# Social Subjects Construction in EFL Teaching Education Programs: Challenges and Opportunities*

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**Abstract**

This article reports the partial results of a research project aimed at interpreting how social actors in Bachelor Degrees programs in Foreign Languages understand the meanings of education. As such, this paper is a first attempt to understand that English Teacher Formation programs have been conceived based on economic models that focus on the construction of skills related to knowledge of the field of study, instead of providing spaces that strengthen the construction of social subjects. We conclude that for English Teacher Formation programs it is necessary to concentrate on possibilities that allow future teachers to be aware of their interculturalities in order to become social subjects. This requires that future teachers negotiate with their communities, the critical evaluation of teaching materials, and the comprehension of local contexts.

**Keywords**: subjects, interculturality, pre-service teachers, English teaching, humanism.

## La construcción de sujetos sociales en los programas de formación de la lengua extranjera: retos y oportunidades

**Resumen**

Este artículo reporta los resultados parciales de un proyecto de investigación cuyo objetivo es interpretar la manera como los actores sociales en los programas de Licenciatura en Lenguas Extranjeras comprenden los sentidos de la educación. Por lo tanto, este artículo es un primer intento por entender que los programas de formación de docentes de inglés se han concebido desde modelos económicos que se enfocan en la construcción de habilidades relacionadas con el conocimiento de la disciplina, en vez de proveer espacios que fortalezcan la construcción de sujetos sociales. Concluimos que para los programas de formación de docentes de inglés es necesario orientarse hacia lo que les permita a los futuros maestros ser conscientes de sus interculturalidades a fin de convertirse en sujetos sociales. Esto requiere que los futuros docentes negocien con sus comunidades, evalúen de manera crítica el material que utilizan y comprendan sus contextos locales.

**Palabras clave:** sujetos, interculturalidad, maestros en formación, enseñanza de inglés, humanismo.

## La construction des sujets sociaux dans les programmes de formation en langues étrangères : enjeux et opportunités

### Résumé

Cet article rend compte des résultats partiels d'un projet de recherche avec l'objectif d'interpréter la manière dont les acteurs sociaux des programmes de licence de langues étrangères comprennent les sens de l'éducation. Par conséquent, cet article est une première tentative pour considérer que les programmes de formation des enseignants d'anglais ont été conçus à partir de modèles économiques qui se concentrent sur la construction de compétences liées à la connaissance de la discipline, au lieu d'en fournir des espaces qui renforcent la formation d'acteurs sociaux. Nous concluons que pour les programmes de formation des enseignants d'anglais, il est nécessaire de se focaliser sur ce qui permet aux futurs enseignants d'être conscients de leurs interculturalités afin d'en devenir des sujets sociaux. Cela exige que les futurs enseignants s'engagent auprès de leurs communautés, évaluent de manière critique le matériel qu'ils utilisent et comprennent leurs contextes locaux.

**Mots-clés:** sujets, interculturalité, enseignants en formation, enseignement de l'anglais, acteurs sociaux, humanisme.

## A construção de sujeitos sociais em programas de formação de línguas estrangeiras: desafios e oportunidades

### Resumo

Este artigo relata os resultados parciais de um projeto de pesquisa cujo objetivo é interpretar a maneira como os atores sociais dos programas de Licenciatura em Línguas Estrangeiras compreendem os significados da educação. Portanto, este artigo é uma primeira tentativa de entender que os programas de formação de professores de inglês têm sido concebidos a partir de modelos econômicos que focam na construção de habilidades relacionadas ao conhecimento da disciplina, ao invés de proporcionar espaços que fortaleçam a construção de sujeitos sociais. Concluímos que para os programas de formação de professores de inglês é necessário focar no que permite aos futuros professores tomar consciência de suas interculturalidades para se tornarem sujeitos sociais. Isso requer que os futuros professores se envolvam com suas comunidades, avaliem criticamente o material que usam e compreendam seus contextos locais.

**Palavras-chave**: sujeitos, interculturalidade, professores em formação, ensino de inglês, humanismo.

## Introduction

In this article, our goal is to conceptualize the social subject and how it is constructed when interculturality is at the core of foreign language programs. This paper recognizes the ideas of Touraine (1997) on how the social subject can be constructed based on how he/she sees him/herself as a human being in society and acts upon others. Based on the notion of the social subject, English as a foreign language teaching education programs should focus on promoting spaces for future teachers to come into contact with diverse interculturalities, as opposed to only developing English language skills. Sharing with the other is practically the only way to realize what power relationships and realities exist within cultural structures which, in turn, will build social subjects.

Since the enactment of Law 115 in 1994, educational policies in Colombia have reflected the need to teach a foreign language. Specifically, English was chosen as the main foreign language to be taught beginning in preschool. According to Usma (2009), *Bilingual Colombia* is one of the strongest initiatives ever taken to promote foreign language learning in the country. In an effort to become part of the globalized world, the Colombian educational system declared English as the preeminent foreign language to be taught in schools all over the country. Monetary investments and advertisements to promote English language learning have been substantial, which have been a major strategy in making Colombia a competitive country worldwide.

In order to promote English language teaching and learning, the government designed a series of initiatives. These initiatives were created and launched in alliance with the National Ministry of Education, and they include the *National Program of Bilingualism* (2004-2019), the *Program for Strengthening the Development of Competences in Foreign Languages*, *Bilingual Colombia* (2014-2018), and *The National English Program: Colombia Very Well* (2015- 2025). Since the Colombian National Bilingualism Program was launched in 2004, English language teachers have had to prepare students to reach an intermediate or upper intermediate English proficiency level (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2006, 2014, 2016).

Consequently, the goal of the Colombian National Bilingualism Program is to train Colombian citizens to communicate in English so that they can participate in globalization. To measure the students' English level, the National Ministry of Education created a document titled *The Basic Standards of Competences in Foreign Languages: English* (2006a; 2006b). Authors such as Guerrero-Nieto and Quintero (2021), Gómez Sará (2017), and Guerrero (2008), among many others, argue that this kind of document was an unfortunate decision because their theoretical bases come from exogenous agents which do not consider the socio-cultural, political and economic realities of the Colombian context.

Standardized measurement practices have reached English as a foreign language teaching education programs as well. Pre-service teachers must achieve a high English proficiency level, which is usually measured by a standardized test.

Ramírez (2020), Cárdenas (2009), and Vergara et al. (2009) argued that in the national context, pre-service teaching programs are influenced by the Colombian Ministry of Education standards and its policies. In this sense, there is a tendency to train pre-service teachers to pass, usually, a foreign language test, and some of the components of foreign language teaching programs are solely based on the need to meet national standards.

Thus, teachers conform to set standards, goals, and objectives. However, standardized practices imply that students are all the same, and they all have similar needs and can reach the same academic outcome. As González stated, "Standardization is defended as the adoption of internationally validated models that are adequate for all contexts" (González, 2009, p. 313).

Considering the previous ideas, English as a foreign language teaching education programs that attempt to accomplish the standards proposed by the Ministry of Education through the *National Bilingualism Program* are considered homogenous. Therefore, development and test-taking skills are taught instead of creating formative spaces to build social subjects who transform their realities. Unfortunately, most English as a foreign language teaching education programs are built with economic agendas in mind rather than social dynamics.

In this article, we analyze the concept of social subject and its relationship with interculturality. We attempt to show that it is through the understanding of what interculturality implies that pre-service English as a foreign language teaching education programs can be thought up and transformed based on social dynamics. In doing so, we hope to contribute to the discussion on interculturality as a path towards humanistic perspective of education. We divided this paper into the following sections: the social subject, interculturality, some challenges and opportunities for English as a foreign language teaching education programs and, finally, further thought for discussion.

## The social subject

Touraine (1997) suggested that social subjects are human beings able to understand reality. The author further asserted that each individual lives unique experiences that permeate his/her thoughts and his/her reality. It is through the awareness of such realities that individuals become social subjects. Along the same line, the social subject can be linked to the concept of *Bildung*.

Understanding *Bildung* not only from a historical viewpoint, but also from a modern concept, as stated by Schuck (2020), Vilanou (2001) and Gadamer (1996), integrates it in a humanistic and hermeneutic perspective in connection with pedagogy. *Bildung* is a complex concept which according to the European Association for the Education of Adults (n.d) has deep roots in European thinking and education. *Bildung* is related to the knowledge necessary to interact and care about oneself and others in society. It includes

not only the knowledge of diverse disciplines but also moral and emotional maturity to be able to interpret one's past, comprehend one's present and foresee one's future.

*Bildung* then goes further than accumulating disciplinary knowledge per se, which is the theory, and it moves beyond to how the social subject takes this theoretical knowledge to help others. In practical terms, *Bildung is* necessary for education and pedagogy to transform realities in accordance with the context and needs. In this way, the construction of the social subject in English as a foreign language teaching education programs should be permeated by the concept of *Bildung*.

Thus, social subjects are not just human beings prepared for a competitive world economy; rather, they understand and comprehend cultural diversity. They are also critical and provocative individuals who challenge educational realities (Noguera-Ramírez & Parra, 2015). As such, social subjects try to understand multiple forms of difference, interpretations, ways of knowing, and constructions of knowledges. In other words, social subjects resist against a globalized and capitalist society. Therefore, social subjects are not conversant with students competing for high levels of language proficiency, but they agree with developing their students' intellectual force. What this means for English as a foreign language teaching education programs is that their focus should be on cultural concerns over economic welfare as suggested by Páez (2009).

In this sense, English as a foreign language teaching education programs wonder about how educational systems can account for socio-economic and cultural differences. Their curricula may answer the questions, such as: Whose worldview are educational systems trying to understand? How are identities constructed? How many realities are there? Who constructs knowledge? Which culture is represented in language teaching materials?

Zemelman (2010) and Touraine (1997) concluded that in educational systems, there is a need to have social subjects who care about everyday people and their daily struggles, along with their multishaped identities and subjectivities. This leads us to the point that social subjects are able to comprehend other cultures.

## Interculturality

To introduce the concept of interculturality, it is of paramount importance to comprehend what culture means. Culture is a concept that is used widely in both academic and everyday settings. It has been defined as the set of social, material, and ideological characteristics of a human group. This definition is so broad that it appears not to say much, which could be due to the fact that culture is difficult to define. Actually, it was not until the late 19th century that the concept was formally described by the English anthropologist Edward Tylor (1871).

It is necessary to state that culture is not a univocal concept, in which people with different perspectives agree. On the contrary, as is the case with most crucial terms in the social sciences, culture is discussed and contested from many distinct perspectives. Undoubtedly, major contributions in defining culture have come from the field of anthropology.

The first approach, then, would be to examine Tylor's definition: "Culture in its wide ethnographic sense is the complex universe that includes knowledge, beliefs, art, moral, law and customs, as well as other capabilities and abilities acquired by people and members of society" (Tylor, 1871, p. 6). The preceding definition has several implications. For example, it implies that culture is not biological; culture is acquired by people from their social context. The previous implies that people are not superior than others from a biological point of view. Instead, a child from anywhere in the world and with different physiognomic characteristics will acquire the culture of her or his environment, no matter how culturally or geographically far she or he is from their original culture. Although this notion seems obvious today, it challenged popular beliefs of white superiority in the 19th and part of the 20th centuries. Thus, culture is a social construct as opposed to an individual one; it can only be created in society. Although, over time, Tylor's concept has been refined and shaped, most of his view continues to be valid.

Culture is usually taken for granted. People do not ponder about their own cultural features, unless they are contrasting themselves with another group. Nonetheless, people have different interpretations that make them unique. The previous remarks take us to the following point. In order to study culture, social scientists need some degree of contact with other cultures. It is through this contact that we become aware of the underlying structures and behaviors of our own and others' cultures. Therefore, being with the other is perhaps the only way to understand the power relationships and realities within our cultural structures.

Thus, to move towards such an understanding, the concept of interculturality needs to be considered. Interculturality, from a comprehensive and critical perspective, "aims at respect and coexistence between cultures, which allows not only an equal relationship but also mutual learning and enrichment" (Cruz, 2013, p. 55). Comprehension of cultural structures and mutual learning might happen if one is aware of the intercultural practices in a given community. Ramos-Holguín (2021) suggests that "Intercultural practices are expressions in which interculturality can be perceived, and they connect to a person's academic and personal lived experiences" (p. 96). In other words, intercultural practices allow human beings to be aware of the diverse interculturalities which, in turn, is a key point to become social subjects.

In the following section we will open a discussion based on the challenges and opportunities for English as a foreign language teaching education programs in order to create formative spaces that help in the construction of future English teachers as social subjects.

## Challenges and Opportunities

First, the processes of building social subjects would not be possible without the active participation of future teachers and the community. English as a foreign language teaching education programs can provide formative spaces for future teachers to be involved with the community. Ramos and Aguirre (2016) stressed the need for teachers to be part of the community they work with. The authors suggested that "Teachers must be introduced to the community's relevant ethnographic information in order to smoothly enter into the community, avoiding conflicts that could arise by not having cultural information about the group in question" (Ramos & Aguirre, 2016, p. 215). Researchers like Moll and González (2004) have demonstrated the benefits of getting to know familiar contexts well and then building connections with families and communities. In fact, this might help future teachers to understand the intercultural practices in a specific context which in turn might guide them to become critical and provocative social subjects in their educational communities.

When future teachers develop empathetic feelings towards the community, they are involved in, they foster a connection with one's roots, they engage in social participation, and they question realities. Questions that can be answered in unison with members of the community to promote sharing include: How are human rights understood in my community? How is the right to liberty exercised and appreciated when there is a lack of freedom of speech? How does the community conceive globalization? How is life affected when food and health care are not fully available? and how is happiness understood?

Second, English as a foreign language teaching education programs could contribute to move future teachers from being users to be critical and influential actors in the selection and use of teaching materials. The idea of having curriculum that promotes superiority of certain cultures is now understood as colonial education. For example, textbooks often exalt the target culture, but students are rarely asked to question, discuss, and compare this culture with their own daily experiences. In this vein, Martínez Boom (2004) argues that power nations, through publishing houses and textbooks, promote cultural supremacy.

Undoubtedly, teaching materials may have supported political and economic interests of pre-established systems; thus, conserving the dominant *status quo*. Academics such as Núñez-Pardo (2018), Soto-Molina and Méndez (2020), Rico (2012), Pulverness (2003), Tomlinson (2003) and Canagarajah (1999) have examined the nature and social function of materials development and they have identified a mercantilist global interest. As a result, the materials development industry sustains the standardization and homogenization of pedagogic and cultural practices connected to the teaching of foreign languages regardless of the specificity of each region, country or continent. This suggests that publishing companies are indifferent to specific local needs.

The choice of teaching materials, textbooks, and the way contents are negotiated in classroom are not devoid of ideology, nothing is. Everything in a text is a way of displaying what is considered important. For instance, an English language learning textbook may exclude other varieties of Englishes except for British or American English. Additionally, the selected texts might systematically avoid social, intellectual, or cultural problems. In these cases, we can find ideological traces of what the author(s) considered important or not.

Issues, such as human rights, refugees, global economics, nutrition, environment, and health, can be addressed in the materials. Some of the questions future teachers need to answer are: Would students with a low socioeconomic status be interested in discussing world issues? Would students be interested in understanding how other countries have solved problems related to health, nutrition, etc.?

Third, English as a foreign language teaching education programs should promote sensitive pedagogies. It is a fact that in Colombian classrooms, as Aguirre and Ramos (2011) mentioned, "there is a mixture of students in the classrooms coming from different backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, ethnicities and religious beliefs" (Aguirre & Ramos, 2011, p. 170). Lately, there has been a tremendous awareness in EFL classrooms about the realities of students and their diverse backgrounds. Beyond concerns about gender, ethnicity and race, invisible diversities such as exclusion, social class, upbringing and life experiences have started to be recognized. As such, Ramos and Aguirre (2014) further asserted that the Colombian population attending schools nowadays demand a teacher who can adapt his or her methodologies to meet the diverse needs of class. This implies for teachers to rethink their relationships with students, be open and flexible, challenge misconceptions, and disrupt hierarchies. Then, the concept of particularity (Kumaravadivelu, 1994) comes into play.

Particularity relates to the need for a pedagogy that is both relevant and sensitive to a particular group, which includes teachers and learners pursuing specific goals in a particular institutional context embedded in a unique sociocultural milieu. Future English teachers should think of alternatives for reconceptualizing English language teaching contexts as global spaces. In such a way, future teachers would not adopt whatever is prescribed but they adjust and negotiate global and local agendas. They also recreate possibilities for them to be, become and know.

## Discussion

We began this text hoping to clarify the meaning of social subjects and interculturality and its relationship. We stated that the social subject is still needed in English as a foreign language teaching education programs, as well as the comprehension of what interculturality means and what it implies in the construction of social subjects. Then, we proposed some opportunities for English as a foreign language teaching education programs. In doing so, we argued that the construction of the social subject happens through the negotiation with the community, the critical evaluation of teaching materials, and the comprehension of local contexts.

We truly believe that English as a foreign language teaching education programs should focus on the concept of *Bildung* which is a process undertaken by social actors that allow them to make informed decisions about their own intellectual achievements, in accordance with their own cultural parameters. In other words, these programs should foster individuals who are able to question and to problematize fixed cultural structures that usually perceive them as homogenous entities which impede the recognition of intercultural practices.

The comprehension of others through the understanding of intercultural practices provides us with the opportunity to communicate with others in diverse languages, have the tools to analyze without bias, and comprehend what is being said by the other and his or her culture. In addition, it helps future teachers to develop skills to critically compare beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that appear both in their own culture and in other cultures. All the aforementioned aspects are the ones that build social subjects who can challenge and transform, if necessary, their realities.

All in all, our take is that English as a foreign language teaching education programs need to go to the fundamental questions to recall their past, analyze their present and foresee their future. Those questions from the perspective of Cadavid-Ramírez (2014) can be summarized as follows: what weighs more in education either the language discipline or the construction of social subjects? Which principles should guide curricula that promotes the *Bildung?* Does education promote dialogues among its social actors?

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