

A Decolonial Perspective on Adult Immigrant English Language Training in the Global North

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Abstract:

Transnational migration across different borders often necessitate immigrants learning different languages, values and customs of the receiving country for a 'successful' social and economic integration. Available evidence suggests that adult immigrants studying non-academic English as a second or other language (ESOL) worldwide is large and fast-growing. In this chapter, drawing on decolonial perspective, we explore the nuanced racio-linguistic ideologies and Eurocentric linguistic visions underpinning language of teaching adults. In line with Lalage Bown's pioneering work in Adult Education broadly challenging educational institutions to rethink their curricular and pedagogical practices in such ways to include 'other' voices and ways of learning, we argue, for a teaching/learning approach that is culturally responsive to the diverse needs of adult English learners.

Keywords: Adult Education; Decolonisation; ESOL; English Language; Immigration

Introduction

In recent years, transnational migration has globally encouraged the process by which immigrants are able to forge and sustain simultaneous multi-national social relationships that link together their societies of origin and settlement. Such complex, transnational movements across different borders often necessitate immigrants learning different languages, values and customs of the receiving country for a 'successful' social and economic integration. Currently, English is being used as the official language in over 70 countries. English is often considered as one of the primary languages that transnational immigrants are expected to know, especially if they migrate to English speaking countries. Available evidence suggests that the population of adult immigrants (including refugees, asylum seekers, migrant workers, and naturalised citizens) studying non-academic English as a second or other language (ESOL) worldwide

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is large and fast-growing. The British Council (2019) estimated that there are two billion English language learners worldwide as of the year 2020 – implying that one out of every four persons on the planet is either an English as a foreign language speaker or ESOL. These data, however, do not reflect the education or literacy ‘attainment’ of adult immigrants (Bown 2000), implying that their linguistic needs may not be always fully met, with dropout rates among adult ESOL learners remaining a concern (Bigelow and Schwarz 2010) and achievement being at best inconsistent (Mathews-Aydinli 2008).

Concurrent to the rise in ESOL learners, there remains the continuing focus on the relationship between language abilities and subsequent ‘employability’ of these adult immigrant English language learners (AELLs), thereby suggesting that English language proficiency is one of the most important markers of immigrants’ success within the host society. What is important to note here is how employability and language abilities are constructed as individualised self-development agenda without taking into consideration socio-economic inequalities in the receiving country that might impact employability more than anything else. The dominance of English, therefore, has been a cause for concern, with some scholars critiquing it as a tool for post-colonial dominance and a means for perpetuating a power imbalance. Others, however, argue that English is the language of opportunity, opening doors for people seeking better lives for themselves and their families.

Given the important role of English language for adult immigrants, it is critical to explore the nature of English language training that is being imparted to the immigrants once they move to a new country. Additionally, it is also important to understand what constitutes effective and culturally sustainable pedagogical approaches for AELL learning, given the diversity of the transnational immigrants’ social, cultural and linguistic practices.

Unfortunately, possible answers to these questions and many others are often rather prescriptive and simplistic, especially around issues of pedagogical approaches as demonstrated by available research studies on adult English learners (e.g., Bown 1968, 1977; Ullman 2010). Against the backdrop highlighting the knowledge gap in this area of study, we aim to explore the language of teaching adults from a decolonial perspective, specifically seeking to examine the current pedagogical approaches/models adopted in the teaching of AELLs with a view to highlighting the nuanced racio-linguistic ideologies of ‘appropriateness’ (Flores and Rosa 2015) and Eurocentric linguistic visions (Mathews-Aydinli 2008) foregrounding many of these approaches.

In line with Lalage Bown’s (1973, 1977) pioneering work in adult education broadly challenging educational institutions to rethink their curricular and pedagogical practices in such ways to integrate ‘other’ voices and ways of learning, we argue, drawing also on the thoughts of other educational thinkers such as Freire (1972), Santos de Sousa et al. (2007) and Santos de Sousa (2014), for a decolonising teaching/learning approach that is responsive to the diverse needs of adult migrant English learners. Supporting the idea of adult education as continuous equipment for life rather than a one-off preparation, Bown (2000)

highlights the dangers of displacing and devaluing linguistic practices other than those emanating from the global North. According to her, adult education stands the chance of benefiting greatly from the inclusion of other knowledge and language systems, more with the idea of learning from its methods and processes rather than with the unabashed vision of lingual identity reconstruction. Other scholars have similarly argued how as English continues to gain more importance globally, other languages, particularly those spoken by minority groups, are being devalued, leading to further inequalities (Chan 2023).

Building on Bown's argument, in this chapter we demonstrate that the notion of English as the default 'global language' of learning has colonial undertones and the focus on standard anglo-normative forms of English denies the diversity of the language, learners, teachers and pedagogical practices thereby continuing to focus on English as a language of power and elitism (Liyange and Canagarajah 2019; Rice 2021).

1. Adult Immigrants in the Context of Global English Language Learning

Given unequal global power relations, not all forms of transnational migration are equally possible, seamless, or successful (Blommaert 2010). Various types of mobilities are governed by various language, residency, and citizenship regimes. Consequently, migration from the global south to the global north is characterised by the importance of international linguistic resources such as global English and is significantly influenced by colonialist ideologies that emphasise 'global' language learning as a prerequisite for social engagement as well as economic integration in the host country (Garrido and Codó 2017). Irrespective of the increasing shifts in geopolitical power and the diverse demographics of migrant workers, students, and refugees in many English-speaking societies, there appears to be a sustained monolingual culture that privileges proficiency in English language abilities both as a form of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) and as a valuable resource for globalised cultural and economic exchange (Luke and Dooley 2011; Hanukaev 2022).

Arguably, the significant and diversified migration to English-speaking countries in recent decades has potentially reinforced the belief in monolingualism within education, despite unrelenting criticisms of the deficit perspective that serve to marginalise the linguistic practices of AELLs. This is evidenced by the renewed focus on standard English in AELL programs in the UK (Tollefson 2002), anti-bilingual activism and official English in the United States (Alim 2009; Flores and Aneja 2017), and a rise in English-only policies for Native North Americans, Aborigines, and Torres Strait Islanders (Brayboy and Castagno 2008). Even where bi- and multilingualism have been slowly integrated into AELL programs, it has relied on a multicultural approach that upholds an appropriateness-based model (Flores and Rosa 2015). Therefore, scholars like Paris (2012) propose the adoption of *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies*, emphasising the importance of the plurality approach which entails integrating diverse languages

and cultures of AELLs while also attending to concerns of stance and terminologies, which he argues are devices for maintaining hegemonic linguistic practices.

On a similar note, García (2009) challenges idealised monolingual constructs such as ‘first language’ and ‘second language’, arguing for more dynamic language constructs that resist privileging monolingual and dominant linguistic practices. In her conception of dynamic bi/multilingual education, she makes an important point about how language learning should be perceived; not necessarily as additional competence to acquire but as a fluid *linguaging* practice to negotiate social situations.

While these critical perspectives have offered an important starting point for examining how language education may marginalise the linguistic practices of immigrant AELLs, they have not explicitly addressed the Eurocentric visions and hegemonic practices of appropriateness foregrounding them. More specifically, little has been done in questioning the pedagogical approach, including the privileged and taken-for-granted status that hegemonic language and accent have been accorded in AELL programmes and everyday contexts, especially from the perspective of the white reading/listening subjects. As such, in this chapter we call to question the assumptions underlying these overgeneralised globalist and raciolinguistic ideologies (including the pedagogies and the terminologies employed in framing AELL) that project the world English phenomenon as though it were universally appropriate and culturally sustaining across global societies (Flores and Rosa 2015). This supports Paulo Freire’s (1972) argument that language teaching and learning is an act of political and cultural power with substantive material and social consequences and possibilities for learners and their communities. In the following sections we foreground our decolonial perspective by highlighting three areas of critique about English language teaching for transnational (im)migrants and other language minoritized population. These areas constitute the institutionalisation and global spread of English language teaching, raciolinguistic profiling of AELLs and pedagogical approaches to AELL.

2. Institutionalised Dominance and Spread of English Language Teaching

In the last few decades, the way English language is taught to adult migrants in English-speaking western countries has undergone significant transformation. This transformation has been driven by the increasing diversity of contemporary societies and the changing demographics of English language learners. From the migrant’s perspective, English is often perceived as the language of opportunity. It is seen as a way to achieve a better life, better education, and better job prospects. The demand for English is high, and the imperative to learn it is strong. As Crystal (1997) pointed out, English has attained a special role that cannot be overlooked in any country. Phillipson (1992) for example coined the term ‘linguistic imperialism’ to describe what he views as colonialism in the disguise of English as *lingua franca* given his skepticism about the ever-growing demand for English. He defined linguistic imperialism as the dominance asserted and

retained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages (Phillipson 1992). His argument was that perpetuating the idea of English opening ‘doors of opportunities’ fuels a power imbalance which intends to subjugate people, particularly in postcolonial settings, albeit clad in a less direct, softer form of control. Furthermore, building on his earlier work, Phillipson (2009) thus critiqued the five tenets of English applied linguistics and English language teaching theory. Describing them as fallacies, he explained that there is the monolingual fallacy – the belief that English is best taught monolingually; the native speaker fallacy – the belief that the ideal teacher is a native speaker; the early start fallacy – the belief that the earlier English is taught, the better the results; the maximum exposure fallacy – the belief that the more English is taught, the better the results; and the subtractive fallacy – the belief that if other languages are used, standards of English will drop.

In relation to the hegemonic development of English, an important area that needs attention is the pervasive development of International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) globally. These are two of the most widely recognized standardized tests used to assess English language proficiency for non-native speakers who wish to study, work or immigrate in English-speaking countries. Both tests assess reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, and each has its own unique format and scoring system. According to scholars, this commercialization of English, building on the colonial history, propagates English as a valuable commodity, particularly in the global marketplace, where it is used as a means of communication, exchange and upward mobility.

Despite its international recognition, TOEFL’s standards are thus not without criticism. According to Xi (2010), a test would be considered fair if it provides consistent results regardless of the test takers’ cultural and individual differences. Xi further observes that fairness should focus on the comparison of test outcomes and test practices across different groups which are not geographically or racially related. Shohamy (2006) is of the opinion that the representation, preservation, and maintenance of knowledge of various culturally diverse groups are equally important. An example that could illustrate the ideas put forth by Xi (2010) and Shohamy (2006) is the development of a culturally responsive test that assesses language proficiency. Let’s say that this test is designed to be administered to non-native speakers of English, who come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. To ensure fairness, the test developers should make sure that the items on the test are not biased towards any particular culture or language. For example, if the test includes idioms or expressions that are specific to American English, it may disadvantage test takers from other English-speaking countries or those who learned English as a second language in a different context. To address this concern, the test developers could involve experts in different varieties of English or hire item writers from diverse linguistic backgrounds to ensure that the test is culturally and linguistically sensitive. Furthermore, to address the need for representation and maintenance of knowledge of culturally diverse

groups, the test developers could include items that reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of the test takers. For example, the test could include items that draw on the test takers' knowledge of their own cultural traditions or customs, or that require them to use vocabulary that is specific to their own language or dialect. Overall, by following these principles of fairness and cultural sensitivity, the standardized test would provide a more accurate and equitable assessment of language proficiency for all test takers, regardless of their linguistic or cultural backgrounds (Chan 2023).

Furthermore, there also exists the near monopoly of TOEFL that creates a bias towards a particular type of English, which may not reflect the diversity of English usage around the world. As TOEFL is an American-based test, it may not fully capture the range of English dialects and accents used in other countries, potentially disadvantaging non-native speakers who do not conform to American English standards (Chan 2023). Additionally, the high cost of TOEFL testing and preparation materials can also be a barrier for many migrant non-native speakers, particularly those from developing countries, who may not have the financial resources to access such resources. Therefore, standardized tests such as IELTS and TOEFL are increasingly being used as gatekeepers, determining access to education and job opportunities globally. As Phillipson puts it, influential organizations that promote English describe the language as something «providential, well established, and as the gateway to the world» (1992, 309). This belief has caused the testing business to explode exponentially over the last decade, making it a multi-million Euro industry (Labi 2010).

Against this backdrop and drawing on Phillipson's (2009) construct of monolingual fallacy, in the next section we deconstruct the assumptions that there is one 'correct' or standard way of speaking, writing or teaching English which consequently results in speakers/writers who deviate from what is taken as the norm to be stigmatised and 'othered'. This can be seen through the concept of raciolinguistic ideologies which profile AELLs as unintelligible and as less culturally proficient because of their 'different' accents, grammatical errors and use of word choice; all of which are reinforced by a monolingual culture that places high premium on native English-like proficiencies.

3. Raciolinguistic Profiling of AELLs

Central to the idea of raciolinguistic profiling is an analysis of the continued rearticulation of colonial distinctions between Europeanness and non-Europeanness – and, by extension, whiteness and nonwhiteness (Alim et al. 2016; Rosa and Flores 2017). These distinctions anchor the joint institutional (re)production of categories of race and language, as well as perceptions and experiences thereof.

Rather than taking for granted existing categories for parsing and classifying race and language, we seek to understand how and why these categories have been co-naturalized in particular societal contexts (Rosa and Flores 2017) and to imagine their denaturalization as part of a broader structural project of contesting white supremacy, especially in the context of adult migrant language

learning (Smitherman 2017). This offers valuable insight into how constructed meaning and interpretation of language abilities and use (both in their spoken and written forms) can be racialised. Even more, it questions the expectations of immigrant writers/speakers to demonstrate language proficiency reflecting whiteness without mutual accommodation and change on the part of readers/listening within immigrants' host society (Morrice et al. 2018).

Drawing on decolonial thoughts, and in particular the idea of language learning spaces as 'contact zones', Bown (2000) argues that language classes, particularly in the global north, have had a civilising effect of maintaining/re-producing hegemonic Eurocentric norms and values rather than encouraging cultural dialogue and exchange, and pedagogical practices, which open educative spaces for challenging fixed and binary notions of cultural groups (see also Santos de Sousa 2014). Drawing on her we can argue that three linked subject types are produced through these AELL classes: the economic (that contributes to national revenue and development), the submissive (re-inventible and law-abiding residents/citizens), and the othered subject (that is perceived as linguistically deficient), explaining that although AELLs appear to be invaluable parts of the society, they are in fact located in the outer margins of society, a space Heinemann (2018) describes as 'inside-outside'.

This liminal positioning is what authors (such as Umansky 2016; Chaka 2021) have attributed to the phenomenon of constructing migrant AELLs as linguistically deficient, and in need of remediation. Rooted in the history and legacy of English language teaching itself as a field of study, Flores and Rosa (2015) conflate raciolinguistic profiling with reverse linguistic stereotyping in which the visual image of a writer/speaker's race triggers readers/listeners' positive or negative perceptions of the speaker's linguistic competence (see also Kubota et al. 2021). In either case, racialised members are perceived as 'illegitimate' and 'incompetent' English speakers with an accent.

While AEL classes are designed to frame the levels of proficiency and enhance the mastery of the spoken and written English language abilities of such learners, scholars (e.g., Mathews-Aydinli 2008; Ullman 2010) have demonstrated how their approaches are reductive and fail to challenge deficit models that socially constructs AELLs with learner status and depict the brand of English these learners speak/write as short of the perceived standard. Lingual standards as Bown (1968) points out are not a linguistic problem in themselves but rather, what must be urgently addressed is the ways in which standard English is constructed as a cultural emblem and how the circulation of that emblem perpetuates raciolinguistic ideologies and thereby contributes to processes of social reproduction and societal stratification.

Within the context of ELT arena and the broader educational spaces, it is common knowledge that learner labels are ascribed to AELLs. Aguayo (2020) and Chaka (2021) aptly capture this point, arguing that the English Learner labels are found in every facet of education concerning learners with home languages other than English and closely associated with these labels are discriminatory practices of using language abilities to make assumptions about people's race or

ethnicity and to stereotype them based on those assumptions. A good example is Miller's (2003) analytic construct of 'audible difference' which describes how stereotypical assumptions are constructed in education and other social institutions about immigrants' English abilities through rejection of non-standard English dialects and 'accents', and reluctance of first language speakers to shoulder responsibility for communicating effectively in interactions with language learners (see also Luke and Dooley 2011).

This critical perspective circles back to how standard English should be conceptualised in terms of the racialised ideologies of listening/reading subjects (Inoue 2015, 2019) rather than the linguistic practices and abilities of speaking/writing subjects, as altering one's speech or form of writing might do very little to change the ideological perspectives of listening/reading subjects (Flores and Rosa 2015). These raciolinguistic ideologies continue to manifest themselves in the everyday relational dealings with immigrants within adult education contexts. Examining career training programs for South Asian women migrants within the Canadian context, Maitra (2015a, 2015b) and Maitra and Guo (2019), for example, highlight how adult education training, including language learning programmes and their assessment procedures, shape the employment trajectories of these women. She describes how this group of migrants become 'formatted' (reinvented) in terms of their self-presentation and are expected to embody an 'entrepreneurial self' depicting certain hegemonic (white) enterprise culture in order to fit into the labour market requirements. Such practices, amongst others, are not only a form of lingual identity reconstruction as Bown (1977) puts it, signalling the devaluation and erasure of the linguistic practices of AELLs but also presenting them as flexible and 're-inventible' subjects whose prior knowledge and abilities are inconsequential. In most cases, however, migrants regard their first languages as an essential element of their personal and cultural identities, linking them to ethnic origins, their parents, families and friends, and as the only bond to an essential part of the lives they left behind (Maitra 2015a, 2015b). As such a reconfiguration of their lingual practices is not only seen as a loss to their 'roots' but may also signal a loss of their social connections and networks in addition to significant changes of losing their familiar surroundings and potentially their status and income and having to deal with issues of social acceptance, discrimination and racism in their host societies.

In light of this reality, Flores and Rosa (2015) critically argues that linguistic stigmatisation, better known as raciolinguistic profiling should be understood less as a reflection of objective linguistic practices than of perceptions that construe appropriateness based on speakers' racial positions. Along the same lines, Santos de Sousa (2007), in what he describes as recognitive justice, has argued against eurocentrism leading to epistemicide – the 'murder of knowledge' of the south and the subjugation of cultures that are perceived as subordinated (see also Santos de Sousa 2014). In his advocacy, Santos de Sousa calls for recognition of the diversity of knowledge and ability sources, the equality of knowers, and the inclusion of previously excluded sources of knowledge production. In this sense, advocates of appropriateness-based models of language education

can critically re-examine the ways that particular people's linguistic practices are being stigmatized by rethinking who decides what is 'standard' English, what constitutes standard forms of English and how inclusive is what is perceived as standard English in terms of cultural exchanges and dialogue.

4. Pedagogical Approaches to AELL

Substantial literature has demonstrated that the pedagogical approaches of many AELL programmes/classes are informed by discursive practices of English standardisation and whiteness (e.g., Silverstein 1998; Rosa 2016; Maitra and Guo 2019; Von Esch et al. 2020; Chaka 2021). Standard English (SE), which is characterised as the existence of a universally acceptable set of rules guiding the use of English both in spoken and written forms (Bacon 2017), serves as a normative benchmark that is used to evaluate all other forms of English. Any divergence from the conventional principles of spoken and written SE is often considered to be unconventional and incorrect, including the English dialect and accent spoken by non-native AELLs.

The emergence of this development has given rise to naturalised binary concept of standard English and non-standard English, first language and second language, and native and non-native English speaker amongst other terminologies, with the former typically associated with superior linguistic capabilities and used as a reference point to judge the perceived linguistic inadequacies of the latter. Nonetheless, as scholars (e.g., Rosa 2016; Bacon 2017; Von Esch et al. 2020) contend, the ideology is imbued with a sense of myth: while it is assumed to exist, it is impossible to pinpoint actual speakers of SE within a geo-linguistic setting. The only living relic of SE is its sentimental attachment to Anglo-Saxonism – a manifestation of which is Anglo-Americanism. But even then, this is a distant, if not an elusive, and romanticised vision of SE (Silverstein 1998).

The existence of both British and American Standard English raises the question of which one holds superiority, and which is the subordinate standard. Scholars in English language purism have not yet reached a definitive conclusion on this subject. The situation is further complicated by the existence of multiple standard and non-standard varieties of English, including African American English, Spanglish, West African Pidgin English amongst many other varieties of Creole. More so, studies have increasingly focused on revitalising heritage linguistic practices associated with various indigenous and (im)migrant groups as part of broader efforts to promote multilingualism (Labov 1972; Poplack 2013; Wigglesworth et al. 2013; Phipps and Kay 2014; Sabaté-Dalmau 2018). As such, Godley et al. (2015) challenge the assumption that standardised English is inherently superior and more grammatical compared to the English variety spoken by language minoritised learners.

Another point to consider is the fact that SE itself is rooted in the notion of a linguistic model based on the norms of native English speakers (Kubota and Lin 2009) which AELL programmes/classes strive to emulate without adequate consideration of the notion of 'native speaker' having its own polemics,

and being a controversial subject (Kumaravadivelu 2006; Bacon 2017). In some sense, the construct reinforces binarised dichotomies such as the association of standard English with whiteness, while non-standard English is associated with non-whiteness. Little wonder Kubota et al. (2021) observe that admiration and surprise are expressed simultaneously (often accompanied by compliments such as ‘your English is so good’) when a non-native English speaker or a perceived linguistically minoritised individual demonstrates high-level proficiency in written or spoken English. These issues have been examined by scholars (Kubota and Lin 2009; Sabaté-Dalmau 2018) in the past and in the present (Abodunrin et al. in press) seeking to demonstrate how subtle and inadvertent communication practices of complimenting the English language abilities of non-native English speakers could exacerbate raciolinguistic otherness and impact learning experiences.

As established in this section, within English teaching classrooms, binarised dichotomies are often predicated on Eurocentric and homogenising reasoning. Consequently, associating native speakers with standard English denotes an ideological inclination that overlooks the diverse form of English spoken by immigrant adults in AELL classes. The same flaw applies to linking the native speaker to whiteness and English standard, as there are native English speakers who are not of white racial/ethnic backgrounds as well as white speakers who only speak English varieties. So also, are those who despite not being native English speakers are proficient in the use of English by reason that English is the adopted lingua franca of their home countries. These stereotypical discursive practices aligns with Santos de Sousa’s «monoculture [logic] of the dominant scale » (2014, 274) where the hegemonic scale (standard English) wields the power to dismiss all possible scales (all non-standard forms of English).

Conclusion

The continual dominance of English has brought with it both advantages and disadvantages, its colonial legacy notwithstanding. While English has become a tool for communication and a means of achieving better opportunities in some cases, it has also led to the devaluation of other languages and cultures. The increasing use of standardised tests and native-speaking teachers has further perpetuated this dominance. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that English language teaching is inclusive and culturally sensitive to diverse groups and that the growth of English does not come at the cost of the devaluation of other languages and cultures.

More importantly, the issues associated with English being the language of a colonising nation must be addressed in order to decolonise our ways of thinking and working in a globalised world, shifting the power dynamic that traditionally favored Western nations. This will mean challenging the dominant English pedagogy in adult language learning that has failed to adequately address the unique needs and challenges faced by transnational immigrants, limiting their

potential for successfully acquiring language abilities in a way that preserves their ethnic linguistic practices and yet equip them with the necessary competencies to thrive in their workplaces and the society at large. As such, we recommend a more diverse and inclusive approach that recognizes the complexity of the language learning process and considers the various social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds of the learners. This can be achieved through the promotion of multi and plurilingualism and broader inclusion of cultural materials in language teaching and learning. To sum, the success of transnational immigrants in acquiring English proficiency will depend on a pedagogy and curriculum that center on the diversity of their experiences and needs.

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