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ARTÍCULO DE INVESTIGACIÓN
RESEARCH REPORT

English Language Teachers' Subjectivities in Shaping Transformative Practices: Forces Between Cultural Essentialization and Internal Experiences*

Las subjetividades de los profesores de inglés en la configuración de prácticas transformadoras: fuerzas entre la esencialización cultural y las experiencias internas

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the tension between external forces of cultural essentialization and the internal forces of English language teachers' subjectivities in shaping transformative practices within English Language Teaching (ELT). Grounded in critical applied linguistics and drawing on poststructuralist views of culture, the article conceptualizes culture not as a fixed set of national traits, but rather as socially constructed through teachers' lived experiences and discursive practices. Methodologically, the reported study employs narrative inquiry to analyze the life stories of two English language teachers, focusing on how they construct and negotiate cultural subjectivities across personal, academic, and professional domains. Findings show that while institutional discourses and curricula impose stereotypical, Anglocentric, reductive, and essentialized notions of culture, teachers negotiate and resist these impositions by resignifying their lived experiences, cultivating agency, and positioning themselves as cultural actors. In doing so, their narratives highlight both resistance to hegemonic representations and the development of transformative pedagogical practices that position culture as dynamic, situated, and dialogic. Accordingly, the article contributes to ongoing debates in ELT by foregrounding teachers' subjectivities as central to reimagining culture in language education.

Palabras clave: culture, foreign language instruction, English, teachers, education and culture.

RESUMEN

Este artículo aborda la tensión entre las fuerzas externas de esencialización cultural y las fuerzas internas de las subjetividades de profesores de inglés en la configuración de prácticas transformadoras dentro de la enseñanza del inglés (ELT). Con fundamento en la lingüística aplicada crítica y recurriendo a perspectivas postestructuralistas de la cultura, este artículo conceptualiza la cultura no como un conjunto fijo de rasgos nacionales, sino como una construcción social a través de las experiencias vividas y las prácticas discursivas de los profesores. Metodológicamente, este estudio que el artículo reporta emplea la investigación narrativa para analizar las historias de vida de dos profesores de inglés, centrándose en cómo construyen y negocian subjetividades culturales en los ámbitos personal, académico y profesional. Los hallazgos indican que, si bien los discursos y currículos institucionales imponen nociones estereotipadas, anglocéntricas, reductivas y esencializadas de la cultura, los profesores negocian y resisten estas imposiciones resignificando sus experiencias vividas, cultivando la agencia y posicionándose como actores culturales. Sus narrativas destacan tanto la resistencia a las representaciones hegemónicas como el desarrollo de prácticas pedagógicas transformadoras que posicionan la cultura como dinámica, situada y dialógica. Este artículo contribuye a los debates actuales en el campo de la enseñanza de la lengua inglesa como lengua extranjera, al poner de relieve las subjetividades de los profesores como elementos centrales para reimaginar la cultura en la enseñanza de idiomas.

Keywords: cultura, enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, inglés, profesores, educación y cultura.

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INTRODUCTION

In the field of ELT, culture has traditionally been presented through behaviors, foods, celebrations, and customs that are characteristic—often stereotypically—of countries with global cultural hegemony perceived as most prominent or exotic from a foreign perspective (Kramsch, 2006). However, this study draws on Kramsch's (2003) definition of culture as the process through which individuals interpret the discursive system and the experiences encounter. Building on this perspective, the present study examines the narratives of English Language (EL) teachers to explore how they have constructed and conceptualized culture through the meanings they ascribe to their lived experiences. Thus, through an analysis grounded in teachers' life stories, this research promotes an understanding of culture in ELT as dynamic and socially constructed from a bottom-up perspective.

Our research commitment to exploring culture from the standpoint of EL teachers arises from two main concerns in ELT. The first relates to EL teachers' discouragement over their disregarded proposals and silenced voices when addressing cultural content in their classrooms. Within many institutional contexts, mandatory curricula and textbooks in ELT require strict adherence, constraining teachers' autonomy. This situation reinforces a problematic view of EL teachers as implementers of predesigned materials, rather than as active agents capable of constructing and reconstructing cultural dynamics. Hence, teachers are often relegated to the role of instructors who deliver static information undermining their intellectual agency and diminishing their position as cultural actors in education.

The second motivation for this research stems from the essentialized view of culture fostered by curricula and textbooks. Zarei and Khalessi (2011), for instance, found that textbooks frequently adhere to four Western cultural patterns: values, norms, institutions, and artifacts. These themes are not only essentialized, but they are also tied to dominant countries while excluding learners' lived experiences and cultural representations. Based on the aforementioned concerns, in this article, we problematize these essentialized portrayals and their implications for both teaching practice and teachers' cultural subjectivities.

Furthermore, as Kumaravadivelu (2008) points out, cultural stereotypes can perpetuate discrimination and racism by labeling individuals according to their nationality, religion, profession, gender, and other identity markers. Such framing often leads to the essentialization of subjectivities, reducing individuals to specific attributes and overlooking the complexity of their local cultural contexts. This essentialization simplifies human experience by fostering value prejudices about what the Self and the Other are supposed to be. In contrast, in line with Kramsch's (2003) conceptualization, culture in this study refers to the subjects' process of making sense of personal and social experiences.

In alignment with these concerns and from a socio-critical standpoint, we, as teacher-researchers, adopted an epistemological position grounded in social critique and transformation. This perspective informed our decision to conduct a narrative inquiry, enabling us to listen to and analyze EL teachers' life stories. Through this approach, we sought to promote an understanding of culture as a local construction, challenging stereotypes, amplifying EL teachers' voices, and recognizing them as cultural agents. The analysis of their life stories was divided into two major themes: "From Prescribed Representations to Lived and Self-Constructed Meanings: (Re)Constructing Sara's Cultural Subjectivity" and "Cultivating Cultural Agency through Voice: John's Journey in (Re)Constructing Subjectivity."

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The theoretical considerations of this article revolve around the rigid dichotomy between external forces of cultural essentialization in ELT and EL teachers' cultural subjectivities. Although EL teachers are aware of their cultural subjectivities, the prevailing societal realities make it difficult for them to exercise agency or mount meaningful resistance against such essentialization through self-initiated transformative perspectives and practices. Therefore, the discussion here touches on two themes: "External Forces of the Essentialization of English-Speaking Countries' Culture" and "EL Teachers' Cultural Subjectivity as Agency to Challenge an Essentialized Vision of Culture."

External forces of the essentialization of English-speaking countries' culture

In this discussion, we view EL teachers as cultural actors navigating the tug-of-war between the TESOL industry's prevailing stereotypical discourses on the English language and the cultures of English-speaking countries. For example, many language schools still narrow the goal of fluency to the British and American varieties, treating them as the essence of English use in different social and cultural contexts worldwide. This persists despite the recognition by researchers like Kachru (1992), who, in his model of World Englishes, introduces three circles: Inner, Outer, and Expanding. The UK and the USA occupy the Inner Circle, suggesting linguistic superiority over other English-speaking countries in the Outer and Expanding circles. This homogenizing approach dismisses sociolinguistic diversity and multicultural backgrounds in favor of standardization. Moreover, its use as a vehicle to perpetuate discourses of linguistic, cultural, economic, political, educational, and ethnic hegemony grants the English language its status (Kumaravadivelu, 2003 as cited in Selvi & Rudolph). Consequently, peripheral varieties are often viewed as different from or inferior to American or British English (Porter & Park, 2018). Such discourses exert pressure on nonnative EL teachers who are expected

to understand and teach the culture of English-speaking countries based on uniform patterns. This may lead them to shape their cultural subjectivities negatively.

In this regard, the essentialization of Anglo-North American culture, pervasive in the TESOL industry (through the marketing of English language courses, programs, instructional materials, textbooks, and tests), creates a homogeneous and static vision of culture. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1991) concept of power, we argue that this cultural essentialization functions as a form of power exertion. The TESOL industry promotes a supremacist narrative that symbolically imposes an idealized worldview and values about the interaction between the Other and the Self by simplifying individuals into traits attributed to their nationality, religion, or other social and cultural factors. This reduction ignores the complexity of people and contributes to discrimination. For instance, the widely recognized fictional character James Bond reinforces the stereotype that British men are charming, well-dressed, and have an appealing accent. This portrayal fosters, according to Kumaravadivelu (2008), an "us-and-them" binary opposition, othering nonnative English teachers and learners by silencing their dynamic cultural experiences.

Furthermore, cultural essentialization simplifies individuals by reducing them to generalized characteristics based on their nationality or culture, often relying on stereotypical visions. This process leads to the perception of some cultures as superior and others as exotic or inferior. In this context, binaries such as "us-them" and "pure-impure" (Burgess, 2012; Kubota, 1999, 2002; Pavlenko, 2002; Rutherford, 1990, as cited in Rudolph, 2018) generate hierarchical distinctions between nationalities. Essentializing cultures perpetuates racism, marginalization, and a lack of personal agency by portraying cultural patterns as static, unchangeable truths (Varón, 2009).

A clear example of cultural essentialization is the portrayal of Colombia's Wayuu people by Anglo-North American publishing houses, which often reduces them to cultural tourist attractions, reinforcing the damaging stereotype of the "exotic." From the perspective of dominant white cultures, the "exotic" implies something foreign, "other," or alien. This exoticization is a form of "othering," in which those in positions of power judge the cultural practices of marginalized groups as strange or different. This, in turn, creates a sense of distance between groups, perpetuating xenophobia and racism. As Bourdieu (1992) observes, some cultures are forced to define themselves by their distance from the dominant culture. The dominant culture that unifies is also the culture that separates.

Although it is difficult to eradicate the presentation of culture as a set of exotic elements from foreign language classrooms for students to explore and adopt when interacting with target language communities. Gómez (2015) and Olaya and Gómez (2013) conducted two research projects aimed at integrating critical cultural issues to encourage students to understand cultural complexity by analyzing

customs, lifestyles, and beliefs during intercultural exchanges with foreign communities. Specifically, the researchers' concern was that the teaching of English as a foreign language predominantly focused on superficial cultural topics such as food, sports, and holidays, thereby promoting an instrumental view of culture.

Similarly, this dynamic occurs in mainstream ELT curricula, which often present North American or British culture as the standard, thereby marginalizing other cultural perspectives. In doing so, ELT curricula promote monolithic cultural norms, rarely recognizing EL teachers as cultural agents with their own subjectivities. This neglect of teachers' cultural identities underscores the need to foster EL teachers' agency in resisting cultural essentialization.

Therefore, this study challenges the marginalization of nonnative EL teachers, who are often isolated in their attempts to assert their cultural and professional agency. While nonnative EL teachers may find it difficult to exercise agency or resist the dominant discourses imposed by societal structures, they can engage in introspective practices to construct their own sense of self and subjectivity. According to Wheedon (1997, as cited in Rudolph, 2018), EL teachers can accept, problematize, or challenge the cultural distance imposed on them by reflecting on their lived experiences.

English language teachers' cultural subjectivity as agency to challenge an essentialized perspective of culture

In this section, we focus on how EL teachers' cultural subjectivity can be reclaimed as a form of agency to resist external forces exerted upon them. Cultural subjectivity, which refers to teachers' awareness of their historical and social contexts, is key to developing their agency (Ortner, 2006). Drawing on Giroux (2004), agency enables EL teachers to actively construct their pedagogical and research practices by reflecting on their cultural experiences. Thus, they can (re)construct their own subjectivities, challenging fixed and stereotypical views of culture. These stereotypes often simplify and reduce complex cultural dynamics to rigid, narrow categories tied to nationality, race, or religion, ignoring the complexity and diversity of real cultural experiences. The TESOL industry is a force exerted upon EL teachers that acts as a tool of neocolonialism and cultural domination. Extrapolating Phillipson's (1992) idea of linguistic imperialism, we view this influence as a form of cultural imperialism. This form of imperialism and domination perpetuates hierarchies that idealize Anglo-North American culture while marginalizing local cultures and perspectives. As a result, it undermines EL teachers' agency, preventing them from fully expressing their own cultural subjectivities or appreciating the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students (Yazan, 2018). Nevertheless, efforts that may appear isolated contribute to challenging marginalization. As an example, Espinal-Meza (2026), a researcher

of indigenous Peruvian origin based in the United Kingdom, has faced the challenge of integrating Global South research into Global North academia, specifically by representing the practices of rural teachers in Global North academia from a perspective of epistemic injustice and critical pedagogical frameworks. In addition to these structural barriers, linguistic challenges and cultural misunderstandings arise when integrating the indigenous knowledge of rural teachers, rooted in Inca heritage, into rural education in Peru; their efforts advocate for the recognition of indigenous perspectives.

Despite the power of essentialization, EL teachers can resist it through their agency. As cultural actors, teachers construct their subjectivities through (re)signifying lived experiences, challenging the static cultural norms imposed by the TESOL industry. They participate actively in giving meaning to their experiences and in rejecting the essentialized view of culture. Even though they are often asked to replicate a curriculum that emphasizes stereotypical cultural patterns, such as festivals and holidays, which are presented as static and idealized, they are not passive recipients of cultural content.

Consequently, these topics are disconnected from the lived experiences of teachers and students, denying them the opportunity to engage with culture in a dynamic and meaningful way. However, through their voices and actions, EL teachers demonstrate the dynamic nature of culture, which cannot be reduced to static information. This resistance is crucial for breaking down the essentialized view of culture that dominates ELT. Ultimately, EL teachers' genuine experiences challenge the idea that culture is something to be memorized or consumed, showing instead that culture is something to be lived and coconstructed.

In this regard, cultural imperialism plays a key role in sustaining the hierarchical and essentialized visions of culture in ELT. As a form of domination, cultural essentialization presents culture as static, equating it with fixed identities that serve to distinguish insiders from outsiders. Bourdieu (1991) notes that essentialization legitimizes divisions in the social world by forcing marginalized groups to define themselves in relation to dominant cultures. In ELT, this is evident in the way non-Anglo North American cultures are framed in textbooks. These materials often present non-Western actors as inferior or exotic, thereby reinforcing a hierarchical vision of culture. For instance, North American tourists are frequently depicted as explorers, while individuals from other cultures are framed as guides or informants who serve the needs of these tourists.

EL teachers' (re)construction of their cultural subjectivity offers a pathway to resist cultural essentialization. Indeed, recognizing teachers as cultural agents disrupts the cultural imperialism that privileges foreign, often Western, cultures over local ones. As teachers engage with their own cultural experiences and subjectivities, they challenge the static, foreign-oriented view of culture typically imposed in language classrooms. In doing so, they position themselves not only as educators but also as cultural

agents capable of resisting, subverting, and transforming dominant discourses (Davies, 1991). To illustrate this point, Álvarez and Bonilla (2009) describe a collaborative and dialogic initiative in which both educators aimed to address the cultural dimension of language through critical intercultural competence in an undergraduate program. Their experience demonstrates their ability to subvert traditional learning about foreign communities when teaching culture in language programs. Therefore, the authors proposed activities that allowed students to critically examine their stereotypes about other cultures and how their own cultures had influenced their understanding of others.

By asserting their right to speak and be heard, EL teachers can reclaim their cultural subjectivity, making visible the complexities of their own and their students' cultural experiences. Through their voices and experiences, teachers demonstrate that culture is dynamic, not a fixed, and that it must be understood in all its complexity. In line with this, Solano Campos (2013) problematizes recent academic debates that have focused on the differences between various approaches to addressing cultural diversity in modern pluralistic societies and questions the fact that most of the literature written in English on diversity paradigms in the Americas comes from an Anglo North American perspective. This author examines this gap in research regarding the sociocultural context of North American multiculturalism, along with that of Latin American interculturality. In doing so, she broadens the debate to include the voices of underrepresented Latin American scholars. Ultimately, she argues that each paradigm should be considered as an element that fulfills a function within the particular contexts and needs from which it emerged and in which it has evolved.

In this context, cultural subjectivity is an ongoing process of negotiation between individual experiences and broader social discourses. Teachers' cultural agency leads them to constantly (re)define their subjectivities by engaging with the social processes, ideologies, and myths that shape their professional and personal lives (Giroux, 2003). Through their voices and experiences, teachers mediate between their own cultural subjectivities and the external discourses that attempt to define them. By reflecting on these experiences, teachers gain the autonomy to position themselves within these dominant social discourses, thereby exercising their agency to challenge and transform this essentialized vision of culture. In this regard, Granados (2015) emphasizes the importance of making EL teachers' subjectivities visible as a means of withdrawing from mainstream pedagogy. Teachers' voices, shaped by their life experiences, mediate their interaction with cultural and social discourses, allowing them to resist the pressures of cultural essentialization and assert their agency in the classroom.

EL teachers' cultural subjectivities should be made visible to contest cultural imperialism in ELT. Freire (1973, as cited in Giroux, 1998) emphasizes that culture is a dynamic process that engages human actors in transforming society through language. EL teachers, through their subjectivities, contribute to

this cultural problematization by bringing their voices and perspectives into the school setting. Consequently, this process not only challenges the static, foreign-centered view of culture but also positions EL teachers as intellectuals capable of interpreting and transforming the world around them.

Educational spaces, as Giroux (1997) notes, are cultural systems that shape the production and transmission of ideologies. ELT, therefore, is not just a space for learning language and culture in a static, superficial sense, but rather a dynamic arena where teachers and students' cultural subjectivities are actively (re)constructed. By recognizing the complexity of the Other's cultural subjectivity, teachers can avoid reducing their students to stereotypes, engaging instead in a coproduction of culture that acknowledges the diversity and fluidity of cultural identities (Kramsch, 2013).

In conclusion, the recognition of EL teachers' cultural subjectivities is indispensable for resisting cultural essentialization in ELT. By asserting their voices and experiences, EL teachers challenge the external forces, such as those of the TESOL industry, that impose an essentialized vision of culture. Through this process, they reclaim their agency as cultural actors and intellectuals, thereby positioning themselves to transform both their classrooms and the broader cultural discourses that shape ELT.

METHODOLOGY

Our understanding of language as a link between the daily-based social (re)construction of culture, which is seen as a hybrid lived-experience dynamic (Kramsch, 2013), guided the development of this research from a socio-critical epistemological perspective framed within a narrative inquiry approach. As Bruner (1991) argues, the (re)construction of EL teachers' voices and knowledge is connected to their social practice. In this vein, we attempted to analyze cultural subjectivities in ELT from the EL teachers' perspective, which was gathered through their biographical life stories.

Narrating, in this sense, goes beyond recounting their personal anecdotes; instead, it constitutes a meaning-making practice through which teachers interpret their cultural experiences. Accordingly, to comprehend culture from the perspective of the subjects who live it, we employed stories as an analytical tool to interpret teachers' narratives and understand their cultural subjectivities (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). Data collection was conducted over a period of approximately five months through individual narrative semi-structured interviews with English language (EL) teachers. The process followed the interview stages proposed by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, as cited in Barkhuizen et al., 2014), including thematizing, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, verifying, and reporting. Additionally, a preparatory induction stage was incorporated before the interviews. During this stage, participants received a worksheet explaining the study's purpose and completed an introspective

exercise designed to stimulate reflection on their cultural experiences and subjectivities. The interviews were conducted in the participants' everyday language to facilitate the expression of personal meanings, values, and intentions associated with their lived experiences. Finally, narrative accounts were used to explore how participants interpreted their past, present, and future experiences and how these contributed to their ongoing (re)construction of culture.

Considering knowledge in this study as a constant connection between theory and practice was crucial to understanding the (re)construction of EL teachers' cultural subjectivities. Thus, narratives enabled us to delve into two EL teacher's introspection about the multiple meanings they attribute to culture shaped by their genuine personal, professional, and educational trajectories. Hence, this research was conducted within a qualitative paradigm, as we explored cultural subjectivities, as our research phenomenon, through EL teachers' lived realities (Heigham & Croker, 2009). By the same token, we focused on narratives for EL teachers to recognize and make visible the cultural subjectivities they perceived as silenced. From a post-structuralist view, in this study we adopted the view of knowledge as a construction that is intrinsically linked to empowerment (Foucault, 1978). In this way, we aimed to empower EL teachers through their cultural subjectivities, enabling them to break away from the imposed essentialized view of culture, and instead, to construct their position from lived and interpreted experiences. Therefore, this research was guided by the question: How do EL teachers negotiate the tension between external forces of cultural essentialization and their own subjective experiences when (re)constructing their cultural subjectivities?

Biographical life stories

In line with the aforementioned considerations, we decided to collect the two EL teachers' biographical stories through individual semi-structured oral interviews (Barkhuizen et al., 2014) to keep the focus on their cultural experiences. To foster a dialogical space, we—as researchers—started by sharing our own reflections on the role of culture in our personal, academic, and professional stories. This stage of the research was essential to generate rapport and encourage EL teachers to openly share their individual biographies framed within social, cultural, and institutional narratives (Mendieta, 2013). This first step also activated their reflections upon how their experiences had contributed to the (re)construction of culture in their personal, academic, and professional lives. Accordingly, our purpose when interviewing was to create an environment to analyze their experiences considering temporal dimensions such as the meaning EL teachers provide to their past lived experiences, their current values and their future intentions based on their meaning-making (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 9). To prepare teachers to be interviewed, we requested that the two EL teachers to collect meaningful

artifacts that helped them connect with their life stories and answer some guiding questions, thereby enriching the depth of their narratives.

Regarding the organization of the narratives, we centered the interviews on four key quotidian cultural signs: music, cultural places, entertainment, and the way they integrated culture into their professional practice. Each main topic was explored during the interviews, providing space for them to share their biographical stories and conduct the analysis in a dialogical manner. Moreover, we categorized their narratives along a temporal continuum: the past, as the significance a cultural sign had during lived experiences; the present, as the current meaning those experiences have in their subjectivities; and the future, as the intention they project to continue (re)constructing their cultural subjectivities. Finally, it is worth noting that the excerpts discussed in this paper stem from a study developed as part of a master's thesis by Duarte (2021).

FINDINGS

The findings of this research are organized into two major themes that reflect the EL teachers' cultural (re)construction. The first major theme, "From Prescribed Representations to Lived and Self-Constructed Meanings: (Re)constructing Sara's Cultural Subjectivity," addresses how Sara negotiated and transformed stereotyped cultural frames into meanings grounded in her own lived experiences. The second major theme, "Cultivating Cultural Agency through Voice: John's Journey in (Re)Constructing Subjectivity," highlights John's process of developing cultural agency by using his voice to resist imposed representations and to reshape his subjectivity. Together, these categories provide insight into how individuals move beyond prescribed cultural discourses to construct more dynamic and agentive cultural subjectivities.

Through the biographical narratives of the two EL teachers, we examined their personal, academic, and professional processes to better understand the role of culture in their lives. Our analysis revealed a shared pattern: a cyclical connection between the ongoing construction of an inside-subjective discourse and outside social discourses with which they engaged. It is within the interrelation of these discourses that teachers position themselves culturally. Subsequently, following Pennycook (1994), who explains that discourse is the way subjects organize meaning through language, we found that it is through their discourse construction that EL teachers are in a constant state of development of their cultural subjectivities. This cycle has to do with, on the one hand, the postmodernist perspective of culture as a result of those inside-outside discourses (Kramsch, 2023); and, on the other hand, with *subjectivities*, considering that by engaging in lived experiences—whether by going along with, adapting to, questioning, pushing back against, or moving beyond these boundaries—subjects acti-

vely and fluidly build their sense of subjectivity (Rudolph, 2018, p. 149). Hence, EL teachers' narratives disclose a triangular link between culture, life experiences and their cultural subjectivity. Through their subjectivity they give meaning to the outside discourses they experience; likewise, they (re)construct their inside discourse while they are living a new experience. In the EL teachers' biographical stories this cycle is particularly noteworthy when they resignify their cultural points while narrating their stories.

From prescribed representations to lived and self-constructed meanings: (re) constructing Sara's cultural subjectivity

Before defining this theme, a summarized narrative of Sara serves as an introduction to this section of our article:

Sara is 30 years old. She is an EL teacher from Barrancabermeja, Colombia. However, she teaches in Bogotá, Colombia, her students are adults at an English language center, and she also teaches private French language lessons. She completed her bachelor's degree at a private university.

The transition from Barrancabermeja to Bogotá, followed by the move from Bogotá to several European cities, constituted a particularly significant cultural turning point in Sara's life. Each city represented a cultural window and a lived experience that contributed to shaping her cultural subjectivity, both in her personal profile and in her professional identity as an educator. In order to guide the analysis of Sara's experiences from concrete anecdotes toward their broader significance and the discourse surrounding them, the interviewed EL teacher was asked about her cultural experiences with television as a cultural sign, drawing on Vygotsky's theoretical framework. Vygotsky (1966) defines signs as artificially constructed stimuli designed to guide behavior and establish new neural connections. From this perspective, signs are inseparable from culture because they represent systems humans create to mediate their relationship with the world. Examples such as casting lots, traffic lights and signs, tying knots as memory aids, or writing notes illustrate how culturally developed sign systems enable individuals to regulate and control their own actions (Ghassemzadeh, 2005). To allow the EL teacher to narrate her biographical stories using cultural signs, we discussed Sara's experiences with television as a cultural sign during the narrative interview. Below, we present an excerpt from her biographical narrative.

> The series I could watch in the living room showed me how life in another country was. At the time, I lived in a very small town where I didn't have contact with the rest of Colombia because that town was a dangerous zone for a long time. Thus, television and those series allowed me to see a window toward the outside world. And I realized that how I lived was not a normal

> life for other people. However, I felt shocked by the fact that television didn't show me the full reality, because there was so much to discover. For example, I had a preconceived vision about Asians, and I didn't want to talk to them; I thought they were reserved, that they didn't talk to you, and that they could be rude. But she (a South Korean girl) tried to communicate with me, and she was so kind that I changed my mind. At first, I didn't want to talk to her, so I kept clear of her, but little by little, we became friends. (LS2-Sara, I2, our translation)

In this case, where television functioned as a lens through which society was observed, Sara's cultural vision of Asian people was shaped by a discriminatory external discourse that she internalized leading her to act based on stereotypes disseminated by television. At one stage of her life, it served as her primary cultural lens for understanding the world. Influenced by this stereotypical discourse, Sara overgeneralized Asian people and constructed an essentialized vision of others based solely on nationality. Her experience provides an instance of the inequality fostered by cultural stereotypes, as she consciously or unconsciously ended up discriminating against a young woman merely on the basis of her nationality. Consequently, when stereotypes are disseminated, certain subjects' voices are silenced while others position themselves as superiors, thereby reproducing inequity, as Sara's narrative illustrates.

However, culture is an ever-evolving process shaped through ongoing discourses (Kramsch, 2003, p. 68); as seen in Sara's story, since her perspective shifted through lived experiences. The cultural lens she initially acquired was not static, but fluid. Sara's standpoint was reconstructed when she had a lived experience of meeting and interacting with an Asian girl, an encounter that enabled her to recognize her peer subjectively rather than through stereotypes. That is to say, the interpretation of her lived experience plays a central role in shaping and reshaping her cultural subjectivity. It is not only understood, as Foucault (1981) suggests, as a site through which the self undergoes transformation, but it also operates as a critical resource for challenging the essentialization of culture. In this vein, experience becomes more than a process of personal change; it functions as an active tool that confronts fixed or homogenizing views of culture. Finally, it also exposes how symbolic power is wielded over individual subjectivities (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). Sara's story helps us to understand that culture is constituted by experiences that go beyond static and stereotypical information. In this sense, culture emerges as the expression of subjects' lived experiences and everyday practices situated within a broader system of social connections, as Freire (1973) points out. Sara's story enables her to dismantle and move beyond the stereotypical notion of culture which is often narrowly tied to a particular nationality. In light of this, her authentic interactions become her own distinctive cultural lens through which she encounters the world and continuously (re)constructs her subjectivity. Following Aquino (2013), this subjectivity represents the space where individuals generate experiences that give significance to their relationship with the world. Such a process became possible through

a shift: from perceiving culture primarily through generalized social discourses about cultural signs she had never directly engaged with to grounding her understanding of those cultural signs through real and embodied interactions. By way of illustration, in an interview reflecting on meaningful places, Sara recounted the experience of meeting a Muslim classmate during an English course she attended in the United States:

> She flustered me at first; she was a Muslim from Saudi Arabia. It was the first time I had spoken to someone of a different religion. Up until then, I had been told stories about Muslims related to the idea that they were terrorists—that is to say, from the gringos' point of view, which is racist. However, she was really nice; she explained a lot of principles of her religion to me, and she inspired and taught me a lot. (LS2-Sara, I2, our translation)

In agreement with Kumaravadivelu (2008), having an essentialized vision of culture generates bias and segregation, as it promotes stereotyping toward others based on categories such as religious beliefs, ethnicity, occupations, tendencies, and generations. Sara's story illuminates what occurs when cultural understanding is based on biased information instead of subjectively experiencing the world. In this regard, stereotypes about Muslims influenced Sara, fostering a discriminatory perception of them. This view led her to overgeneralize individuals without exploring their inherent complexity. Nevertheless, Sara's encounter and interaction with the Muslim girl unsettled and disrupted her previously essentialized view of Muslims as a uniform group defined by fixed and static traits. For instance, Sara mentioned that she thought they were terrorists. To wit, her lived experience became a decisive cultural turning point that reoriented her understanding of difference. Rather than fostering reductive generalizations, the experience invited her to recognize plurality and complexity within cultural subjectivities. Thus, lived experiences act as catalysts for her ongoing (re)construction of cultural subjectivity, functioning, in Foucault's (1981) terms, as a transformative process through which the self is continuously reshaped in relation to power, discourse, and interaction.

Furthermore, Sara transitions from her personal profile to her professional and academic role. To elaborate on this transition, in one interview, Sara discussed her language classes as being linked to cultural themes. She mentioned that she decided to position culture in her classes from a collective perspective from which culture is viewed and constructed through the analysis of anecdotes and lived stories. In this regard, Sara as a Spanish language teacher in France decided to explain and demonstrate her cultural background through her own life narrative:

> Something that I do in classes that involve culture is that I try to show things that I have experienced, or familiar things I've had contact with, because Colombian culture is broad, and I, as a young woman from Santander, haven't had contact with everything. I say what I know about it. I wonder: Is it part of my culture? There (in France), the notion they had about Colombia

> was related to what Narcos (the Colombian TV series) had taught them. So, all my students had watched and remembered this series. What I could say was, "Look! Pablo Escobar is not a hero for us because of this and this and so on." So, regarding culture, I tried to show them more about what I experience as a Colombian person, my real opinion about La guerrilla, and all this topic. (LS1-Sara, I3, our translation)

Sara interprets culture through the lens of her own experiences, considering that in her narrative those lived practices enable her to bring culture meaningfully into her language classes. In other words, culture for Sara is the significance derived from contextualized lived experiences and its constitution through practices, interaction, and personal engagement with others. This perspective allows her to go beyond the rigid frameworks and prescriptive definitions of culture often presented in institutional textbooks.

Sara's defiance of the essentialization of culture aligns with Kramsch's (2004, as cited in Nunan & Choi, 2010) perspective that culture cannot be reduced to one homogeneous worldview for all subjects within a nationality, but must instead be recognized as varied and continually evolving. Thus, the excerpt reveals that the most meaningful way to examine culture is to ground it in what subjects have personally experienced. Accordingly, her pedagogical stance transcends the stereotypical and overgeneralized portrayals of national identity. Instead, she endorses lived experiences as genuine sources for understanding culture, promoting the dynamism of culture constructed through ongoing social practices. That is why she resists that essentialist view by creating spaces where lived experiences serve as the material for learning about culture. In this regard, on the one hand, Sara conceives language primarily through its negotiating role; on the other hand, she views culture as a dynamic discursive construction. In her perspective, language is not merely a neutral tool of communication but an essential element in shaping both experiences and subjectivities (Giroux, 1998). Overall, Sara's cultural subjectivity is the result of a triangular interconnection between language, lived stories, and the self. This junction suggests that language is the means through which life stories are articulated, interpreted, and shared. At the same time, experiences contribute to the process of negotiating and (re)constructing subjectivity. Therefore, cultural learning is not an isolated process, but rather a dialogic interplay where language both mediates and transmutes the way subjects experience the world and position themselves within it.

Cultivating cultural agency through voice: John's journey in (re)constructing subjectivity

Before defining this theme, a summarized narrative of John serves as an introduction to this section of our article:

John is 27 years old. He is an EL teacher from Bogotá, Colombia. He teaches adult students at an English language center and gives private English language lessons. He completed his bachelor's degree at a public university, which he views as a culturally significant setting for the development of his awareness of kinesthetic expression, shaping his life experiences.

John's brother played a pivotal role in his growth from childhood by introducing him to metal music, which became a lifelong passion. John now incorporates his love for art and music, particularly metal, into his teaching. He believes these passions enrich his approach to language education.

During four interviews, John highlighted key cultural influences that shaped his personal, academic, and professional identity. He described significant turning points in his life, including influential people, meaningful places, and important events that contributed to the development of his cultural subjectivity. Some of these turning points included metal music bands and concerts, his brother's influence, a university literature teacher, theater lessons, and his interactions with both culture and his students. A recurring theme in John's story is his desire to express his voice freely, without external impositions, which guided his selection of meaningful experiences. Sharing these experiences with others has also fostered a strong sense of community in his life.

Building upon John's narrative, this theme encapsulates our analysis of his voice development as it pertains to his evolving cultural subjectivity, drawing from both his personal and academic experiences. Throughout the interviews, John emphasized key cultural markers that have shaped his self-awareness and capacity to engage as an active cultural actor. Indeed, he perceives culture not merely as a backdrop but as an ongoing, dynamic interaction, wherein his recognition of his own voice plays a pivotal role in his engagement with cultural processes.

In one interview, when asked about the significance of cultural spaces, John reflected on what makes a place culturally meaningful to him:

> For me it, is important that I feel free; it is important that I do not simply follow something or someone without expressing my opinion. I think it is important to exercise critical thinking regarding the information I receive and to express how I interpret it. (LS3-John, I2, our translation)

This response leads us to infer that John sees his voice as integral to his agency, thereby recognizing his role in shaping culture through active participation and critical reflection. This aligns with Ortner's (2006) assertion that social actors, throughout their lives, reproduce or transform the culture that created them, just as culture constructs them as types of social actors. In this regard, social actors not only internalize culture but also contribute to its transformation through their lived experiences.

John's insistence on expressing his interpretations suggests that he views his voice as a mechanism for influencing and (re)constructing cultural discourse.

John also extends this understanding to his professional identity as an EL teacher. He consciously uses his voice to foster the development of his students' voices, aiming to empower them to challenge and contribute to cultural narratives. For example, he described a teaching strategy in which he encourages students to question assumptions:

> I like trying to find a breakup related to what the students say; I mean, just to push them to argue their point and ensure they are not easily influenced. In this way, we learn together because I show them things they do not know, while I also learn from their knowledge as well. (LS4-John, I4, our translation)

Here, John is not merely imparting knowledge, but rather cocreating a space for cultural exchange. In turn, he positions himself as both a learner and a teacher, fostering a collaborative environment in which students construct their own discourses. By encouraging critical thinking and argumentation, John promotes his students' agency in shaping their subjectivities, thus mirroring his own journey of cultural (re)construction. His teaching approach resonates with the notion of culture as a progression of activities (Kramsch, 2012), through which individuals coconstruct their positions while influencing the subjectivities of others.

By extension, John's pedagogical practice likewise highlights the power of language. He does not merely teach English in isolation, but instead uses it as a tool for (re)constructing discourses and challenging cultural stereotypes. Noticeably, this becomes particularly evident when he discusses how he approaches art in his classroom:

> Usually, I try to prompt a little change in their stereotypical notions about art. I try to be impartial, and I respect their opinions as long as they substantiate them. I approach it this way because I try to construct a voice among my students regarding several topics, that is my purpose. (LS4-John, I4, our translation)

By positioning art to provoke critical discourse, John resists essentialized views of culture, encouraging his students to explore and articulate their own perspectives. His method aligns with Kumaravadivelu's (2008) perspective on understanding culture as a complex, nonessentialized construct that evolves through individual and collective subjectivities.

John's narrative also reveals a deeper collective awareness. He acknowledges that his voice, while individual, is shaped by his engagement with others. In reflecting on his time at university, he noted how the shared academic environment influenced his understanding of culture:

> I learned at the university that there is a collective sense. I mean, before I studied at the university, I was a little selfish, but when I shared information and spaces with friends and teachers there, I learned to share my opinion as others did as well. (LS2-John, I2, our translation)

Through this reflection, John expresses a transformation from a self-centered view of knowledge to a collective perspective, wherein cultural subjectivities are coconstructed in a shared space. In this light, his university experience served as a cultural turning point, providing a platform for his voice to develop in relation to that of others. This collective awareness, moreover, reinforces Kramsch's (2012) argument that culture is not linear, but is rather continuously redefined through the interaction of individual discourses within broader social realities.

In sum, John's journey as both an individual and an educator illustrates the interplay among voice, cultural agency, and subjectivity. His narrative demonstrates a conscious effort to use his voice not only navigate, but also actively shape cultural discourses. Through his teaching, he empowers his students to become cultural actors capable of influencing and transforming their cultural landscapes. Ultimately, this process of voice development and cultural (re)construction stands as a reflection of the ongoing negotiation between the self and society.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study sought to understand how EL teachers negotiate the tension between external forces of cultural essentialization and their own subjective experiences as they shape and reshape their cultural subjectivities. To this end, the analysis of two these teachers' narratives demonstrates that this negotiation is a dynamic and ongoing process marked by resistance, resignification, and the enactment of agency in their pedagogical practices.

The two teachers' narratives revealed that external forces—such as stereotypical representations of Colombia and Colombian teachers, curricular impositions privileging Anglo-American cultural norms, and broader discourses from the TESOL industry—exert strong pressures toward essentializing culture. Consequently, these forces attempt to position teachers within narrow, homogenizing frameworks that often undervalue their own voices, knowledge, and local perspectives. For instance, both Sara and John described how encounters with stereotypes in academic and cultural exchanges initially confronted them with reductive visions of their identities. However, rather than internalizing

these views, they reappropriated such experiences as opportunities to question and problematize cultural essentialization.

At the same time, the two teachers' subjective experiences emerged as crucial resources in this process of negotiation; their personal, professional, and academic trajectories enabled them to acknowledge that culture is not static or preestablished, but constantly (re)constructed through discourse and lived experiences. This recognition empowered them to resist dominant discourses and to reconstitute their cultural subjectivities in more dynamic and plural ways. Besides, these teachers did not simply reject external cultural discourses outright; instead, they engaged critically with them, filtering, contesting, and resignifying those aspects that conflicted with their own lived realities. In doing so, they positioned themselves as cultural agents who actively reshaped how culture is understood and taught in ELT.

One of the most significant findings is that this negotiation is enacted through pedagogical practices that open spaces for dialogue, reflection, and coconstruction of cultural knowledge. Teachers incorporated personal stories, local cultural practices, and critical engagement with stereotypes into their classrooms, thereby transforming teaching into a site of resistance and empowerment. In this sense, teachers' subjectivities were not only reconstructed internally, but were also externalized in their practices, allowing students to experience culture as fluid, contested, and situated, rather than as a set of essentialized traits.

Therefore, EL teachers negotiate the tension between external forces of cultural essentialization and their own subjective experiences when (re)constructing their cultural subjectivities by transforming sites of imposition into opportunities for reflection and agency. They accomplish this by problematizing stereotypes, resignifying external discourses through their lived experiences, and integrating their reconstructed subjectivities into pedagogical practices that challenge hegemonic representations of culture. Crucially, this process is neither linear nor definitive, but rather cyclical, as teachers continue to navigate between external pressures and their own dynamic cultural identities.

In conclusion, the study underscores that cultural subjectivities are not passive outcomes of external discourses, but active constructions shaped by the interplay of power, experience, and reflection. By engaging in this negotiation, teachers not only resist symbolic domination, but likewise contribute to more transformative and decolonial practices in ELT. Ultimately, recognizing and amplifying teachers' narratives is therefore fundamental to reimagining English language education as a space where culture is not consumed as static knowledge, but is instead lived, questioned, and reconstructed as part of a broader struggle for empowerment and epistemic justice.

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