

Professors' English-only or Multilingual Approaches in English Language Teacher Education at Ecuadorian Universities

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Abstract

Preparing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers is a key challenge for higher education institutions in countries like Ecuador. This research summary describes the language use practices that university-based English language teacher educators employ when teaching content courses (such as pedagogy and research methods) and explores how these relate to their expressed purposes of teacher education and language ideologies. The convergent mixed-methods design employs survey data from 115 professors from 21 Ecuadorian universities and focus group data from 28 of those professors with various language use approaches. This research is guided by decolonial theory and the Capabilities Approach and by literature on linguistic imperialism, native-speakerism, and multilingualism. Findings extend research on language use from the English teaching field into teacher education and Comparative and International Higher Education research, where exploration of the benefits and drawbacks of English-only versus multilingual approaches are needed given the prevalence of English-medium instruction.

Keywords: EFL, English-only, language-in-education, language ideologies, mixed methods, multilingual, teacher education

Since the 1990s, higher education institutions in Latin America have followed global trends in reforming teacher education to address educational quality (Voisin & Ávalos-Bevan, 2022). One key area is English language teacher education (ELTE). English is seen as an essential global skill, but the success of English language teaching in the region has been limited, which is often attributed to shortcomings of teachers and ELTE (Barahona & Darwin, 2021; Stanton & Fiszbein, 2019). While efforts to improve ELTE often emphasize international standards and ‘best practices’ (such as those developed by the European Union or the British Council), some scholars point to the need for recognizing local expertise and empowering teachers in the Global South (Castañeda-Londoño, 2021; González Moncada, 2007, 2021). Such tensions echo ongoing conversations in Comparative and International Education regarding globalized ‘best practices’ (Ramirez et al., 2016; Robertson, 2016) versus contextualized pedagogies and teacher agency (that is, power to define and enact effective pedagogy) (Khoja-Moolji, 2017; Vavrus & Bartlett, 2012).

Language of instruction is “the elephant in the room” (Kerr, 2016, p. 519), rarely fore-fronted in discussions of ELTE. However, English-medium instruction is a notable trend in global higher education as institutions, faculty and students experience pressures and incentives to use English as an academic language in a variety of contexts (Covele, 2022; Qin, 2022; Yallew, 2022). World-wide, university-based ELTE has increasingly adopted English-medium instruction (Dang et al., 2013), following the broader pattern in higher education and a norm in the English teaching field. Common fallacies underlie English-medium instruction trends in higher education, specifically the ‘maximum exposure fallacy’—the assumption that the more English instruction, the better—and the ‘monolingual fallacy’ and ‘native speaker fallacy’—assumptions that monolingual instruction by ‘native’ or ‘native-like’ teachers is optimal (Kedzierski, 2016). Meanwhile, potential harms to teaching content courses in English are seldom considered (Kedzierski, 2016). Ideologies influencing language-in-education, such as linguistic imperialism—privileging English over other languages—and native-speakerism—privileging ‘native’ over ‘non-native speakers’ of English—are prevalent in Latin American ELTE (González Moncada, 2007; Zaidan, 2020). However, a ‘multi/plural turn’ has emerged in the English language teaching field, which embraces diverse forms of language use and inclusion of learners’ full linguistic repertoires, at least theoretically (Kubota, 2016). Nonetheless, it is questionable how much multilingual approaches and ideals have challenged dominant practices and ideologies outside of North American academia (Kubota, 2016).

Research Purpose & Questions

The research summarized here describes language use practices in ELTE and explores how those practices relate to the purposes of teacher education and to the prevalence of language ideologies of linguistic imperialism, native-speakerism, or multilingualism. I focus on university-based ELTE in Ecuador, a country pointed to in the media as having particularly low English proficiency (De Angelis, 2022). Like many countries, Ecuador has struggled to prepare English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers with both language proficiency and teaching skill and has significantly reformed ELTE in higher education over the last decade (Cajas et al., 2023; Kuhlman & Serrano, 2017). This summary presents preliminary quantitative and qualitative findings from in-progress mixed-methods dissertation research with higher education faculty teaching ELTE courses, addressing the questions:

1. How much do EFL teacher educators use English, Spanish, or a multilingual approach when teaching content courses and what purposes, ideologies, and/or teacher educator characteristics are associated with these approaches?
2. How do EFL teacher educators understand the relationship between their language use practices and the purposes of teacher education that they value?

Literature Review

Research suggests multilingual approaches can foster language and content learning and ameliorate language-related inequities in education (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020; Galante et al., 2020; Rabbidge, 2019). Yet, the potential for using multilingual practices within ELTE has been researched rarely and mostly in North American contexts (Alarcón et al., 2022; Morales et al., 2020; Tian, 2020). Multilingual approaches are largely “taboo” (Barahona, 2020, p. 5) in Latin American ELTE, where an English-only ideal persists (Banegas, 2020; Zaidan, 2020). In these contexts, ELTE students often have limited English proficiency (Abad et al., 2019; Banegas & Martínez Argudo, 2019; Morales et al., 2020), so programs may attempt to develop language and pedagogy simultaneously through instruction in English (Argudo et al., 2018; Barahona & Darwin, 2021). In Ecuador, undergraduate ELTE programs include language-learning courses but face time constraints (Cajas et al., 2023). Many Ecuadorian universities’ ELTE curriculums indicate that, aside from initial general education courses, most content subjects (such as pedagogy and research methods) are also to be taught in English. Professors make daily language-use choices even when the language of instruction is established as English or Spanish, and language of course delivery is sometimes left entirely to professors’ discretion.

Literature on Latin American ELTE highlights a tension between competing purposes of fostering pedagogical learning and language learning and suggests language is often prioritized in program design and delivery (Abad et al., 2019; Argudo et al., 2018; Banegas & Martínez Argudo, 2019; Barahona, 2015; Martin, 2016). Both pedagogy and language outcomes overshadow development of teacher identity and cognition (Castañeda-Londoño, 2021; Mendes & Finardi, 2018). An accountability-driven approach has characterized language policy (Kuhlman & Serrano, 2017; Stanton & Fiszbein, 2019), often emphasizing language proficiency standards (González Moncada, 2021; Sierra Ospina, 2016). However, scholars also critique the limitations of decontextualized ELTE and call for an empowerment approach (Barahona & Darwin, 2021; Freeman, 2020; González Moncada, 2007).

While language ideologies appear deeply implicated in considerations of language use and educational purpose, the empirical study of language ideologies within ELTE is limited (Deroo & Ponzio, 2019). Ideologies of linguistic imperialism and native-speakerism have been used as critical analytical lenses in some EFL research in the region (González Moncada, 2021; Mackenzie, 2021; Zaidan, 2020). Examples of these ideologies, such as unsupported suggestions that employing ‘native speakers’ will improve outcomes, are abundant in Latin American policy, academic literature, and media discourse (Banegas & Martínez Argudo, 2019; González Moncada, 2021; González Moncada & Llurda, 2016; Stanton & Fiszbein, 2019).

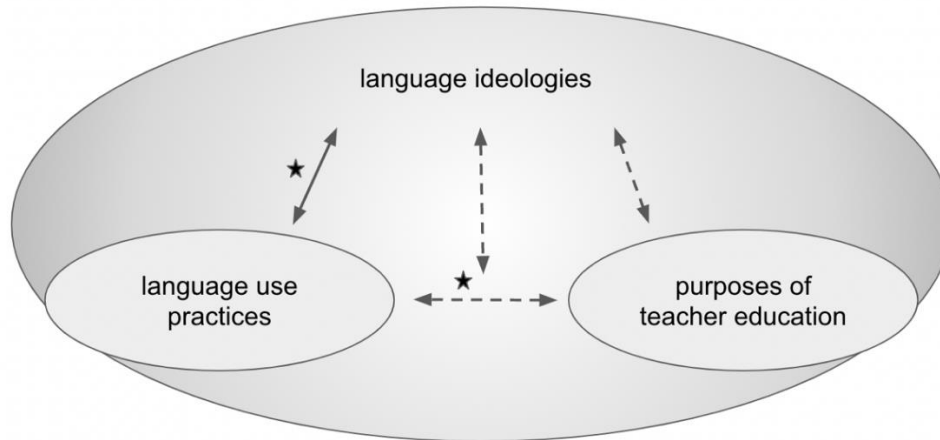
Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical perspectives orient my approach. The first is decolonial theory, which explains language use as laden with ideology (García & Otheguy, 2020; Holliday, 2017; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Phillipson, 1997) and suggests a decolonial approach to ELTE that values local teacher knowledge (González Moncada, 2021; Kumaravadivelu, 2016; Lucero & Castañeda-Londoño, 2021). The second is the Capabilities Approach, which posits that education ought to foster valuable capabilities that support justice and well-being in a given context (DeJaeghere & Walker, 2021) and leads me to study purposes valued by teacher educators. Drawing on these perspectives, I conceptualize the three core concepts as bidirectionally interrelated, as illustrated in Figure 1. The ideologies of linguistic imperialism, native-speakerism and multilingualism defined in literature (Deroo & Ponzio, 2019; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Holliday, 2017; Phillipson, 1997; Zaidan, 2020), which I use to characterize beliefs about language learning that teacher educators hold and perceive among their colleagues and students, set the context for both language use practices and ELTE purposes. The solid line indicates a

relationship explicitly established in the literature, while dotted lines indicate less established links. Stars indicate the focus of this research.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework

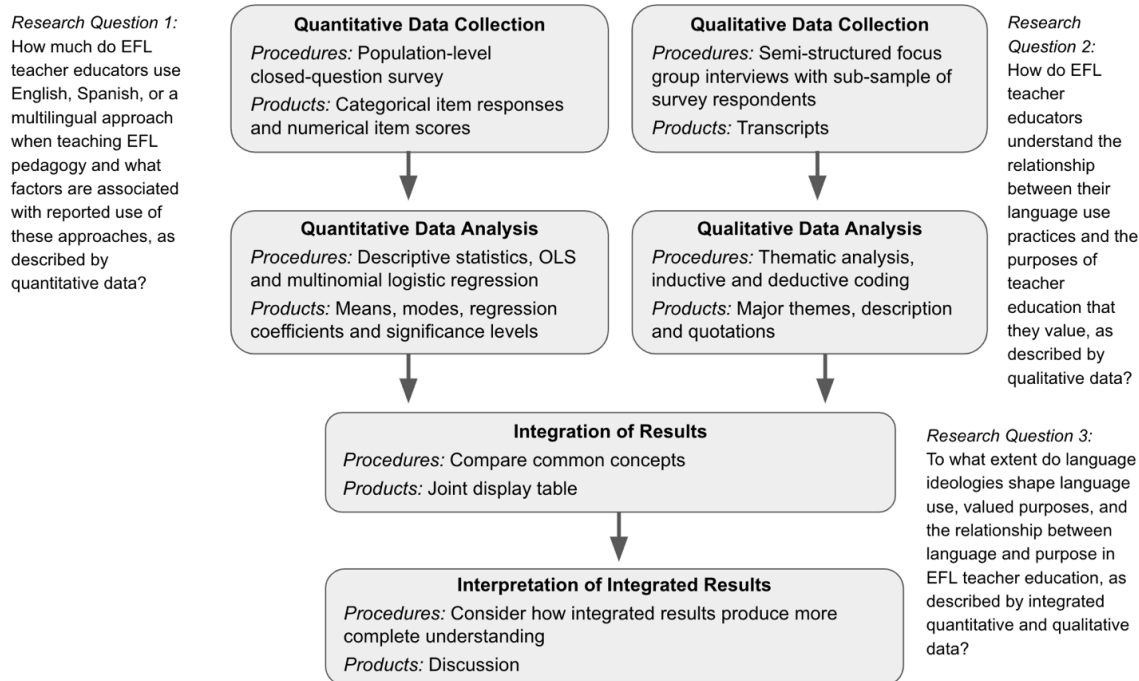


Methodology

This in-progress dissertation research employs a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) described in Figure 2, aiming to provide depth and breadth of evidence on a little-understood topic. Here, I focus on the first two research questions with a preliminary analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data sets.

Figure 2

Overview of the Convergent Mixed-Methods Study Design



Quantitative data was collected through an online survey of professors teaching content courses at Ecuadorian universities offering undergraduate- or graduate-level ELTE. Program coordinators distributed the survey at 22 of 24 such institutions and 119 professors responded (response rate=34% [119/354]), for a total of 115 valid responses. These were used to assemble descriptive statistics for dependent variables describing language use and independent variables describing valued purposes and language ideologies.

Qualitative data was collected through focus-group interviews with a purposive, nested sample of survey respondents (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Focus groups allow for collective articulation of ideas and reduce power imbalances (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2013) such as may arise from my ‘native speaker’ privilege as a North American conducting research in Ecuadorian ELTE. 32 Ecuadorian professors participated in focus groups organized by language use approach, while 5 North American or European professors participated in a mix-approach group. Groups met and were recorded in Zoom and transcribed for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Preliminary Findings

Preliminary quantitative findings indicate that most teacher educators primarily or only use English in non-language content courses (65%), though a notable minority takes a multilingual approach (32%) and a small number primarily or only use Spanish (3%). Empowering teachers and fostering critical thinking, English proficiency and pedagogical skill are all highly valued purposes. Linguistic imperialism and native-speakerism appear slightly more prevalent for teacher educators with English-only or primarily-English approaches than for those with multilingual approaches, according to quantitative survey data where teacher educators responded to statements based on their own beliefs and their perceptions of colleagues’ and students’ beliefs. Average responses show greater agreement with statements representing linguistic imperialism (such as “the best methods and resources for English language teaching come from English-speaking countries”) and native-

speakerism (such as, “the goal of learning English is to become as similar as possible to a native-speaker”) where teacher educators also report using more English.

Preliminary qualitative findings suggest that many teacher educators consider use of some Spanish necessary due to students’ lack of English proficiency upon entering ELTE. The extent to which they see incorporation of students’ own language as a valuable pedagogical strategy rather than as a failure or necessary evil (Macaro, 2001) relates to the ELTE purposes they most value. The strongest proponents of an English-only ideal, such as the professor who stated that “the most important quality of any English teacher will always be that they know English and that they are fluent in it”, most highly value future teachers’ English proficiency. The strongest proponents of a multilingual approach prioritize developing pedagogy and teacher identity and cognition, like the professor who emphasized that “we’re teaching *teachers*, we’re not teaching *language*.” Meanwhile, many teacher educators appear torn between purposes as well as languages.

Conclusion

This research aims to open dialogue on language use in Latin American ELTE and help teacher educators and programs reflect on how their approaches to language may or may not support their aims and values. Drawing on debate surrounding English-only versus multilingual approaches within the English teaching field, it will contribute to the study of Comparative and International Higher Education by illuminating how language in education may reflect and reinforce ideas about what kind of education is valuable, particularly when it comes to teaching teachers. This consideration of links between language, purpose, and ideology is important given the prevalence of English-medium instruction in global higher education, as well as tensions between standard ‘best practices’ versus contextualized pedagogies.

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