

Academic event report

Conversaciones Sobre Lenguas Extranjeras: A Cycle of Interviews to Foreign Language Teaching Specialists in the Southern Cone

As a result of Covid-19, the world as we knew it no longer exists. Our everyday life has changed radically. This pandemic has put the world in lockdown, which, along with the ensuing isolation, has provoked uncertainty and fear about the future.

People are eager to communicate with each other and new ways of contacting the world outside the walls of our homes have proliferated. Technology and its multiple online platforms have transformed our geography and landscapes, moulding different scenarios which now allow us to explore novel means to connect so as to retain a sense of community. The pandemic has also blatantly exposed social inequality since a huge sector of the world population has been excluded from these virtual interactions due to lack of technological resources.

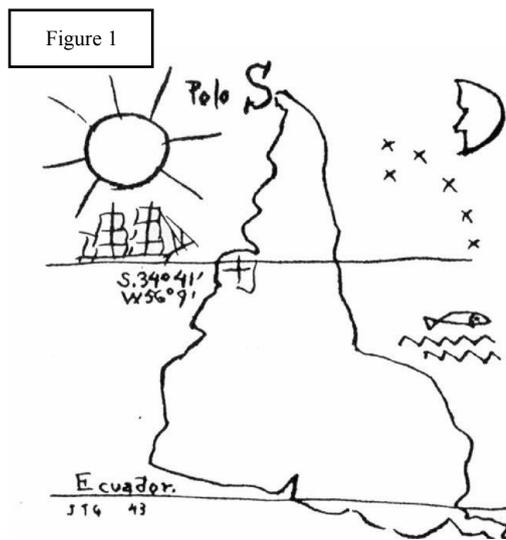
In this context of inequalities and confinement, a cycle of interviews to specialists of foreign language teaching was created. From its headquarters in Buenos Aires, Argentina, *Conversaciones sobre lenguas extranjeras* invites professionals who engage in language teaching in different levels of the educational system to be interviewed by Mariano Quintero. Every Wednesday, at 8:00 pm, live on Instagram, the interviewer and the interviewees embark on a dynamic dialogue, which is enriched by comments and queries made by the audience in the chatbox. For a whole hour, the (g)local foreign language community converges to discuss new trends and central concerns in our profession, not only opening a channel of communication between a specialist and a wide audience from all over the country and beyond, but also, and above all, democratising knowledge.

Mariano Quintero is an English language specialist and a teacher educator in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) didactics, language and literature with a vast trajectory in the field. This makes him a valid interlocutor to carry out this one-hour conversation every week with well known colleagues. The specialists engage in conversations which focus on different areas, such as Applied Linguistics, Phonology, Comprehensive Sexuality Education, Translanguaging, (Cultural) Translation, Literacy, CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), Critical Citizenship, Research, Young Learners, Play, Drama,



Language Acquisition, Critical Discourse Analysis, Sociolinguistics, Teachers' Unions, Grammar, FLT (Foreign Language Teaching) Didactics, Teaching Material, Digital Technology, Literature, FLT to Senior Learners, Language Appropriation, Critical Intercultural Education, among others.

Based on our description so far, this cycle seems to be similar to many other local projects created at the same time and for the same reasons. The big question is what makes this cycle different, and, most importantly, to what an extent it offers an innovative view of foreign language teaching.



Conversaciones inscribes itself in, and re-signifies, Joaquín Torres García's famous motto "Our North is the South." This Uruguayan visual artist painted "Inverted America" in 1943 (figure 1), which is a direct provocation to a dominant Eurocentric worldview. By drawing the Equator at the bottom and the River Plate area in the centre, and by turning the geopolitical map of the Southern Cone upside down, the painting offers a clear shift of perspective. Interestingly, Torres García's painting and *Conversaciones* have both made a U turn: "Inverted America" has challenged hegemonic views of the

North and the South and, similarly, *Conversaciones* has metaphorically turned the map of foreign language teaching upside down by giving a voice to local specialists. What principle did *Conversaciones* adopt in order to encourage innovation and transformation?

First and foremost, all the specialists interviewed belong to the Southern Cone and most of them work locally. Only a very few live and work in the UK and keep strong ties with local academic circles. This choice is crucial to distinguish *Conversaciones* from other similar cycles. Giving local voices the opportunity to express their views on foreign language teaching on social media in prime time gives local experts visibility and defies the international supremacy of the northern hemisphere (Europe and North America) when it comes to discussing the role of foreign language teaching in our context. By so doing, the cycle challenges our heritage of European imperialism and pursues to decolonise academic practices. Inevitably, this leads to question the affluent contemporary foreign language learning industry of the North, which produces teaching material to be used worldwide, reinforcing hegemonic neoimperialist ideologies and perpetuating inequality.

In an attempt to work towards decolonizing the curriculum, the question of who owns the languages we speak and teach was brought to the forefront again and again in the different interviews. The concept of 'Native-speakerism', representing the unresponsive 'native speaker' hegemony still so present in our teaching context, was definitely challenged.

Following Kumaravadivelu's exhortation to take action against it by the non-native subaltern, interviewees, as members of that non-native speaker community, defied imposed phonetic norms, cultural stereotypes (of themselves and others), heteronormative views, political biases, naturalised ethnic, social, gender and economic privileges, pedagogical approaches "for export" - among others - and provided examples of their own teaching practice that undo the invisibility and silencing we have been framed into.

In one of the interviews, the term 'English as a Lingua Franca' was explored in relation to the claim of ownership over the English language and the adherence to a less hegemonic perspective which challenges the native-speaker supremacy. This act of renaming is a clear example of an action taken by the subaltern community which gives visibility to an overwhelming number of speakers of different first languages who choose to, or need to, communicate among themselves through English (Seidlhofer, 2011). In other words, English as a Lingua Franca becomes the language of the decentred: whereas it keeps the colonial heritage of oppression and domination, it also empowers subaltern communities to use it on their own terms. It becomes the site of convergence of international speaking communities in the field of science, education, culture, technology, diplomacy, business and tourism.

Another relevant choice the cycle takes is the use of Spanish to carry out the conversations. By bringing the first language of the specialists and the audience to the forefront, the plurilingual approach to FLT becomes evident. If the cycle had chosen one foreign language, it would have been restrictive, limiting access to specialists of other additional languages in the region. In this way, *Conversaciones* embraces a wider language teaching community, and creates a virtual space for dialogue and interaction through a common first language to work towards building a Southern Cone criticality in FLT, incarnating Torres García's motto "Our North is the South." Moreover, the cycle reignites previous attempts at collaborative work on local linguistic policies. In Argentina, for example, the National Ministry of Education produced and shared important documents, such as *Proyecto de mejora para la educación inicial de profesores para el nivel secundario* (2011) and *Núcleos de Aprendizajes Prioritarios (NAP) para la educación primaria y secundaria - lenguas extranjeras* (2012), which brought together specialists of different foreign languages to agree on approaches, content, concepts, perspectives and forms of assessment in FLT.

Conversaciones has created a very strong and interconnected regional language teaching community on the web and has woven a tapestry of themes and concepts that run through the different talks. The specialists converse with Mariano Quinterno, with the audience and with each other reengaging in the discussion of heated topics from previous interviews and adding new possible meanings related to their areas of expertise. For example, the transversal dimension of Comprehensive Sexuality Education became evident in talks about literature, language acquisition, planning and analysing teaching materials, to mention but a few. The FLT paradigm shift of the last 30 years was one of the main topics of

discussion: content-based approaches challenge former grammar-based methods which taught languages in a cultural vacuum. Native-Speakerism is questioned when it comes to appropriating accent, pronunciation and agency. The many implications of the cultural become a topic of discussion among literature and language experts, who exhort the audience to notice the power of literature to either culturally colonise or empower subaltern communities. In this sense, intercultural education gives visibility to the cultures of the subaltern in dialogue with other cultures, and supports the production of local teaching material which focuses on our realities so that students can relate to them. Teacher research which explores our own teaching practice gives us, local language professionals, a voice to develop our own identities as practitioners, researchers and scholars of the Southern Cone.

All in all, *Conversaciones* clearly offers an innovative view of foreign language teaching which empowers local professionals to develop our own criticality and share our views, theories and teaching practice: the South has definitely become our North. And, to cap it all, it takes place in a very popular virtual space as a live session on Instagram.

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