

Recognizing Indigenous Knowledges: The Imperative of Decolonization in Higher Education in Chile

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ABSTRACT

This reflection explores the critical importance of decolonization in higher education, emphasizing the recognition and integration of Indigenous knowledges and epistemologies into teacher education courses. Drawing from a critical conversation with a Chilean academic deeply engaged in decolonial practices, the discussion highlights how traditional Western-centric models of education have historically marginalized Indigenous perspectives, leading to a narrow and incomplete understanding of knowledge. The academic highlights the necessity of challenging these dominant paradigms by acknowledging and valuing the rich, diverse epistemologies that Indigenous communities contribute to helping us read the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987) through different onto-epistemological lenses. This process of decolonization is not merely an academic exercise but a transformative approach that seeks to create a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape that is sensitive to diverse voices, perspectives, ways of knowing and being. By integrating Indigenous knowledges, higher education institutions can foster a more holistic and diverse intellectual environment, ultimately contributing to the broader goals of social justice and reconciliation.

Key Words: Decolonization; Indigenous knowledges, Higher Education, Chile, Epistemologies

Introduction

Decolonization has attracted a great deal of interest in higher education. While a great deal of scholarly work has focused on ‘decentring western traditions and practices’ (Tully, 2024) in (English) language education (e.g. Bacquet, 2021; Castañeda-Peña et al., 2024; Kramsch, 2019; Kubota, 2020; Makoni et al., 2023), there remains an ongoing need to explore how these decolonial shifts can be practically implemented in classrooms, curricula, and institutional policies and practices.

Any discussion, reflection or piece of research with a focus on decolonization should not ignore the role and status of the English language in societies and education across the globe. A great deal of scholarly research has focused on the role of English as a tool of social, cultural, linguistic, and epistemic imperialism, positioning the language at the centre of decolonization debates in education and language policy. Professor Robert Phillipson’s seminal work in the 1990s pioneered an influential movement that brought attention to the destructive power of English, coining the term "linguistic imperialism" to describe the ways in which English systematically undermines and marginalizes local, autochthonous, and indigenous languages. Phillipson (1994, 2006) argued that the global dominance of English perpetuates inequalities, often acting as a ‘killer’ language that contributes to the erosion of linguistic diversity and cultural heritage. His research raised critical awareness of the need to de-centre the supremacy of English in favor of promoting multilingualism and linguistic justice, ensuring that local languages are not only preserved but also integrated into educational systems and societal structures in meaningful ways.

Building on Phillipson’s contributions, Alastair Pennycook expanded the conversation by examining the intersections of language, power, and colonial legacies, particularly in postcolonial contexts. Pennycook (1998, 2007) explored how English functions as a vehicle of neocolonialism, shaping identities, knowledge production, and power dynamics across different societies. He highlighted the complexity of English as both a tool for global communication and a mechanism for reinforcing hierarchies of knowledge, suggesting that decolonization requires rethinking how English is taught, used, and positioned within global systems of power. Pennycook’s work encouraged scholars and educators to critically engage with the ideological underpinnings of English language education, advocating for

more equitable approaches that recognize and empower local languages and cultures.

Decolonization in higher education is a crucial process that seeks to address the historical and ongoing marginalization and devalorization of Indigenous knowledges within academic institutions. In a recent conversation with an academic, Dr. Diaz, deeply involved in decolonial work, I sought to develop a more nuanced understanding of the scholar's views and lived academic and personal experiences about efforts to decolonize higher education in Chile. The importance of this endeavor was emphasized as central to creating more equitable and inclusive spaces whereby the knowledges and practices of non-dominant communities are taken into account. The academic argued that traditional Western-centric models of education have long dominated universities, often to the (detrimental) exclusion of diverse epistemologies that are essential to a comprehensive and holistic process of 'forming' professionals in higher education (Battiste, 2013). Before delving into some of the key aspects of the dialogue, it is worth noting some of the historical background of colonization in Chile.

Colonization in Chile

The legacies of colonization have left a significant imprint on educational and linguistic landscapes around the world, and Chile is no exception. Spanish colonization in Chile established European languages and cultures as dominant, marginalizing Indigenous languages and identities. This colonial past has also set the stage for the contemporary phenomenon of linguistic imperialism, particularly through the prioritization of English as the language of global success and opportunity (Barahona, 2016). English language teaching (ELT) in Chile today reflects both the historical residue of 'epistemic and linguistic' colonization and modern neoliberal ideologies, as it aims to integrate the nation into a globalized economy that values English over local linguistic diversity (Veliz et al., 2024). Even though this present reflection does not focus upon ELT in Chile, of which much has been discussed and critiqued (Barahona, 2016; Barahona et al., 2024; Veliz et al., 2024), it is worth mentioning for it has greatly contributed to the perpetuation of neo-conservative imperialist ideologies that lead to the devalorization of local knowledges and cultures.

Spanish colonization in Chile, beginning in the 16th century, resulted in the systematic suppression of Indigenous languages such as Mapuzungun, Quechua, Aymara among other autochthonous languages. Indigenous communities were forced to adapt to Spanish linguistic norms, Catholic

religious beliefs and a wider range of values and practices imposed by Spanish colonizers, a process that weakened local languages and cultures over generations. This colonial language hierarchy established a template in which the languages and knowledge systems of marginalized communities were deemed inferior, and this attitude has persisted into the present. Despite the resilience and constant struggle of Indigenous communities to re-claim their land, languages and identities, the Spanish language has dominated education, media, and government, with minimal institutional support for Indigenous languages.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, linguistic imperialism re-emerged with the global rise of English, which has now largely replaced Spanish as the “language of power” for greater employability, international relations, economic prosperity and diplomacy. English linguistic imperialism, as theorized by Phillipson (1992), asserts that English is promoted globally in a way that prioritizes its value over other languages, positioning it as essential for social mobility and success. In Chile, the ideology of English as a “global language” was formalized in policy initiatives like the “English Opens Doors” program (Programa Inglés Abre Puertas), launched by the Chilean Ministry of Education in 2003. This initiative, aimed at promoting English proficiency from an early age, reflects the neoliberal belief that English acquisition is a vehicle for global competitiveness and economic advancement. However, the implementation of such programs has had implications for national identity and local language preservation, as resources are funneled into English language education at the expense of Indigenous language programs.

The dialogue

The dialogue, which took place at the beginning of 2024 over Zoom, and recorded for analysis purposes, was an honest, open, transparent and rather unstructured conversation about Dr. Diaz’s (pseudonym) views, beliefs and, most importantly, practices towards the integration of Indigenous perspectives in higher education as an act of decolonial resistance to dominant hegemonic ideologies.

The conversation took place in Spanish, the common language between the author of this reflection and Dr. Diaz. While Dr. Diaz undertook postgraduate studies in the US and therefore claimed to possess a reasonable level of English proficiency, it was agreed that in order to aid fluidity, dynamism and conceptual complexity throughout the dialogue, Dr. Diaz would utilize mainly Spanish. Once automatically recorded on Zoom, the

conversation was translated into English by the author, sent to Dr. Diaz for review and approval. To ensure accuracy and fidelity to the core substance of the ideas translated from Spanish into English, extracts in Spanish and English were randomly selected and sent to a bilingual (Spanish-English) researcher working at a Chilean university for an expert opinion.

One of Dr. Diaz's first interesting points in the discussion was around the 'Western-ization' of higher education which, in his opinion, has become a common, modern practice that legitimizes the forces of the West, and weakens the voices of the South and East.

Universities are Western enterprises, and they have become the medium of Western thinking, reasoning, knowledge and ideologies to pass to other people in other parts of the world. The West has decided what knowledge is more valued, what language is more valued, what cultures are more valued, and things like that. This obviously is very damaging to local communities, cultures and knowledges.

As a historian and educational sociologist, Dr. Diaz reflected that he feels "privileged" to be working, teaching and researching at the intersection of both history and sociology. He commented that,

Not every discipline in higher education lends itself to the critical analysis of dominant discourses and ideologies, and of the ways in which we can dismantle these in 'eloquent' ways. I mean, not too abrupt.

The strategic academic positioning of Dr. Diaz allows for opportunities to not only discuss but also question the perspectives and stories that have been traditionally told in higher education from a singular, narrow and monolithic perspective. He adds that,

I teach history in different programs, and also sociology in education so I can question history from the perspective of the colonizer and the colonized. I like to do this because it challenges students, their thinking and their perspectives. I think it's important to look at history from our local perspective, what we lost, what was imposed on us, what has disappeared, and what was robbed of us. This is a way of integrating the critical aspect of history and emphasize the importance of traditional knowledges more.

This commentary captures Dr. Diaz’s approach to integrating Indigenous perspectives in higher education as a form of decolonial resistance. His focus on history and sociology provides a unique academic lens for critically examining dominant narratives and the often-overlooked experiences of colonized populations. Dr. Diaz’s work challenges the singular, monolithic views traditionally upheld in higher education, creating space for a more inclusive, critical pedagogy that foregrounds marginalized voices. Moreover, Dr. Diaz’s remark about teaching history “from the perspective of the colonizer and the colonized” highlights his commitment to revealing the complexities of historical narratives. By presenting a local perspective—acknowledging what was lost, imposed, or taken—he brings students closer to the realities of colonial impact and encourages them to question inherited knowledge structures. This approach aligns with decolonial aims to reclaim and integrate the histories and knowledge systems of Indigenous and local communities.

One of the key points raised during the conversation was the need to challenge and deconstruct dominant paradigms. This involves not only recognizing the value of Indigenous knowledges but also integrating them into the curriculum and research frameworks of higher education institutions (Smith, 2012). Dr. Diaz commented that one way of dismantling dominant thinking and ideologies in higher education is, in his view, by “partnering” and collaborating with colleagues to co-design lessons for their university students:

What I do is put some time aside every two weeks to partner and meet with colleagues from other departments, religious studies, journalism, even law to plan together and think of how we can integrate Indigenous perspectives into our own disciplines. For example, look at how media construct the ‘West’ and how we in the South validate that, so how can we turn that around? Or in law, look at rights of Indigenous peoples in Chile, their views of justice, peace, etc. It’s really interesting.

By setting aside time to engage in regular dialogue with colleagues from diverse disciplines—religious studies, journalism, and law—Dr. Diaz demonstrates a commitment to fostering an environment of shared learning and cross-disciplinary reflection. This approach is particularly significant because it recognizes that the decolonization of knowledge is not confined to a single discipline; instead, it requires a concerted, collaborative effort to address the pervasive nature of colonial frameworks across fields of study.

Dr. Diaz further highlighted that the process of decolonization is not merely an academic exercise but a transformative approach that has the potential to reshape the intellectual environment of universities. He remarked that,

I think it's important to do all this for a purpose and with a clear reason in mind. In the end, it's for transforming what we do and the intellectual minds of our students, so they become social activists and great critical thinkers.

By integrating Indigenous perspectives, higher education can foster a more holistic and diverse intellectual climate, ultimately contributing to the broader goals of social justice and reconciliation (Tuck & Yang, 2012). This shift is particularly important in the context of universities that serve diverse student populations, as it allows for a more relevant and meaningful educational experience that acknowledges and respects the cultural identities of all students (Smith, 2012).

In discussing Chile's growing cultural and linguistic diversity, Dr. Diaz notes the substantial changes in the educational landscape over the past two decades. He observes that this diversity enriches educational settings, bringing a wealth of new perspectives and deeper understanding among students. However, he also emphasizes that it presents significant challenges for educators, particularly in adapting curricula, pedagogical practices, and assessment methods to better reflect the varied backgrounds and needs of students while maintaining equitable learning outcomes. Dr. Diaz highlights the tensions between traditional, monolithic educational models and the need for inclusive approaches that address the experiences of Indigenous and migrant students, who often face systemic barriers to full participation.

Higher education, and all areas of education, is becoming very diverse, with students and families from all over, so attention and funding, too, is being directed to supporting these students and families. This, again, negates the diversity of our Indigenous communities, and put them as secondary. When we think of multicultural or multilingual communities in Chile, the first thing that comes to mind is people who speak English and other languages, but not Indigenous languages.

As nations across the globe become more multicultural and multilingual (Veliz, 2023, 2024), increasing concerns arise around equity and inclusion of all perspectives and knowledge systems in a pluralist country. Dr. Diaz

highlights a critical issue in the discourse surrounding diversity and multiculturalism in education, particularly within the Chilean context. It suggests that while educational institutions are increasingly recognizing and responding to cultural and linguistic diversity, there remains a skewed prioritization. The speaker notes that attention and funding are often directed toward supporting immigrant or non-Indigenous multilingual students, a shift that can marginalize the needs and visibility of Indigenous communities. By focusing on students and families who speak “global” languages, such as English, educational institutions may inadvertently reinforce the colonial legacy of valuing certain languages and cultural groups over others, positioning Indigenous languages as peripheral or secondary.

Dr. Diaz further adds that these shifted perspectives towards what he calls “the new diversity” is what needs to be contested, and more systematic efforts need to be made to integrate Indigenous perspectives into education:

The movements of migration, and people coming and going is what I call the new diversity. This is because 700 years ago we already had a very diverse country, and we are not recognizing that diversity in society or in higher education. Universities, programs, academics and everyone must come together to question and contest the current dominant frameworks and make every effort to integrate Indigenous knowledges in our education system.

In conclusion, the conversation highlighted the critical role that recognizing Indigenous knowledges plays in the decolonization of higher education. As universities continue to grapple with their colonial legacies, the integration of Indigenous epistemologies stands out as a necessary step towards creating a more just and equitable academic environment. This work not only benefits Indigenous students and communities but enriches the academic discourse as a whole, leading to a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of knowledge (Battiste, 2013).

Dr. Diaz’s reflections underscore a powerful call for decolonizing higher education by actively integrating Indigenous perspectives and knowledge systems. His work challenges dominant narratives and promotes an inclusive approach to teaching history and sociology that respects Chile’s cultural heritage while fostering critical thought. By engaging colleagues across disciplines, he advocates for a collaborative strategy that redefines diversity to honor both the “new” diversity of recent migration, and the long-standing Indigenous diversity often overlooked. Dr. Diaz’s approach

not only seeks to rectify historical erasures but also aims to empower students as critical thinkers and social activists, prepared to challenge colonial and hegemonic ideologies. This vision of higher education is rooted in social justice and seeks to create a transformative, equitable, and culturally relevant intellectual environment for future generations.

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