

# Chapter 7

## Critical Multilingualism in TESOL in Practice: Language, Power, and Decoloniality



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**Abstract** The Global South has been characterized by power struggles between local and foreign languages. In particular, Morocco is a southern space that has been grappling with its postcolonial positionality and linguistic dependency on foreign languages. With the spread of English in the country, local languages are facing more threats since French is the ex-colonial code while English might represent modern coloniality. Critical multilingualism seems a nuanced approach in balancing these power inequalities between languages and alleviating the possible hegemonic understandings of English. However, practicing multilingualism in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL)/English as a foreign language (EFL) in the Global South is complex as the presence of English is often linked to the issues of linguistic imperialism, coloniality, and the supremacy of Anglophone cultures and perspectives. This chapter argues that (a) implementing multilingualism in Moroccan EFL classes has to be informed by a decolonial option that critically understands the linguistic dependency of the country, (b) multilingualism has to go beyond the mere integration of local languages by raising both teachers' and students' awareness of the potential hegemonic attitudes of English, and (c) EFL classes are sites of political activity where English might be implicitly understood as a better and more alluring alternative of local languages. This chapter (a) presents my attempts as an English language teacher to decolonize EFL classes through a decolonial approach, (b) argues for the necessity of embracing a form of multilingualism that is informed by decoloniality to present local languages and English on equal footing, and (c) offers practical applications of critical multilingualism that seeks to decolonize EFL classes.

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## Introduction

Until recent years, the popular assumption of the language teaching scholarship has been that “new languages are best taught and learned monolingually, without the use of the students’ own language(s)” (Hall & Cook, 2012, p. 271). Languages have often been kept separate or avoided in classrooms in order to maximize exposure to and encourage thinking in the second language (L2) and minimize interferences of the first language (L1) (Littlewood & Yu, 2011). To undermine these understandings, critical Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) scholarship has made a valid case for actively supporting multilingualism in the TESOL classrooms, which is accompanied by a broad realization that multiple languages, cultures, and backgrounds can be part of classroom practice (Conteh & Meier, 2014; Raza et al., 2021).

Since the end of the colonial policy of the French protectorate, the Moroccan sociolinguistic situation has been marked by a power struggle between local and foreign languages (R'boul, 2022a). While the local languages, Arabic, Darija, and different varieties of Tamazight, are portrayed as languages of the local identity, culture, and traditions (Marley, 2004), French and English are seen as high-prestige languages (Jaafari, 2019) that symbolize modernity and status-bearing significance (Chakrani & Huang, 2014). Although English does not “have a colonial legacy in Morocco” (Buckner, 2011, p. 213) which explains the predominance of French in the country, the current demand for a lingua franca brought by modernity, globalization, and neoliberalism has propelled the presence of English in Morocco as a global language (Zouhir, 2013).

The rationale for this chapter is the assumption that the increasingly strong presence of English may come at the expense of local languages, cultures, and identities that have not received similar attention. Such a practice would further relegate the status of Arabic and Tamazight in Moroccans’ imagination and label them as languages of locality, conservatism, and backwardness while French and increasingly English exude modernity and secularism. Therefore, the attempt to reflect multilingualism in Moroccan English as a foreign language (EFL) classes has to be underpinned by a critical understanding of the sociolinguistic, sociocultural, and postcolonial situation of the country which has been dominated by the French and increasingly English languages and perspectives.

The question here is whether implementing multilingualism in Moroccan EFL classes is only a matter of incorporating both local languages and English or it is a complicated task that requires careful attention to the interplay of power, language, and identity. This chapter argues that:

1. implementing multilingualism in Moroccan EFL classes has to be informed by a decolonial option that critically understands the linguistic dependency of the country and its postcolonial struggles;
2. multilingualism has to go beyond the simple integration of local languages and work toward raising both teachers’ and students’ awareness of the potential hegemonic attitudes of English in Morocco;

3. and EFL classes are sites of political activity where English is introduced as a better alternative of not only local languages but also French as the ex-colonial code.

This chapter recognizes the complex intersection of multilingualism, power imbalances, and postcoloniality. It also acknowledges the difficulty of making use of the nuanced theory and scholarship within TESOL classrooms as counterhegemonic pedagogic practices. This chapter (a) presents my own attempts as a teacher to decolonize EFL classes through a decolonial approach, (b) argues for the necessity of embracing a form of multilingualism that is informed by decoloniality in order to present local languages and English on equal footing, and (c) offers practical applications of critical multilingualism that seeks to decolonize EFL classes.

## Multilingualism and Moroccan Sociolinguistic Situation

According to the Moroccan constitution (2011), the official languages of the state are standard Arabic and Tamazight. French is the nation's second language due to its prevalence in the sectors of higher education, business, and diplomacy since the end of the French protectorate in 1956. English and Spanish are used as foreign languages across various fields for different purposes (Ennaji, 2009). In recent years, English has been widely spreading in Morocco and, therefore, has gained more importance. The continuous efforts for economic prosperity and better representation worldwide have reflected the necessity of using English as a lingua franca and a global language in Morocco (Zouhir, 2013).

Several scholars and stakeholders have made a case for embracing English instead of French as the country's second language (Errihani, 2017; Kachoub, 2021) since it accommodates neoliberal conditions and globalizing attitudes (Soussi, 2021). A major factor and manifestation of this spread is the popularity of the American Language Center and the British Council schools in major Moroccan cities. Importantly, the positive attitude toward English has been attributed to the ideology of modernity of language attitudes (Chakrani, 2013), the hope for better socioeconomic status (Jaafari, 2019; Ouakrime, 2016), and the absence of any colonial connotation of English language in the country (Buckner, 2011; Zouhir, 2013).

Morocco is a multilingual country where different languages hold varying levels of importance. Yet, this state of multilingualism does not imply coexistence and equal status of all languages (Boudihaj & Sahli, 2021). French and increasingly English are granted more importance as evidenced by Moroccans' attitudes (R'boul, 2020a) and the state's language policies (Ben Haman, 2021). Language attitudes research in Morocco has revealed that French and English are perceived as high-prestige languages (Belhiah, 2020; Jaafari, 2019) that reflect modernity and status-bearing significance (Belhiah & Lamallam, 2020). On the other hand, Arabic, Darija, and different varieties of Tamazight are regarded to symbolize local culture, traditions, identity, and perspectives (Chakrani & Huang, 2014; R'boul, 2020a).

This state of multilingualism and the power struggles between languages in Morocco is highly relevant and important to EFL classes. The unequal status of local and foreign languages warrants serious consideration of multilingualism in EFL classes considering how English is strongly supported and propelled in the country. This chapter takes into account these understandings in its theoretical standing and the practical applications which will be extensively developed in the following sections. English has a great momentum due to its positive connotation in Morocco; that is why the EFL teaching practices discussed in the chapter actively consider the Moroccan sociolinguistic situation with regard to multilingualism and build on its postcolonial positionality and decolonial impulses.

## **Decoloniality in Multilingual TESOL**

The previous section has outlined the power struggles that have long existed between local and foreign languages in Morocco. With the overwhelming spread of English in the country, it is even more threatening for local languages since French denotes the colonial legacy while English might be seen as a form of modern coloniality. Therefore, critical multilingualism seems a nuanced approach in balancing these power inequalities between languages and alleviating the possible hegemonic understandings of English. However, practicing multilingualism in TESOL/EFL in the Global South is not simple since the presence of English in these contexts is often linked to the issues of linguistic imperialism, coloniality, and the supremacy of Anglophone cultures and perspectives (R'boul, 2020b). Non-native teachers may unknowingly engage in self-marginalization in order to reflect western ways of knowing and languaging.

The postcolonial positionality and the linguistic dependency of Morocco warrant active support for decoloniality in critical multilingual TESOL. Decoloniality acknowledges the postcolonial malaise that Morocco and other southern contexts have been struggling with. Decoloniality recognizes the enduring colonial structures and tries to undermine the colonial mechanism by which power imbalances are maintained. In the context of TESOL/EFL classes, decoloniality can serve to problematize how languages are used as a colonial element that perpetuates inequalities within southern spaces or between southern and northern spaces. That is why given the sociolinguistic situation of Morocco and other southern spaces as well, it is important to include appropriate decolonial impulses in the process of implementing critical multilingualism in TESOL/EFL classes. This chapter argues for understanding criticality in “critical multilingual TESOL” as a framework that builds on the sociocultural and sociolinguistic situation of Southern spaces and includes power-conscious teaching practices that discourage hegemonic understandings of Anglophone perspectives and cultures over local languages, knowledges and ontologies.

The main question here is how teachers can deliver effective EFL teaching activities and ascertain, at the same time, a healthy degree of multilingualism in their

classes. I believe it is problematic and complex to ensure proper EFL teaching practices that integrate other languages without being criticized for potentially precipitating interference and wasting valuable time. Yet, it remains possible as long as teachers are power-literate and possess a deep perception of languages in their contexts and how their interaction is shaped and continues to shape the sociocultural milieu. Implementing critical multilingualism in TESOL classes in the Global South has to be underpinned by (a) a profound understanding of the sociocultural and sociolinguistic situation of the country, (b) decolonial impulses that do not motivate abandoning foreign languages but rather encourage simultaneously enabling students' access to English and a state of multilingualism where all local and foreign languages are appreciated, and (c) a framework that presents the perspectives and the cultures of all languages as being equal.

### **My Attempts in Decolonizing TESOL/EFL and Promoting Critical Multilingualism**

I was a non-native English teacher for 8 years. I used to be working in a local languages school in Morocco where I have had the opportunity to teach a myriad of students with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. English was usually the students' second foreign language that they were exposed to and trying to learn. French is introduced early in private schools since first grade while in public schools it is first taught in the third grade. English is also introduced early in private schools since the third grade while students in public schools have to wait until the third year of middle school to start learning English for the first time. In fact, a great number of students were exposed to English for the first time in the language center where I used to teach. The groups were always homogenous with regard to students' level of English, but their ages were quite different at times. Therefore, although students had comparable skills in English, their cognitive and intellectual development was varied. This fact has sometimes complicated the very process of practicing the decolonial approach and critical multilingualism in the classes since some students would not be able to sufficiently fathom abstract and complex ideas.

This account of my own attempts to decolonize EFL classes through a decolonial approach and critical multilingualism focuses on two groups where students had a fairly good level of English (B1-B2) and their ages ranged from 16 to 26 years old. One group comprised 9 students whose ages were from 16 to 20 while the other group was formed of 8 students whose ages were from 19 to 26. The textbook used was *Speakout 2nd Edition* by Pearson. The use of US- or UK-produced textbooks was particularly required by the school administration justifying their decision by the importance of exposing students to "real" English in terms of languaging, culture, and accent; also, the administration had the belief that imported textbooks were of better quality and the parents were expecting their children to speak like native speakers.

My approach focused on meta-awareness since I had a conviction that critical multilingualism in TESOL/EFL classes basically relates to language attitudes and how students perceive different languages. Instead of prioritizing speaking various languages in classes, I was alert to the very assumption that multilingualism is about the perception of equality among languages rather than a linguistic practice. I mainly used discussions as a way of simultaneously teaching the language and practicing critical multilingualism. That is why my attempts sought first to draw students' attention to the postcolonial positionality of their country and its malaise with linguistic dependency. Then, I aimed at raising their awareness of the presence of English and how it can be understood through the lens of global coloniality and the superiority of Anglophone perspectives.

First, I prompted my students to reconsider the presence of English in Morocco by using a set of pre-constructed questions. These included "how do you see the status of English in Morocco?", "what are the reasons behind the global spread of English?", and "how did English get this enormous power in today's world?". While students would usually give typical answers, I would lead them to or explain to them the link between English and global coloniality. I often clarified that the global spread of English is a reflection of power imbalances among different countries which have been the case due to the overwhelming power of the USA and its influence on the world. After ascertaining that students have developed a fairly coherent understanding of the global spread of English, I would use questions that guide them to rethink how English might not be benign and might reshape our perceptions of other languages. The usual answers would focus on the comparison between French and English. More often than not, French was not perceived positively due to its colonial legacy and its use as a marker of social classes (the use of French was associated with high status) while English was seen as a better alternative since it is more accessible and does not have a colonial connotation in the country.

Next, I would prompt students to think more deeply about the status of local languages in the current shifts in the Moroccan sociolinguistic situation. Students agreed that Arabic and Tamazight are being relegated and that is mainly due to the use of French as the main linguistic pattern in higher education and business where fluency in French is a requirement to join and function in the job market. After that, students exhibited a serious concern about their identities, languages, and cultures. I asked students whether they have ever felt how language influences cultures, lifestyles, beliefs, clothing, etc. Students noted that French and English are seen as symbols of modernity and contemporary lifestyles while Arabic and Tamazight represent traditions and conservatism. Students started gradually to deliver a more critical stance toward foreign languages, especially English. Their traditional perceptions of the spread of English as being completely benevolent were questioned. Students claimed that in the current circumstances, learning foreign languages is a must. However, it should not be at the expense of our local languages and perspectives. Students started to explain that it was indeed possible to have access to English without compromising their own identity.

In other sessions, I would deliberately include perspectives and knowledge about language, culture, and ontology that originated in Moroccan culture or Arabic. I

had a firm belief that the main manifestation of the hegemonic understandings of English is the supremacy of its cultures and knowledge. I included various activities where students would use English to describe and discuss their own culture, ideas, and identity. For instance, I would teach interculturality in a way that does not essentialize themselves and others. I encouraged students to rethink their own perceptions of themselves and particularly native speakers. I was trying to prompt students to develop a strong belief in the equality of all cultures and that individuals cannot be understood through the defining characteristics of their national cultures. These teaching practices reflected the assumption that the supremacy of a certain culture is largely a reflection of the dominance of a particular linguistic pattern. Finally, I would write on the board the four languages: Arabic, Tamazight, French, and English, then ask students to establish relationships among these languages. My aim was to raise students' awareness of the multilingual state of their country and how it does not translate into the equal appreciation of these languages. This way, students would be able to better imagine the linguistic dependency of Morocco but seek to promote multilingualism and use English for their benefit without comprising their own languages, cultures, and perspectives.

## **Practical Applications of Critical Multilingualism in TESOL/EFL**

The previous sections have provided insights into the rationale and the understandings underpinning critical multilingualism. The process of applying the principles of critical multilingualism is delicate and context-dependent. The following are suggested teaching practices inspired by critical multilingualism; these practices can be used in TESOL classrooms to decolonize and take into account the dynamics among languages in a particular context.

### *A. Have students discuss multilingualism*

It is important to treat students as epistemic subjects who are able to discuss themes characterized by a relative degree of complexity. Teachers can engage with multilingualism and prompt students to discuss it according to their cognitive development and level of English. While the idea of multilingualism sounds fairly complex, it can be described and discussed in a way that supports students' learning as well as their reasoning. For example, teachers can use vignettes containing clear statements about different languages and then encourage students to give their opinions. Teachers can also have them read a text on multilingualism and how its relevance to their context.

### *B. Have students discuss the significance of English to themselves and their community*

Teachers can sometimes ask students to consider the status of English in their context. The input that students will provide would be important to develop future practices

that take into account students' perceptions of English. For instance, teachers can elaborate on the history of English and its spread in their context. Then, students would be asked to share their opinions. This activity can be used as a further discussion of the previous activity. Teachers can amalgamate the understandings of the students from these two activities and discuss them collectively.

### III. *Set a policy about language use in classroom*

While students need to focus on speaking English to complete assignments, teachers can develop policies that allow students to use their languages in certain cases and contexts. In particular, teachers can ask students to watch an English-speaking movie and write a report on it. Then, in the class, students would be asked to share their opinions on the movies and the English vocabulary they learned in their languages.

### IV. *Have students see the value of learning English and maintaining their languages*

Teachers can draw a chart with two columns referring to the benefits of learning English and the benefits of maintaining their languages. Then, students would be asked to brainstorm and share their ideas with the whole class. Students can be encouraged to compare and contrast the benefits and the reasons for learning English and maintaining their languages. This activity is meant to show students that learning English does not have to be at the expense of their languages, cultures, and perspectives.

### E. *Teach English by using students' knowledge, cultures, and perspectives*

Language is reflective of the culture and a nation's perspectives and knowledge. Dialogues that feature native-like names and topics are popular in textbooks (Shin et al., 2011). Teachers can make use of local culture and elements to teach English. For instance, teachers can utilize local stories with some parts in students' languages and the other parts in English. This way, students would be able to follow the story, learn English, and appreciate the presence of their languages in their classroom.

### F. *Have students work in small groups*

Teachers can instruct students in small groups to perform certain tasks. Then, the teacher would ask each group to assign a reporter who would share their work in their languages other than English. This practice can be used the other way around. Teachers can have the students discuss the assignment in their own languages but report their work in English. This type of activity can help students realize the ability to speak their languages and learn English simultaneously.

### G. *The importance of translanguaging in the classroom*

Research has shown that multilingual students have a linguistic repertoire that comprises the features of the various languages they speak (Gunnarsson, 2019). Teachers can build on these findings and orient their practices by an understanding that recognizes the links between languages. Also, teachers can sometimes use students' L1 to teach English; yet, this practice should be used with discretion and in a way that supports learning.



## Conclusion

This chapter has made a case for critical multilingualism as a framework for decolonizing TESOL/EFL classes in the Global South by drawing on (a) the sociocultural and sociolinguistic situation of the context where classes are taking place and (b) decolonial impulses as a way of meaningfully considering the postcolonial positionality of the context and how English plays a role in its dynamics and social practices. This chapter describes a particular case of critical multilingualism in Morocco as a southern context whose linguistic dependency and postcolonial malaise are reflective of the issues that the Global South has been struggling with and where language is of major significance. It also provides a set of practical applications of critical multilingualism and decolonial approach that can be used in TESOL/EFL classes in the Global South. However, it should be noted that these applications are not standardized practices and teachers remain responsible for designing teaching practices and activities that are informed by critical multilingualism and actively take into account the sociocultural and sociolinguistic situation of their contexts. Critical multilingualism should account for the specificities and the conditions of each particular context.

The claim for the importance of multilingualism in TESOL is well-founded. Yet, the very process of practicing multilingualism has to be nuanced and characterized by a profound perception of the power imbalances among languages. Speaking various languages in classes does not imply equality among these languages and/or how students come to form attitudes toward them. Colonial structures continue to shape relations between the Global North and South which maintains the power asymmetries among these contexts in terms of knowledge, languages, and cultures (R'boul, 2022b). Critical multilingualism in TESOL classes is about realizing a pedagogical frame of reference that anchors its understanding of languages in power relations among the Global North and South. Critical multilingualism does not solely focus on using various languages in TESOL classrooms; it seeks to underpin the practice of using different languages in classrooms by a critical engagement with power inequalities among these languages and the status of English and its cultures in a given context.

TESOL classrooms can potentially be of great help in dismantling the inequalities among languages, and, most importantly, how learners come to perceive English with regard to their local tongues and cultures. I understand that the principal role of TESOL classrooms is to enable students to use English effectively, but it is also essential to form an understanding of English where it is seen as a useful tool in undermining injustices and hierarchies among people. Critical multilingualism can enable students to develop their awareness of how languages interact and ultimately shape societies. English provides an enormous voice to speak back against inequalities; speaking English does not have to be at the expense of local languages, cultures, and perspectives. The aim is to have teachers and students who are power-literate and actively seek to use English for their benefit. Critical multilingualism can contribute to the development of socially just classrooms where students are not implicitly

prompted to develop a firm belief in the superiority of Anglophone cultures and perspectives.

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