Interaction, Inclusion, and Identity: Rethinking Language Education through Diversity

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ABSTRACT

At the 2025 FAAPI Conference, I had the privilege of delivering a plenary session focused on the theme, *Interaction, Inclusion, and Identity: Rethinking Language Education through Diversity*. My aim was not merely to discuss current trends, but to challenge educators to rethink the very foundations of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Argentina. This report synthesizes the main arguments, theoretical underpinnings, and practical strategies I presented, offering a comprehensive reflection for fellow teachers and stakeholders committed to meaningful change in language education.

KEYWORDS: interaction - English as a Lingua Franca - inclusion- identity- diversity

INTRODUCTION: CHALLENGING THE FOUNDATIONS OF ELT

My session, grounded in both my own professional journey and contemporary sociolinguistic research, called for a fundamental paradigm shift. We must move decisively away from rigid native speaker norms and instead embrace a pedagogy centered on inclusion, identity, and diversity in the classroom. The reality of English as a global language—a *lingua franca* used predominantly among non-native speakers—demands that we re-evaluate our goals and methodologies.

To set the stage for this critical examination, I began my talk by quoting the seminal words of Paulo Freire:

> "Language is never neutral. It is laden with values, choices, and power."
>
> (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1970)

This statement encapsulates the core of my report. Every pedagogical choice we make—from the textbooks we select to the accents we prioritize—is embedded with values and power dynamics. By moving away from an unquestioning adherence to Anglo-norms, we can transform ELT into an education for social justice and democracy, promoting liberty, equality, and solidarity.

Over the course of this report, I will detail my personal journey away from normative teaching, define the four essential pillars of my framework—Interaction, Inclusion, Identity, and Diversity—and propose practical ways to integrate translanguaging and decolonial perspectives into our daily practice. This is not just a theoretical argument; it is a vision for creating more equitable and engaging language classrooms across Argentina.

MY PERSONAL JOURNEY: FROM ANGLO-NORMATIVITY TO CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

My shift towards advocating for a more inclusive and critical language pedagogy was profoundly personal, rooted in my own experiences as a teacher in the early 1980s. Like many of my colleagues, my teaching philosophy was initially shaped by the Communicative Approach, which emphasized grammar, vocabulary, and, crucially, the rigorous imitation of native speakers, particularly those from the UK.

The classroom environment I inhabited—and, indeed, contributed to—was saturated with UK-centric norms. Textbooks and curricula privileged images of the UK flag, references to the Queen, and the strict adherence to Received Pronunciation (RP). The educational mandate was unambiguous: learners were expected to approximate native speaker competence as closely as possible.

However, this relentless focus on anglo-normativity created deep constraints, not just for my students, but for me. I often felt "trapped in a straitjacket," experiencing an almost obsessive focus on the UK, the 'center,' and achieving perfect idiomaticity. The pervasive and anxiety-inducing question that dominated my teaching and my learners' minds was: "How would a native speaker say this?". This constant comparison became a source of self-doubt and anxiety, prompting a critical self-reflection: who was this idealized native speaker, and why should their language use be the ultimate, unquestionable standard?

Over the last fifteen years, my work in teacher education, combined with intensive study in linguistics —specifically sociolinguistics— instigated a profound transformation in my perspective. This period of professional development exposed me to two fundamental truths:

1. The dramatic, evolving status of English as a global language
2. The principles of Critical Language Pedagogy (CLP)

My journey in teaching linguistics underscored the critical need to challenge the dominance of native speaker models and instead embrace the vast diversity inherent in English today. The theoretical insights of scholars like Widdowson and Jenkins confirmed my developing conviction: the belief that native speakers are inherently superior and are the sole authority for setting language standards is both outdated and exclusionary. This personal and professional journey ultimately led me to re-evaluate traditional norms and champion the central tenets of inclusion, identity, and diversity that formed the core of my FAAPI plenary.

ENGLISH TODAY: EMBRACING THE ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA (ELF) PARADIGM

My personal journey of self-reflection was profoundly validated by the dramatic, observable shift in the global status of English over the last few decades. Simply put, the traditional model we were taught under no longer reflects the linguistic reality of the 21st century.

The transformation of English has been highlighted by organizations like the British Council in its *"Future of English: Global Perspectives"* report (2023). Today, English is the de facto official language in 67% of countries and is spoken by an astonishing 31% of the world's population. Crucially, the dominant use of English globally is not between a native speaker and a non-native

speaker; it is overwhelmingly among non-native speakers themselves, functioning as an English as a Lingua Franca (ELF).

This reality renders the idealized native speaker standard increasingly irrelevant. As the British Council's report emphatically states, "English belongs to whoever uses it," and policy and pedagogy must move away from privileging native speaker norms.

THE IRRELEVANCE OF THE CIRCLES

For decades, many ELT practitioners relied on Braj Kachru's influential three-concentric-circles model (1985) to understand the distribution of English use:

- Inner Circle: Considered the birthplace of English (e.g., UK, USA), designated as norm-providing.
- Outer Circle: Countries with historical ties to English (e.g., India, Nigeria), described as norm-developing.
- Expanding Circle: EFL contexts, such as Argentina, classified as norm-dependent.

However, the forces of globalization have blurred these boundaries, significantly diminishing the model's relevance. In Argentina, our ELT practice remains stubbornly norm-dependent, continuing to look outward for linguistic standards instead of developing our own. ELF researchers, such as Martin Dewey, urge teachers to actively move beyond this restrictive normativity and empower themselves to create their own localized linguistic standards, thereby challenging the systemic bias of native speakerism.

The belief that native speakers are inherently superior and are the sole architects of linguistic standards is exclusionary and has been rightly critiqued by sociolinguists like Widdowson and Jenkins. My call to action is to reject this outdated hierarchy entirely.

WHAT'S ELF?

ELF is defined as "any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option" (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 7).

Main features:

1. Fluid: ELF is not rigidly bound to "standard" grammar or vocabulary; speakers adapt it to the situation.

2. Hybrid: Speakers often mix English with resources from their own languages — code-switching

3. Highly variable and Dynamic: ELF interactions are constantly evolving as speakers negotiate meaning in real time, because ELF users come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Variation is the norm rather than the exception.

4. Plurilithic: Instead of **one monolithic "Standard English" there are many Englishes**, all legitimate in their own right. ELF assumes there is no single correct version.

Later, it was defined by Jenkins as English as a multilingua franca (EMF): "multilingual communication in which English is available as a contact language of choice, but is not necessarily chosen" (Jenkins, 2015: 7).

English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is not a fossilized interlanguage resulting from learners' failure to conform to Inner Circle native norms, but rather a legitimate and inevitable outcome of the globalization of English (Seidlhofer, 2011). ELF represents the sociolinguistic reality of how English is used today, differing at times from Standard English (SE) without being inferior or superior. Traditionally, when language produced by non-native speakers deviates from native norms, it is labeled as an error or evidence of an incomplete L2 system. However, similar deviations by native speakers —such as saying "I borrowed him a pen" instead of "I lent him one"— are dismissed as dialectal variations or slips. This reveals a double standard in judging linguistic correctness, rooted in arbitrary norms and linguistic prejudices. The traditional view, often argued by linguists like Michael Swan, sees ELF as just a stage in the interlanguage path, where learners' mistakes are simply products of an incomplete mastery of the 'correct' native-speaker language. The desired competence in this model is to imitate or approximate native English speakers and conform to their norms.

SHIFTING FOCUS TO INTELLIGIBILITY

When we shift from the goal of "native-like accuracy" to the goal of effective intercultural communication, our emphasis must fundamentally change from accuracy to intelligibility. The aim should be for learners to be able to understand and be understood by speakers from all three of Kachru's historical circles—and beyond.

Intelligibility and accuracy are not mutually exclusive, but the priority must be refocused: English is primarily a medium of intercultural communication, not an end in itself. Furthermore, we must acknowledge that intelligibility is not an inherent quality of any language form; it is a co-constructed process between speakers.

This paradigm shift liberates teachers from the impossible task of policing every deviation from an arbitrary foreign norm, allowing us to focus on practical communication skills and empowering Argentine students to claim ownership of the English they use.

INTERACTION, INCLUSION, IDENTITY, AND DIVERSITY

Moving beyond the theoretical validation provided by the ELF paradigm, a meaningful transformation in ELT requires clarity about the foundational concepts that must guide our daily practice. In my plenary, I defined four essential pillars—Interaction, Inclusion, Identity, and Diversity—that represent a complete departure from the monolingual, norm-obsessed classroom of the past.

INTERACTION: CO-CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE

Interaction in the context of language education is far more than simply the exchange of words between people. It is a dynamic process through which teachers and students, as well as students among themselves, actively co-construct knowledge.

Crucially, this concept extends into the inner workings of the learner's mind, encompassing the dialogue between all the languages a student knows. Neuroscientific research confirms that all languages are stored together in the brain and interact constantly. Therefore, the traditional practice of prohibiting the use of a student's first language (L1)—enforced by rules like "Don't translate, think in English!" or "Spanish is forbidden"—is not only ineffective but is counterproductive, inducing cognitive overload. We must see this linguistic interaction as an essential cognitive and pedagogical resource for deeper learning.

INCLUSION: VALIDATING LINGUISTIC BACKGROUNDS

Inclusion means ensuring that **all students**, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities, have equal access to learning opportunities and feel fully integrated into the educational environment. This commitment often requires me to adapt teaching methods to accommodate students with different learning needs, including those with learning disabilities.

More significantly in the ELT context, inclusion means recognizing and validating the L1 as a legitimate and necessary part of the classroom. By explicitly welcoming students' linguistic resources through mediation and translation, I foster a deeper sense of belonging and participation, reducing anxiety and paving the way for greater equity.

IDENTITY: RECOGNITION AND CELEBRATION

Identity in education refers to the explicit recognition and celebration of students' individual and cultural identities within the learning environment. I can achieve this by consciously incorporating literature, music, traditions, and local history from various regions of Argentina and Latin America into the curriculum.

This approach transforms the English classroom from a space of imposition to a space of reflection and affirmation. By valuing the students' existing identities and cultural anchors, I strengthen their engagement, motivation, and ultimately, their confidence in using English in ways that reflect *who they are*.

DIVERSITY: PREPARING FOR THE GLOBAL REALITY

Diversity encompasses the variety of backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences that students bring to our classrooms, including both cultural and linguistic variation. If we are to truly prepare students for real-world communication in a globalized society, we cannot restrict them to a single dialect or accent

I must create lesson plans that actively highlight different dialects, accents, and linguistic variations within the English language itself, moving far beyond the Inner Circle norms. More fundamentally, I encourage students to share their own diverse experiences and perspectives, creating a classroom ecology that mirrors the global complexity they will eventually encounter.

MULTILINGUALISM, TRANSLANGUAGING, AND THE DECOLONIAL TURN

The four pillars of practice I've outlined—Interaction, Inclusion, Identity, and Diversity—are given their profound meaning when we ground them in the reality of Argentina's linguistic landscape. We often operate under a façade of monolingualism in the classroom, yet Argentina is, in truth, a multilingual country. Spanish coexists with 24 living languages, including 15 indigenous languages like Quechua, Guaraní, and Mapuche, numerous immigrant languages (e.g., Basque, Italian, Japanese, Levantine Spoken Arabic), and the widely taught foreign languages included in the national curriculum, such as English, French, and Portuguese. The linguistic rights of these ethnic minorities are explicitly recognized throughout the country.

In this context, insisting on a monolingual English classroom is not only educationally unsound but fundamentally ignores the rich linguistic resources our students possess.

TRANSLANGUAGING: THEORY AND PEDAGOGY

To bridge this gap, the concept of Translanguaging is essential. It serves as both a powerful theory of language and a flexible pedagogy. It recognizes that languages are not compartmentalized or stored separately in the brain; rather, they are blended into a unified linguistic repertoire that students draw upon dynamically to make sense of the world.

Adopting a translanguaging lens has several profound pedagogical benefits that directly address the anxieties of the traditional ELT setting:

- Cognitive Support: Allowing students to use their L1 strategically aids comprehension and reduces cognitive overload.
- Acquisition Aid: It supports both vocabulary and grammar acquisition.
- Empowerment: It fosters confidence and deeper metalinguistic awareness.
- Challenging Native Speakerism: It enhances cultural and linguistic diversity and empowers me, as a teacher, by reducing the anxiety and guilt traditionally associated with allowing L1 in the classroom.

By making other languages visible in our classrooms, we embrace Pennycook's idea that English is a language always in translation, always in contact with other languages. This practice is a practical step toward developing a decolonial mindset.

THE DECOLONIAL TURN IN ELT

The need for a Decolonial Turn arises from the fact that English has historically often been taught as a "superior" language, with ELT structurally tied to Anglo-norms and textbooks originating from the U.S. or UK.

A decolonial perspective means actively acknowledging these historical inequalities and valuing local knowledges. It compels us to question textbooks that only reflect dominant cultures. I encourage myself and my colleagues to ask critical questions in class:

- "Whose culture is represented in this material?"
- "Why do we think British or American English is 'better'?"

By creating space for Argentine and Latin American perspectives, we can make the curriculum profoundly more relevant, inclusive, and empowering. This practice is the engine that drives a more equitable classroom.

CLASSROOM STRATEGIES AND ASSESSMENT FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

The culmination of the shift from native speaker norms to a framework prioritizing interaction, inclusion, identity, and diversity is the practical application of Critical Language Pedagogy (CLP). Inspired by Paulo Freire, CLP positions language teaching as a means of promoting social justice, democracy, and equity. This approach mandates that we move beyond teaching "just grammar and vocabulary" to examine how language shapes power relations, reinforces or challenges inequality, and can be used as a tool for liberation.

CRITICAL LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY IN PRACTICE

Inspired by Paulo Freire, CLP centers on several key principles: striving for dialogical learning, co-creating knowledge with students through questioning and reflection. We should structure lessons around real-world problems—problem-posing education—rather than predetermined, culturally neutral content. This empowers students to be active participants in their own learning and in society.

This critical shift has broadened the view of pedagogy significantly in the last decade, emphasizing:

- Plurilingual Practices: The strategic use of multiple languages, code-switching, and translanguaging.
- Critical Pedagogies: Including decolonial, antiracist, LGBT+, restorative justice, and trauma-informed approaches.
- Multiliteracies: Cultivating digital, critical, and media literacy skills alongside linguistic competence.
- Technology-related pedagogies: Blended, hybrid, and mobile learning.

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This shift reflects a growing recognition that inclusion, diversity, and belonging are central to effective teaching and learning.

ACTIONABLE STRATEGIES

In my plenary, I presented concrete ways to embed these critical and inclusive practices:

Strategy	**Description & Example**
Critical Materials Design	I adapt or supplement global textbooks to include local voices, history, and current events—such as Argentine literature and music—ensuring students see their own cultures and experiences reflected.
Translanguaging Tasks	I encourage students to create bilingual glossaries or perform comparative analysis of idioms and grammatical structures across Spanish and English. I also assign mediation and translation tasks to leverage their full linguistic repertoire
Project-Based Learning (PBL)	I use PBL to bring in socio-political issues that textbooks often omit, such as racism, poverty, or challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community. For instance, a project explored the dialects of Spanish in Argentina, prompting students to discuss why so many variations exist and which dialect they speak, thereby validating their L1 diversity.
Decolonial Reflection	I engage students in analyzing their English textbooks, prompting them to identify whose cultures and voices are represented—and whose are missing—to promote critical awareness of cultural dominance.

ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION: RETHINKING SUCCESS

To align our evaluation with this critical perspective, we must reject the traditional prioritization of "native-like accuracy" and standardized tests. A critical, inclusive approach calls for a broader understanding of success.

Some new directions in assessment prioritize:

- Communication over Grammar: Focusing on intelligibility, creativity, and the ability to negotiate meaning effectively.
- Contextualized Evaluation: Assessing students' ability to use English in real-world, meaningful contexts, rather than relying solely on paper tests.
- Alternative Methods: Utilizing portfolio assessment to demonstrate learning through projects and reflective writing, and promoting self- and peer-assessment to foster agency and goal-setting

Implementing these changes may face institutional resistance or skepticism. However, by gradually building awareness, collaborating with colleagues, and sharing evidence of the benefits of inclusive, multilingual pedagogy, we can advocate for systemic change

FINAL REFLECTIONS AND A CALL TO ACTION

My plenary was intended to be more than a critique of traditional ELT; it was a blueprint for a more inclusive, equitable, and dynamic future. By embracing multilingualism, translanguaging, and critical pedagogy, we can create classrooms where all students feel valued, empowered, and prepared to use English in ways that genuinely reflect their identities and realities.

As I concluded the session: "Language is never neutral—it is shaped by values and power. As educators, we must move beyond teaching 'just grammar and vocabulary' and embrace the multilingual, multicultural reality of our classrooms. Let's see students' L1 as a resource, not a problem, and empower them to become confident users of English in their own contexts"

This path requires courage and commitment, but the reward is a truly democratic and socially relevant education. I encourage every reader to reflect on these questions as you move forward:

- How can you incorporate students' L1 into your lessons?
- What challenges do you anticipate, and how might you address them?
- How can you celebrate linguistic and cultural diversity in your classroom?

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