.

The agency of the indigenous English language teacher is also what will dictate hybridity and the dialogue between both ethnic bilingualism and institutionalized mainstream bilingualism, how these bilingualisms converge into multilingualism, and how owning such diversity dialogues with the voice of the unfair historical impositions of ‘one state- one language’, and ‘mainstream bilingualism as a resource’, and the very ‘linguistic human rights’. This agentive role of the subject constitution is what is allowing transformation of social realities. As Giroux (1994) claims: “Dominant

cultural traditions once self-confidently secure in their modernist discourse of progress, universalism and objectivism are now interrogated as ideological beachheads used to police and contain subordinate groups, oppositional discourses, and dissenting social movements” (p. 29).

## Horizons of understanding between the contemporary Colombian ELT and Indigeneity

The identity of Colombian indigenous teachers in the ELT is still utterly unexplored, however, there are horizons of understanding that have started to emerge in the academia in regards to the dialogue between the Colombian ELT field and the Colombian indigeneity. The researchers authoring these studies, even if not always consciously committed to a decolonial thought, have built counter hegemonic discourses by which there is a visibilization and a dialogue between the *humanitas* and the *antropos* (Mignolo, 2013), an understanding that the situate conditions of the knowledges produced by the historically constructed as subaltern gives them an epistemic privilege that counters the colonial hegemonies (Piazzini, 2014). The caution needs to be made to avoid the exoticism or the epistemic extractivism (Grossfoguel, 2016), that could just end up in the construction of politically –correct ways for the epistemic universality. Ultimately, the communal efforts put in these studies claim more for multiversalities in the Colombian ELT, the Colombian academia, and the Colombian society at large.

The visibilization of indigeneity in the Colombian ELT is nested in a certain political positioning, and reclaims the attention to divergence even when cases in which the conflux of an indigenous background and the ELT formation are by far rather the exception than the norm. Despite efforts of scholars to find bridges between the tangible linguistic diversity of a country with 68 living languages and the expected and imagined Spanish- English bilingualism, the field has been permeated by a logic of discriminatory and segregation attitudes (Robayo & Cárdenas, 2017).

Examples of efforts to find a horizon in which linguistic diversity is protected simultaneously to the pursuit of mainstream bilingualism often gather together with the introduction of the term ‘inclusive education’, where the conditions of indigeneity are paired with other particularizing conditions such as deafness (Robayo & Cárdenas, 2017). This term has been used to refer to an existing need in the field of foreign languages in Colombia to implement foreign language policies that do not exclude but intend to allow the inclusion of the languages and cultures constituting the Colombian pluri-linguistic and pluri-cultural reality (de Mejía, 2006). These efforts confront the binary bilingualism since, as de Mejía claims, “Restricting the notion of bilingualism to Spanish/English bilingualism leads to a distorted view of the complex interrelationships between languages, cultures, and identities in the Colombian context” (2006, p. 165).

The fact is that the indigenous identities have been reduced to a supra-ethnic community (involving different ethnically diverse ancestral communities) constituted in opposition with the European- derived identity constructed during colonization and perpetuated by the modern/colonial world system (Maldonado-Torres, 2017). Both identities have been merged within the equally supra-ethnic imagined and homogenizing nation- state community, resulting from the republican government (Anderson & Uribe-Jongbloed, 2015).

This was supposed to be countered by the new Constitution of 1991 that “effectively reversed previous homogenist policies by recognizing both the nation’s inherent multiculturalism and the state’s responsibility to protect this” (Anderson & Uribe-Jongbloed, 2015, p.133). Nonetheless, indigenous languages are severely endangered by the factual language policies of the state- nationhood, and even by their very internal community policies. For example, the loss of indigenous in group identity due to migration, like the Embera family that moving away from their ancestors’ territories, will not be considered to be “indigenous” any longer by their own relatives (Piñeros, Rosselli, & Calderon, 1998); or the Wiva that will no longer be considered as such once they have lost their Damana language (Anderson & Uribe- Jongbloed, 2015).

Anderson & Uribe-Jongbloed (2015) claim that in Colombia the fate of endangered languages is determined by the value ascribed to them. Their understanding that “the whole of humanity is enriched (or impoverished) by the survival (or loss) of its languages and culture” (Anderson & Uribe-Jongbloed, 2014, p. 137) takes them to advocate for a closer collaboration between all the actors. It is worth highlighting their call for a collaborative responsibility from mainstream communities towards strengthening endangered languages through policies and practices that make minority individuals more visible in education. Also Robayo & Cárdenas (2017) look forward to generating more interest in scholars towards examining language policies and working further to eradicate inequalities in education.

A study that showed the potential of negotiating meaning between two approaches to language policies and bilingualism, which is what Colombian scholars seem to be requesting for, was the one conducted by Escobar & Gómez (2010). This study showed how identity is constructed through a common history, their sociocultural traits and their language (Nasayuwe). This latter is prioritized sometimes even over ethnicity (there are descendants of European and Nasa people who, because of their language are Nasa, despite their ethnic diversity).

The Nasa participants also voiced their perception of how power structures hierarchized languages; Spanish being the one with the written code and the prestige, Nasayuwe being the one marginalized from institutional practices, such as schooling. Escobar & Gómez’s (2010) study also sheds light on how principles of the Nasayuwe – Spanish bilingualism of their community has been linked to a historical, religious, or emotional background and a sense of supra ethnic nationhood belonging. These



elements, which seem to be constitutive of a natural ethos, appear to be rather absent in the implementation of an institutionalized mainstream (Spanish- English) bilingualism, as it is pursued by the educational policies.

## Teaching English in indigenous communities

Cuasialpud Canchala (2010), who holds a B. Ed. degree as EFL teacher and comes from an indigenous community in Nariño, conducted a study about indigenous students' attitudes towards the learning of English by means of a virtual program. She identified three main problematic social conditions for English language indigenous students. First, the Colombian education system does not offer coverage for the whole indigenous peoples. Second, indigenous peoples' school background is precarious. They have gone through a primary and secondary education of low quality, with few human and material resources. Third, indigenous students have to face multilingualism rather than bilingualism, which is rather disregarded as a crucial learning factor by educational institutions.

Jaraba & Carrascal (2012) conducted an ethnographic study at an indigenous school in which the identity of indigenous students was at the core. The ethnographic study showed the importance of arrow cane weaving as the cohesive element of the indigenous community, and central to the teaching and learning traditions of the in group members of the community. With such initial findings, they carried out a pedagogical implementation- ethnoenglish- which acknowledges and strengthens the students' linguistic, cognitive and cultural identitarian traits.

Their study managed to integrate the learning of English (and even some standard Spanish) by resorting to the cultural knowledges of the Zenus. Consequently, there were some meaningful pedagogical and communicative processes that were built upon the discourse and interaction patterns related to the weaving craftsmanship process and on the belief that by weaving their handgrafts (like *vueltaio* hat) they are actually weaving their ingroup social bonds and weaving the survival of the Zenu peoples.

More recently, Usma, Ortiz, & Gutierrez (2018) have documented how indigenous students of different majors at Universidad de Antioquia face the challenges of a language policy of the university that requires them to take and approve a number of courses in English as a graduation requirement. The study, which includes very complete demographic descriptions, participants' narratives on their challenges, their appreciation of the policy, and their suggestions and feedback towards improving the practices of the policy, also shows some staggering circumstances. Among them, there is a significant trend towards indigenous language loss (only 10.7 % of the 241 indigenous students had an indigenous language as their mother tongue, and 67.9% had Spanish as their mother tongue); besides, there is a positive view towards the learning

of English, despite their insistence that other languages (including both ancestral and foreign) should be considered as valid alternatives to certify their graduation language requirement.

## **Pluricultural approaches from the academia**

Arismendi (2016), a Colombian scholar with a background in EFL and teacher education, has advocated for a vision of interculturality that acknowledges first the own cultural diversity. In gathering a theoretical ground for his approach, he has identified the need for the development of competences within a 'meta-competence' (borrowing Montagne- Macaire's term) that aims at the understanding of plurilingualism, and pluriculturalism. Such approach considers attitudes, knowledges, and aptitudes towards linguistic diversity as pivotal for the preservation of cultural diversity.

Arismendi (2016) is aware that his theoretical borrowings result from what has been documented in regards to the diversity of mainstream Europeizing languages, but he finds it valuable to advocate for an intercultural metacompetence that raises student teachers' awareness on the Colombian intrinsic plurilingualism. His research has resulted in the creation of a course called 'Introduction to plurilingualism' in the undergraduate foreign language teacher program at Universidad de Antioquia, Medellín, Colombia. His course has resulted in a shift of student teachers' discourse from bilingualism to plurilingualism, an attitude of awareness of Colombian plurilingualism (positive acceptance) and knowledges about the importance of autochthonous languages as a human heritage that needs to be protected and treasured.

Still, from time to time in the context of an Education programs linguistic diversity is treated as having different levels of proficiency, as it is the case with Vanegas, Fernández, González, Jaramillo, Muñoz, & Ríos (2015) who have identified how the idea of idealized speaker/ language user generates inclusion and exclusion in the learning practices of prospective EFL teachers, invisibilizing the speakers whose language production distance from the idealized one.

## **A concluding remark**

The study of identity in education builds its epistemological foundations on critical theories, but also there needs to be a space for considering giving voice to studies on the identities of indigenous English language teachers by resorting to a sociology of absences and an ecology of knowledges. Such perspectives will bridge the 'border theorizing' with the existing 'civilizing theories', thus creating spaces for dialogic construction of knowledge. The generation of a voice coming from indigenous teachers in the Colombian ELT regarding their identity will not just be novel in

terms of knowledge production, but might eventually reveal an agentive role in these teachers that is so far invisibilized. The dialogue is not just representation, but is also constitution; which is why new realities might emerge out of agency.

The production of local knowledge about aspects that are tangentially related can be synthesized together by generating efforts of dialogue between the scholars whose expertise has taken them to specializations and soloist paths. It is through reading local scholars' work that new networks need to be created, so that there are spaces for encountering the other, and constructing shared knowledge.

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