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Conspiring to decolonise language teaching and learning: reflections and reactions from a reading group

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Abstract

Within the spirit of conspiration, this article brings together contributions from participants of the PhD-led UCL Reading and React Group 'Colonialism(s), Neoliberalism(s) and Language Teaching and Learning', which ran in 2019/20. Weaving together various perspectives, the article centres on the dialogic nature of the decolonial enterprise and challenges the colonial concept of monologic authorial voice. Across the reflections on participants' own engagements with questions of decolonising language teaching and learning, we pull together three threads: the inherent coloniality of the concepts that shape the very disciplines we seek to decolonise; the need to place

decolonial efforts within broader contexts and to be sceptical of projects claiming to have completed the work of decolonising language teaching and learning; and the affordances and limitations offered to us by our positionalities, which the reflexivity of the conspirational encounter has allowed us to explore in some depth. The article closes with a reflection on the process of writing this article, and with the assertion that decolonising the curriculum is a multifaceted and open-ended process of dialogue and conspiration between practitioners and researchers alike.

Keywords decolonising; language teaching; ELT; conspiration; reflexivity; neoliberalism; positionality

Introduction

Drawing on Alison Phipps's (2019: 8) notion of 'conspiration', this article is an attempt to weave together the different perspectives, experiences and research of six participants from the PhD-led UCL Reading and React Group 'Colonialism(s), Neoliberalism(s) and Language Teaching and Learning', which ran in 2019/20, to make a wider comment about the nature of decolonial efforts in scholarship. This conspirational work is undergirded by a dialogical, polyphonic, pluriversal approach that we adopt throughout the article. Through this, we seek to emphasise at once the collaborative nature of knowledge production, as well as the inherently subjective standpoints from which we speak. In practice, we have attempted to signpost this through the different narratives woven throughout the piece: we open and close the piece with co-authored framing texts developed collaboratively through both the reading group and the editing process. Between these sections, we present individual contributions ('Reflections'), linked by commentary sections (in *italics*) written by the two first authors as a means to contextualise and reconcile the group's reflections. In this vein, and by way of introduction, we begin with a short vignette from the reading group.

> *There was an uneasy silence. We looked down, flicking through this week's article or busied ourselves making notes. Throughout our conversation, we had, as usual, oscillated between righteous excitement, impassioned arguments and unsettling realisations, with long stretches of discussion interspersed with moments of stilted discomfort as we attempted to balance the interactional dynamics between those present in the room, and those joining online due to childcare duties. This discomfort was exacerbated by the feeling of being watched. We had been forced to hold the reading group in one of the library study rooms, a glass box in one of the busiest places on campus: with our PhD status it was near impossible to book a classroom. Our discussions about colonialisms, neoliberalisms and language teaching and learning were taking place in a display cabinet, and what were we displaying? An uncomfortable silence.*
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> *This silence was, however, gracious, it was saving us from the awkwardness that arose from confronting our roles in the structures and systems we were there to discuss, and from the tensions inherent in the different and sometimes contradictory ways we approached these. It provided an alternative to the messiness of attempting cohesion and coherence in a group of researchers at various stages of their careers, with different personal, educational and professional histories. We were here on a shared mission: to consider ways in which language teaching and learning is enmeshed with the logics of capital and colonisation; what became clear, however, was our disagreement as to how to reflect on, and put into practice, a decolonisation of the language curriculum. But the messiness and the (shared) discomfort, it would turn out, was precisely what needed to be at the centre of our work.*

Conspiration

This article is inherently polyphonic. Its driving force is a series of reflections generated by participants of a reading group who came together, with others, to respond to the increasingly urgent call from within

our various language teaching contexts to decolonise our practices. In answering this call, we have, from the outset, attempted to conspire, to work together as a group of language educators and researchers of language education to reflect on what it means to decolonise language teaching and learning. At the same time, we are keenly aware of a rising decolonial 'trend' – what Moosavi (2020) calls the 'decolonial bandwagon' – which frequently fails to live up to its promises (Todd, 2016), and which, at times, serves to advance individual scholars' careers (Cusicanqui, 2019). Much like Tuck and Yang (2012), we agree that decolonisation is not a metaphor, but we simultaneously hold, along with Gopal (2021), that this does not mean that we need to abandon scholarly conversations on discursive or epistemic decoloniality, and that the university remains an important space for anti-colonial thinking. This article is our contribution to the conversation.

Through the article's structure, we engage in dialogic conspiration (Phipps, 2019) as an attempted anti-colonial practice of knowledge exchange and production, which centres on Mbembe's (2015: 14) notion of pluriversality, or 'openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions' as a means to embrace epistemic diversity and address epistemic injustice (Anderson, 2012; Walker, 2020). Our dialogic conspiration, which shaped our reading group and which we re-enact here through the structure of the article, is thus an attempt to put this into practice – to speak with many voices. We frame the dialogic, conspirational method employed throughout the text (including, as we explain later, the various drafts and rewritings) as an anti-colonial practice, that is, practice which 'invokes a critical and radical spirit of enquiry and action, rather than a singular state to be feasibly arrived at within the modest – and inevitably compromised – parameters of the university' (Gopal, 2021: 889).

We rely on the methodology of conspiration, on the one hand, to challenge the Western, colonial concept of the monologic authorial voice and, on the other hand, to open an important space for encounter between multiple positionalities, recognising that the very meaning of 'decolonisation' is dynamic and 'involves a multitude of definitions, interpretations, aims and strategies' (Bhambra et al., 2018: 2).

Despite leaning into polyphony, we find ourselves necessarily constrained by the generic expectations of the academic article; we are forced to be recognisable and, of course, we want to be understood. As such, the reflections below are curated and commented by Peter and Katy as the Reading Group conveners – a process which was not without its own challenges and discomfort (see the final section). The comments emerge from our joint reading of the contributions, as well as the provocations and challenges that they threw up for us, and they serve to guide the reader to three key threads that emerged in our thinking in light of our conspiration: (1) the question of knowledge production and the coloniality of concepts that shape the very disciplines we are trying to decolonise; (2) the enmeshment of coloniality within broader structures which co-articulate with, subsume or reinforce the structures of colonialism; (3) the unavoidable reflexivity of the conspirational encounter. This final thread runs throughout each reflection, opening up questions such as: What are our roles in decolonising language teaching and learning? What concepts do we take for granted? How can we leverage our positionality strategically? What risks can we (or are we willing to) take? Where do we fall short?

Reflections

Rowena: A decolonial analysis of the systems of higher education and knowledge production looks not merely at how the university perpetuates colonial epistemic asymmetries, but rather, at how the university itself is central to structures of coloniality that dominate people. To paraphrase Audre Lorde (1984): Is it possible to dismantle the master's house (coloniality), if the tools at our disposal are the master's tools (the Westernised university and its practices)?

One of these tools is English. In our group, we reflected on how the language has been a tool of continuing coloniality. As a London-based academic, English is the linguistic tool of my trade. The academic English I use is a form of Philippine English that positions me in a specific social class among Filipinos, and that shapes my relationships with others (Tupas, 2019). The reading group made me wonder how my use of English as my main language of teaching and research makes me complicit in its coloniality.

The contours of this dilemma have been described before. Walter Mignolo (2009: 166) uses the linguistic dilemma to reflect on global epistemic asymmetries:

> You can of course do sociology in Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, Mandarin, Bengali, Akan, etc. But doing it in those languages will put you at a disadvantage in relation to mainstream disciplinary debates … Granted, doing sociology in French, German or English will also be 'local sociology'. The difference is that you have a better chance of being read by scholars in any of the above mentioned languages, but the inverse will not hold.

Mignolo's (2009) solution to this bind is what he calls the 'decolonial option'. The precondition for this is what Aníbal Quijano (2007: 177) refers to as 'desprendimiento', which Mignolo translates as 'de-linking', that is, 'to extricate oneself from the linkages between rationality/modernity and coloniality, first of all, and definitely from all power which is not constituted by free decisions made by free people'. Although Marxist writers have similarly called for the disentanglement from hegemonic political and economic systems, Mignolo (2009: 178) emphasises that de-linking also requires epistemic disobedience, a refusal to accept the hegemonies of the 'web of imperial knowledge'.

De-linking makes it possible to shift 'the geography of reason' by subsuming its tools into non-Western (for example, Indigenous) ways of thinking and being (Mignolo, 2009: 172). For Mignolo, the ultimate aim of the decolonial option is not the decolonisation of any structure per se; its goal is not to decolonise sociology for its own sake. As he puts it: 'Why would you want to save capitalism' – or any other 'abstract entity' – 'and not save human beings?' (Mignolo, 2009: 178). Rather, the decolonial option is primarily about humans: it aims to end the domination of human lives by coloniality.

What might the decolonial option be in terms of my academic language practice? Seriously rising to the challenge of de-linking would demand that I weigh the value of the languages I use according to their capacity to liberate humans from colonising structures. It would mean letting go of my own attachment to the 'web of imperial knowledge', including the power afforded me within this web by my use of English. This does not mean that I need to forego its use, but I must value it only insofar as it allows for decoloniality. I must be willing then to take up tools other than the master's. In my case, I have at my linguistic disposal Tagalog, the other language that I speak.

These reflections made me think about how bilingual academic practice might itself be decolonial praxis. These questions remain: How can academic practices in English be paths towards decoloniality? At kailan mas akma ang paggamit ng sarili kong wika? (And when is it more suitable to use my own language?)

> *Rowena's reflection challenged us to turn our focus to the place(s) from which we are attempting to do decolonial work; to the structures that we attempt to speak back to, but in which we are also rooted. By laying bare her own complicity in colonial structures through proximity to English, she raises uncomfortable (yet crucial) questions for us about repurposing colonial machinery for decolonial efforts. In particular, she prompted us to question our own positioning within the system. Her focus on bilingual practice as a decolonial endeavour, furthermore, lays the foundations for further questions that problematise this approach: What are the consequences of the proposed bilingual practice, and for whom? Is the mobilisation of marginalised and minoritised languages sufficient? Is the framing of languages themselves as distinct, self-contained wholes not in itself built on colonial language ideologies? (Heller and McElhinny, 2017)*

> *Rowena's invitation to critically reflect on the pervasiveness of colonial categories, and our proximity to them within our system of knowledge production, is taken up by Tania, who emphasises not only where knowledge emerges from, but also where this knowledge is enacted – the classroom.*

Tania: Disentangling the entrenched legacy of colonialism from language teaching requires a dissection of the systems responsible for global language hierarchies and a remodelling of the institutions that maintain them. Having worked as an ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) literacies teacher with adults in London for several years, I have grappled with how far I inadvertently perpetuate the dominant status of English and one particular literacy practice. Although a cognisance of the central role of print in these adults' lives in the London context has sustained my motivation, the colonial underpinnings of such a pedagogical situation has been of constant concern. It has been through upholding 'the local and the global as symbiotic and reciprocal rather than unidirectional' (Auerbach, 2014: 18) that I have come to understand what a decolonised language curriculum could mean in

practice. Nonetheless, my own positionality – equipped with the dominant language that these systems propagate and value – automatically restricts my view. Yet it is this same positionality that the system sets up as indispensable in order to be heard. Focusing my research on understanding the learning strategies and lived experiences of adult refugees from oral societies, I have witnessed a system that positions highly knowledgeable, multilingual, experienced adults as 'beginner learners': a conscious waste of knowledge that extends to the context of their children's schools. I was inspired to join the decolonial reading group to gain deeper insight into the forces behind this situation, and to unravel the colonial structures pervading all strands of formal education.

The colonially constructed notion of so-called 'home languages', and the deliberate exclusion of these languages from formal written discourse (Wa Thiong'o, 1986), persists in schools throughout the world. This same linguistic marginalisation follows people across borders, becoming a normalised and unquestioned reality. For many refugee families arriving in English-speaking countries, English is showcased as the route to opportunity (Pöyhönen et al., 2018), which can lead it to be viewed as a panacea (Warriner, 2007) by adult students, particularly when packaged as synonymous with helping one's child to progress. Conversely, within a decolonised, multilingual curriculum, all linguistic knowledge is highly valued and plays an integral role in enriching every subject learned at school. English simply contributes to a web of interconnected experience, thus parental multilingualism becomes a valuable resource for schools (Edwards, 2009). As much for the dominant language speaker as for the newly arrived child, it is about exploring 'how to position oneself in a multilingual society in which multiple languages and cultures intersect' (Capstick, 2021: 128). Each family's linguistic repertoire tells their story of globalisation (Blommaert, 2010), yet in many cases acceptance depends on a gradual assimilation into a school culture of sameness. Entrenched colonial thinking means that the system intentionally distorts the usefulness of people's existing linguistic knowledge, so that monolingual proficiency in English overrides plurilingual expertise (Flores, 2013). Decolonising the language curriculum does not mean ignoring people's needs or aspirations, but reframing students' linguistic knowledge as a critical learning resource (Mallows, 2012). It necessitates a reconceptualisation of what successful language usage means (García and Wei, 2014) at all levels of formal education. Schools then learn from children and their parents the concept of linguistic fluidity (Makoni and Pennycook, 2007), and how this can be used in the classroom (Canagarajah, 2013) to enrich learning for all. Transforming what language learning does in terms of reinforcing particular narratives, a decolonised approach centres itself on inspiring criticality. The relationship between power, words and inequalities (Luke, 2018) lays the foundations for learning. This includes stimulating an appreciation of the distinct varieties of languages spoken across the world, and the identities that these express (Phipps and Gonzales, 2004). It is not solely a question of which languages schools decide to teach; it is about exploring linguistic interactions throughout history, relating these to students' own linguistic repertoires, and using language teaching as a starting point for interdisciplinary, intercultural exploration. Language teaching has a duty to track and scrutinise its influence on the injustices of the present day. For then, the knowledges held by refugee families become a hub of extensive wisdom, and the stories woven within the systems finally get a chance to be told.

> *What appears most saliently for us here is the double bind that often emerges for those in positions of power who are invested in decolonial pursuits: that of recognising complicity, but equally acknowledging this as a means of 'being heard'. We – as curators – share the tangible discomfort expressed by Tania, particularly as she asks how (and if) this proximity to power can be leveraged for decolonial efforts. However, Tania's discussion of the mobilisation of certain forms of knowledge also forces us to consider a more cautious approach, one which understands the need to unpack just how deeply colonial structures of knowing, of recognising, of meaning making, are entrenched in the conceptual frameworks of our disciplines.*
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> *Eleanor, too, offers us a critical assessment of her own positionality, pushing us to further complexify our understandings of the enmeshment of colonial logics in English language teaching (ELT). We note here how Eleanor's contribution diverges from the cautious optimism alluded to by Tania, as she confronts the material challenges encountered in her trajectory.*

Eleanor: The reading group has gathered people who are exploring different educational and cultural settings. It is interesting to see how decolonising pedagogical conventions varies from context to context. Members agreed on the importance of taking history and political economy into account for making sense of current post/de-colonial practices. We provided contextual overviews of various histories and social conditions imperative for decolonial critiques of language teaching and learning.

I was inspired by the narratives, ideas and emotions shared in the group, while also telling my story as a part-time English teacher in an international school for Chinese students who want to pursue high marks in English language tests designed in the USA and UK (TOFEL, IELTS and so on) to study overseas. The ELT market in China always prefers native speakers from inner circle (Kachru, 1985), or those with Western living and education experience. Although education practitioners emphasise that the key criterion of being language teachers should be professional merits of teaching, rather than nationality or race, White native speakers are considered to have a privileged right to interpret and produce knowledge, due to 'identity-based epistemic injustice' (Anderson, 2012: 167), not to mention that the merit logic in the modern education system stems from the specific intellectual heritage bound up with colonialism, patriarchy and race.

Some of us conduct research on what counts as 'good English' in different sociocultural contexts. Weeks of discussion developed my interest in English teaching and learning as an institutional construct in China related to post-colonialism and capitalism. It is not only about the supremacy of standard (American/British) English, but also about the promotion of American/British norms to be legitimate and qualified English speakers. Although we sought alternative imaginings, there is no denying that systemic forms of exclusion are entrenched.

Different from other members' research sites, mainland China has never been dominated by any colonising power entirely. Although some cities were under the temporary control of Europe after the Opium Wars, such penetration aimed at the forcible opening of local markets, rather than political transition and cultural invasion. Mandarin remains the sole official language, which makes dialogues about post-colonialism and linguistic imperialism rarely visible in China. All the tensions are explained as neoliberal struggle to further embrace internationality, and a promising future in the globalised world. An important moment was when my Chinese student told me: 'I am not interested in whether Chinglish is legitimate. I just want to go where you are, London.' I realised that the issue got complicated when thinking of my own ideological positionings (Heller and McElhinny, 2017). As others shared their sense of unease in fieldwork, reflecting on Britishness, Whiteness and native-speakerness, I, raised in an Asian elite family and trained in Western education and culture, also functioned in a colonial mindset. I presented an 'Englishised' elite persona, while asking my students to de-Westernise themselves. It feels inappropriate for me to offer 'de-colonisation' to an English class where people are trying to get closer to the West, where I am standing. I serve as a neoliberal example of learning English, entering top Western universities to brand myself as someone who is well educated and open-minded. However, decolonising the curriculum means getting off such educational trajectories. I started to understand why Katy felt anxious to justify her engagement with the less privileged Indian students, and why Peter discussed ideological lacunae from his positionality. The group shows that I am not reflecting and struggling alone about whether my 'position' leads to limitations of creating possibility. Collective actions continue our way through the complexities inherent in knowledge production and reproduction.

Decolonisation should not be over-simplified as the answer, the panacea for exclusion. Rather, it is a method to understand the ongoing complexity and power dynamic which stabilise hierarchies and inequalities. The problems do not merely lie with decolonising the language curriculum, nor including more non-native speakers as English teachers, but with realising that we may be complicit with the making and breaking of 'post-colonialism'.

Eleanor's contribution challenged us to consider both the ideological and material battles that are embedded within discussions of decolonising language teaching, and to grapple with the possibility that, in some contexts, the decolonial approach does not always appear liberating. While the history of colonialism in China is somewhat different to the spaces explored in the other contributions, Eleanor's reflection has allowed us to track the continuation of colonial logics through ELT. We were struck by the hesitancy of Eleanor and her students over the consequences and uptake of a 'celebratory' multilingualism as a 'quick fix' to the colonial dominance of English. While Eleanor argues that the neoliberal discourse of meritocracy masks deeply rooted systems of inequality, she also warns that this discourse is extremely hard to counter. As a teacher in the classroom, attempting to reckon with such a situation can be overwhelmingly daunting; one can feel impossibly, hopelessly stuck.

Taken together, these first contributions have provided insights – sometimes complementary, sometimes diverging – into our reflections on decolonising our practice, showing how such attempts are always rooted in, and speak from, specific institutional positions with

specific regimes of knowledge and epistemic frameworks, with different affordances and accompanying limitations. We speak/see/hear, too, from our own trajectories, and who we are in these spaces allows us to see/do certain things.

In the second grouping, contributors bring into the dialogue the tools to think through the inextricability of structures of coloniality from those of capitalism, neoliberalism and other colonialisms, and to explore how, through these matrices, it finds newer forms.

Peter: Since the publication of an influential article, 'Professional development of EFL teachers in Colombia: Between colonial and local practices' (Moncada, 2007), there has been a strong decolonial thread running through English-language teaching practice in Colombia, a place where I worked as a teacher and shaped my own pedagogical principles.

Inspired by the work of critical applied linguistics scholars, much of the decolonial push in ELT in Colombia is rooted in an understanding of the world as organised around a colonial centre and a colonised periphery. In the context of ELT, this coarticulates with dominant theories of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992) and the 'circles of English' (Kachru, 1985), which see the spread of English as mapping on to the same colonial structures of centre (countries in which English is considered a 'native' language) and periphery (countries in which English is considered a 'second' and 'foreign' language).

As the title of Adriana González Moncada's (2007) article suggests, her critique, and the push towards decolonising ELT in this context, is targeted not only towards the *content* of the curriculum (native/non-native varieties of English), but also towards *practice.* I came to understand the importance of the concept of practice in the decolonial endeavour in Colombian ELT as following Kumaravadivelu's (2006, 2008) destabilisation of the (colonial) binary between ELT theory and practice: theory produced in the global centre being implemented and 'put into practice' in the periphery. By collapsing the epistemological into the praxeological, scholars and practitioners become one, and the work of decolonising English-language teaching and learning becomes a collaborative process developed in situ to respond to specific, localised instantiations of coloniality. (The Universidad de Antioquia has, in fact, developed a teacher education programme called 'in situ' which is worthwhile exploring for concrete examples of how this work can be done; see Caicedo Obando, n.d.) This purposeful collapse disrupts the power dynamic between centre and periphery, and means there is no possibility of a theoretically driven 'one size fits all' approach, but rather an acknowledgement of the importance of localised practice as a site of knowledge production and transformative potentiality.

In terms of the ELT curriculum, colonialism is perceived to exert its power most evidently in the assumed imposition of native English-speaking varieties of English and Western methodologies – 'I am a native English speaker, what's my role in all of this?' was a question I often struggled with in this space. In Colombia, I was understood variously as the colonist (for example, in a seminar discussing the Kumaravadivelu (2016) text 'The decolonial option in English teaching: Can the subaltern act?', an event led by the author; as the only person perceived as a native English speaker, I felt the full discomfort of the criticisms levelled against 'native-speaking, foreign teachers'), and as an ally, a so-called 'indigenous foreigner' (Usma Wiches, 2015: 49–50) who had aligned themselves with a decolonial enterprise. (I'm thinking here of a conference where the presenter, who knew I shared her 'critical pedagogic principles', in a tirade against native English-speaking teachers, broke script to clarify, 'Not you Peter, you're different.') I don't claim to deserve, nor do I reject, either of these positions – that's not the point – but rather, I bring these moments to begin to interrogate the role I am able to play in decolonising the curriculum, from my own assumed and ascribed positionality. I bring these moments to reflect on something that the reading group helped me grapple with: the benefits that I accrued by embodying a specific critical/decolonial approach to ELT. Beyond being publicly named as 'an exception' by an influential academic, which garnered me considerable social capital, I also believe that my commitment to critical/decolonial approaches to teaching English contributed to my securing a good job, which, of course, came with economic capital (I discuss the benefits of this critical approach in more depth in Browning, 2020). By becoming an 'ally' to a specific cause, from true conviction, it allowed me also to be understood in particular, positive ways, and to gain professional recognition; in this respect, specific forms of decolonial practice in ELT in Colombia can be considered to have themselves taken on a hegemonic role, and their adoption –at least by specific people– comes with significant institutional prestige.

In Peter's reflection, the recurrence of the 'native speaker', as in Eleanor's contribution, prompted us to reflect on this category in our consideration of colonial forms of knowledge

about language use. This is particularly salient in Peter's case, given how he himself is recognised in these spaces as belonging to such categorisation. Much like in Tania's piece, we are again forced to confront a tension – one that Peter has had to negotiate through his own classroom praxis – between a recognition of the self rooted in colonial categories of language, and an explicit attempt to leverage this 'authority' for decolonial purposes. Peter's contribution points to how, in certain ELT spaces, the enactment and embodiment of the 'decolonial teacher' has become something of a profitable pedagogical script (akin to the critical pedagogic register explored by Soto and Pérez-Milans, 2018). This pushes us to be alert to how the decolonial enterprise can be co-opted, and to be vigilant in our recognition and implementation of practice in the classroom. As Peter suggests, to avoid superficial practices in the name of decoloniality, we must begin first of all with a radical undoing of the binaries between colonial categories of recognition, between native and non-native and, what is most relevant – and indeed most challenging – for this article, between theory and practice.

Echoing Peter's cautious approach to our own decolonial practice in the classroom, and speaking with a certain discomfort over the colonial dynamics between herself and her participants, Katy's contribution urges us to be careful with what appears on a surface level to be 'decolonial' practice, further highlighting the material and symbolic consequences of our refusal to acknowledge the ever-shifting and dynamic, new forms of colonialism that consistently emerge as they interact with other, connected forms of oppression and marginalisation.

Katy: During my time working as a (White, British) teacher in an international school in Gujarat, India, I encouraged my students to stake their claim to English, to see themselves as legitimate speakers of a language that was their own, without bending to the expectations of nebulous British or American 'standards'. I was not alone in this – over the past two decades, it has become increasingly more common to see the inclusion of local varieties in curricula across the world that acknowledge the validity of 'Global Englishes'. While I still welcome this inclusion, I am nonetheless concerned with what is obscured by celeb- ratory discourses of an emancipated English, and how this 'has helped pave the way for the de-linking of the past from the present' (Tupas and Rubdy, 2015). More pressingly, I am concerned with how they overlook how the continued coloniality of English (and English teaching) is embedded within webs of interlocking logics, forces and structures – capitalism, neoliberalism, class, caste, gender – that play out in individual speakers' lives. This is not a case of privileging class over questions of race or colonialism – it is about understanding that these are not *lived* as separate experiences, nor are they historically separable, and thus they must not be addressed analytically as such.

For my PhD, I spent several months with students in an English-teaching non-governmental organisation (NGO) in Delhi, India, who had enrolled in the hopes of seeking out a more stable future. They had all been educated in government (state) schools, which many of them blamed for what they understood to be their 'poor' English skills. Many came from one particular agrarian caste which is often portrayed as uneducated, unintelligent and thuggish: as Mohit, a 21-year-old student relayed to me, 'they think [we are] backward ... they think cheap, they don't know how can we speak [English], how can we survive or how can we be educated, like not gentlemen'. For Mohit, much as for other students and teachers, speaking 'Indian English', or engaging in translingual practices (for example, so-called 'Hinglish') was *not* an option. Conscious of their stigmatisation in Indian society, they understood that the stakes were much too high – much higher than for the children from the private school in Gujarat, whose confidence to engage in fluid language practices without risking unwanted social or material consequences (Kubota, 2015) was bolstered by their self-assured competency in the language, as well as by their socio-economic status and resources. Conversely, in the NGO, students and teachers alike strove at all times to 'rid' themselves of certain 'errors' or indexically loaded ways of speaking (for example, pronunciations that suggest vernacular-medium education, see Ramanathan, 2015), fuelled as they were by a tacit recognition of neoliberal logics that promise social mobility to marginalised students through 'good' English and hard work (Highet and Del Percio, 2021).

This raises critical questions about the role of practitioners and researchers in the classroom. There is an inherent tension between imagining alternative, future, decolonised worlds and action in the here-and-now that seeks to make things slightly better *within* systems of oppression and extraction. These students are highly aware of the (problematic) strategies that they need to employ if they are to have any hope of securing a stable future for themselves. Some demonstrate a deep desire for English;

others are more reticent, but nonetheless acknowledge that, while English is certainly not a guarantee of employment, not speaking English – or speaking a type of English that has been delegitimised – is likely to prove itself to be a huge (extra) burden for them. By encouraging those whose speech practices are marginalised to embrace their language without a deeper understanding of their material and discursive conditions, we risk silencing their legitimate fears and epistemologically invalidating their lived experience, and privileging a politics of recognition at the expense of redistribution (Fraser, 1995). If we are to really delve beneath the superficies of coloniality, then we must begin by asking how students such as these continue to be marginalised in multiple, interconnected ways, as well as by whom, by what, and with what effects. This does not mean that we should stop our attempts to legitimise marginalised language practices: rather, it encourages us to acknowledge and grapple with the tension that emerges from holding contradictory goals.

> *Katy's contribution demonstrates how the celebration of global Englishes in the ELT classroom invisibilises the neoliberalisation and commodification of English, as well as continued structural inequality. We are thus urged to consider how a decolonial approach to ELT must necessarily, simultaneously, be an approach that seeks also to interrogate other, co-articulating structures that are weaved from, within and alongside coloniality. Aligning with Peter's argument, Katy's contribution is a reminder to those of us who teach languages to be vigilant about how our own enterprise is capable of reproducing the very structures it claims to undo. If we understand the colonial system to be a producer of knowledge and categories, then we also need to ask ourselves difficult questions about what it means when our 'decolonial' knowledge becomes validated by the institution, and to consider whether institutional validation is our aim, or if this is a sign that the project has failed.*
>
> *In the final reflection, in dialogue with a thread that has emerged throughout the texts, Andrea pushes us to recognise the shifting dynamics of coloniality and the inherent complexity of the decolonial project by drawing our attention to a site in which the multiple histories of colonialism are embedded within newer (but connected) forces of neoliberalism.*

Andrea: In my research, I frequently think about how families often make life and education choices based on discourses of self-capitalisation and distinction, which seem to be rationalised by neoliberal logics of self-governmentality, in Foucauldian terms. My research settings are internationalised spaces of education, and I have often overlooked internationalisation as a form of late-modern, cultural colonialism in my analyses of globalising forces in education. I joined the reading group hoping to find a space that would help me to think about the links between language (especially English), neoliberalism and colonialism, with people whose research contexts are more overtly traversed by these analytical frameworks.

The readings and group reflections, especially the session on eliteness and post-colonialism, brought up thoughts on the ways in which relationships of power and forms of cultural domination are articulated in contexts such as the internationalising schools in which I conducted fieldwork, in Catalonia – a nation with a long history of aspirations of independence located in the north east of Spain. The flourishing of international schools coincided with a moment in time when friction around languages of instruction appeared among certain sectors of the population, who felt that there was not enough Spanish – or too much Catalan – in the curriculum. These tensions were inserted in a broader context of political and social turmoil, which was partly stirred by the post-2008 economic depression, which had already exposed elite schools to the risk of losing their clientele.

Language was the terrain in which the battle for families was fought by schools – a site for conflict and struggle. In this internationalising space, language served to negotiate and establish new discursive regimes – moving from national to international identities. It was the space for taking control over and substituting specific representations of reality, and for the exercise of social power. The reifying discourses on internationalisation, which materialised in trilingual language policies that added English as a medium of instruction alongside Catalan and Spanish, allowed schools to decentre the conflict around the local languages. Dissident voices within the school identified the 'dangers', mobilising discourses of linguistic conflict that are often circulated, of juxtaposing yet another dominant language with Catalan. Some participants complained that with internationality had come a devaluation of the Catalan identity, while others thought that the school had remained a Catalan space – now in disguise. The role of Spanish and Catalan was debated, and opinions were often at odds. The glories of teaching

part of the curriculum in English, however, were never contested. The language policy that had come with internationalisation had enabled a reframing of the role of Spanish in the curriculum, and also of Catalan. With trilingualism had come more Spanish, which was ambivalently conceptualised either as a language of pride or as a language of profit to please all ears (see Duchêne and Heller, 2012). The spaces for Catalan had been reduced, but its symbolic presence could be interpreted as caring for the minoritised language. The new equilibria allowed the schools to present themselves as a politically 'neutral' space, where the only agenda being promoted was the social and economic advancement of students – a very neoliberal goal.

Internationality was inserting itself into the picture following colonial dynamics, but in a nuanced way. The ways in which these new cultural forms are a form of domination is not straightforward. In elite spaces such as international schools, which people inhabit by choice, it is hard to identify, and to advocate for, forms of resistance to the new hierarchies being established, especially around languages. Such discursive transformations bring disruptions and new affects with themselves, and new forms of cultural domination.

> *What stood out for us in Andrea's text is how cultural domination becomes sublimated on to the terrain of language teaching/learning. She warns us to be wary of the apparent 'neutralisation' of conflicts and, as we saw in Katy's reflection, of celebratory discourses. This compelled us to interrogate the apparent absence of colonial domination, and to understand this instead as an artefact of its displacement on to the linguistic. Through this, Andrea encouraged us to engage with an argument that spoke to us in all of the preceding texts, that of language as the site of (decolonial and other) conflict, be it through the mobilisation of particular colonial knowledges about what language or language speakers are, or the hegemony of particular languages. In ways that are relevant to the spaces cited across this article, she has drawn our attention to the crystallisation of new forms of hierarchy and domination, as well as how they are constantly emerging, in ways that are specific to certain localities, but also how they are instantiations of more global phenomena. If we are to act seriously within the decolonial mission, then the task – as Rowena's reflection focused on – certainly requires us to find ways to dismantle the house, but we must be sure not only to attack the facade. The plumbing, the electrics, the foundations, the concept of 'home', who does the building, how that labour is recompensed, who gets to live there – every element of its construction must be open to scrutiny. Coloniality consistently shifts into newer forms, and consistently produces newer inequalities; we must be vigilant.*

Doing differently

We want to conclude with a comment on the methodological process of the article itself, as we have tried to write *differently*, to centre the dialogic. This has several implications. First, by bringing together different reflections and comments, and thus explicitly foregrounding our different trajectories, histories and perspectives, we have held a mirror up to the limits and scope of each of our positions. We do not always agree with each other; we have intentionally left contradictions in the article, precisely because they allow for a recognition – and enactment – of our individual vulnerabilities and lacunae. By putting this explicitly in our article, we emphasise the importance of dialogue, of multiplicity, of polyphony and of conspiration within all decolonial pursuits.

Second, we believe that this practice allows us to directly speak back to ways of doing academic writing that are rooted in colonial conceptualisations of knowledge and authority: the myth of the single story, the 'single, central, dominant, in a word, quasi-divine, point of view' that Bourdieu (1999: 3) urged us to relinquish. As multiple decolonial scholars and activists have demonstrated, one of the powers of empire lies in the hegemony of a coherent, single narrative. To respond to this, we cannot replace one universalising narrative with a singular counternarrative; instead, there must also be a resistance to the possibility of coherent grand narratives in themselves. Resistance must be polyphonic – a conspiration (Phipps, 2019). If we are to attempt a radical redefinition of the teaching and learning enterprise – what counts as knowledge, whose knowledge is valued, and how that knowledge is transmitted – then there needs to be an interrogation of the myth of the coherent perspective.

Much like Khoo et al.'s (2020: 65) report of their attempts to decolonise their curriculum, our text here was also an 'experiment in doing things differently', which did not always work. In a first draft, we left

the reflections uncommented, and attempted to let the voices stand alone. The result, as our readers told us, was a fractured text: we lost the sense of dialogue that had originally inspired the article's structure, and the article had become cacophonous, unreadable and unrecognisable as an academic text. This is precisely the double bind that has been woven throughout the narratives above: the same institutions and positions that we critique are also those that condition what we can say and how we can be read. If we steer too far off course, we become unknowable, and our knowledge becomes unrecognisable.

We reworked the text to allow for smoother transitions, but later readers remarked – quite rightly – that, in doing so, Katy's and Peter's voices had become too interventionist. We struggled to find a balance. Ultimately, we kept the individual, standalone contributions, because it was important to us to keep what we see as a core element – that is, what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013: 51) calls 'a clear locus of enunciation' which refuses 'to claim universality'. In the transitional sections between the reflections, Peter and Katy took the reviewer up on their invitation to centre what from each contribution helped us to further our thinking in response to the question of decolonising the language curriculum. This move allowed us to re-engage with a founding principle of the reading group, namely to conspire, to share and to learn from each other's lived experiences. Of course, what stood out most to us, as curators, was conditioned by our *own* trajectories, experiences, interests and understandings and, as such, the dialogue we have set out to foster is inevitably (re)shaped by our curation of it.

The final text is highly imperfect: it remains a piece ultimately curated by the two lead authors. But it is, we hope, at the very least a suggestion of how knowledge production can be done: of what conspiration can look like, and what it can do. These are ongoing questions; we have attempted *to do differently through our writing process*, but the extent to which it is understood as such by our future readers remains to be seen.

We are not fully satisfied with how the article worked out. We could have been much bolder; we still very much remain within the generic constraints of academic publishing. But we are also aware of the risks that we *are* taking in this article; we have laid bare our vulnerabilities by showcasing points of tensions and disunity, albeit in ways that, we believe, support the argument that we are trying to make. While we are concerned that it may not be an advisable move for a group composed of PhD researchers and precariously employed junior academics to admit to their lack of knowledge, or to say that they are unsatisfied, and frustrated with their final product, we understand these to be a critical part of decolonial praxis; we hope it will be interpreted as such, because an academia that is open to such vulnerability is a place in which we see hope and possibility.

We also recognise, however, that our risk, although very real for us, is a privileged one; our 'precarity' and our concerns about our ability to be institutionally intelligible are buffered by our sociopolitical stability (see Jaber and Pérez-Milans, 2022, for example, for an account of the precarity of researchers caught in systems of seeking asylum). We are conscious of the need to pay attention to how we are variously positioned within the system and how this conditions our experience of risk. We are all, albeit in different ways, 'insiders' – researchers within British institutions – we speak, necessarily 'from the imperial centre' (Bhambra et al., 2018: 3). But our speaking can – and must be – a space 'for dialogue, alliances and solidarity with colonized and formerly colonized peoples' (Bhambra et al., 2018: 3). At the same time, much like Mbembe (2015), we proceed in this attempt with caution, and reserve a level of scepticism over whether such attempts may be too late, and whether the university is at all reformable, particularly within the increasingly neoliberalised institution (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly, 2021; Kaur and Klinkert, 2021; Moosavi, 2020). While we resist the urge to draw neat, coherent conclusions from our experience of this group, it appears to us fundamental that any attempts to decolonise the school language curriculum, and indeed our own practice in the classroom, must be rooted in such dialogue – in conspiration – one that is open to critique, embraces its own vulnerability and, while radically situated, is framed not as bracketed projects but, rather, as dynamic threads in wider, interconnected flows that are open and reactive to ongoing shifts and reappraisals.

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The authors conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with UCL, BAAL, BERA and ESRC standards.

Consent for publication statement

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The authors declare no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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