Jaime Hoerricks

DECOLONISING LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Reframing English Language Development for Multilingual and Neurodiverse Learners

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Abstract

Decolonising Language Education revolutionises the current approach to English Language Development (ELD), particularly for multilingual and neurodiverse learners, including those identified as Gestalt Language Processors (GLPs). In the context of primary and secondary school education, this book challenges the colonial mindset embedded within modern ELD practices, which prioritise English proficiency at the expense of home language development – an approach that reflects historical power dynamics rather than linguistic realities.

Drawing from the Natural Language Acquisition model and critical pedagogy, *Decolonising Language Education* advocates for a transformative methodology that acknowledges and values the diverse linguistic and neurological profiles of students. This includes a particular focus on neurodivergent learners, such as the estimated 75% who are GLPs, who are often misunderstood or unsupported in traditional language instruction settings.

The book equips educators with practical strategies, case studies, and classroom examples that promote inclusive and equitable learning environments. These environments honour the natural language acquisition processes of multilingual and neurodiverse students, fostering growth that embraces both home and target languages. Building upon the foundational work from Holistic Language Instruction (Hoerricks, 2024), this text applies these insights specifically to ELD and TESOL contexts.

Ultimately, *Decolonising Language Education* is a call to action for educators to dismantle colonial assumptions in language instruction, embrace culturally responsive practices, and bridge the gap between progressive educational initiatives and the realities of mainstream practice. By adopting this inclusive framework, educators can empower all learners to thrive within and beyond the classroom, ensuring that their linguistic identities are recognised and respected in the learning process.

Key words

Decolonising education, english language development, gestalt language processing, analytic language processing, multilingual learners, neurodiverse education, critical pedagogy, natural language acquisition, inclusive practices, culturally responsive teaching, equitable language instruction, power threat meaning framework

Contents

Introduction

Learning objectives

- Understand the colonial roots of current English Language Development practices and their detrimental effects on multilingual and neurodiverse learners, particularly Gestalt Language Processors.

- Recognise the importance of adopting a decolonised approach that not only uplifts and supports home languages alongside English but also empowers students through the integration of their cultural and linguistic identities.

- Be able to apply the principles of Natural Language Acquisition and critical pedagogy to design more inclusive and equitable language instruction.

- Use the Power Threat Meaning Framework to assess the social, cultural, and psychological impact of current ELD practices on marginalised students.

- Be able to design classroom practices that support diverse linguistic and neurological profiles, using a transformative educational methodology.

Rationale

The purpose of this introduction is to lay the groundwork for understanding the historical and systemic issues embedded in

current English Language Development (ELD) practices. These practices often prioritise English at the expense of home languages, reflecting a colonial legacy that marginalises both the linguistic and cultural identities of multilingual and neurodiverse learners. Recognising these colonial roots challenges educators to reconsider the conventional focus on English, inviting them to explore more inclusive alternatives.

The Power Threat Meaning Framework plays a crucial role in this rethinking, offering a lens to examine how power dynamics shape language instruction. Rather than viewing the challenges faced by multilingual students as individual deficits, the PTMF encourages educators to see these difficulties as responses to systemic pressures. This shift in perspective fosters a more inclusive and equitable approach, where home languages are not merely acknowledged but actively uplifted and supported, strengthening students' sense of identity and belonging.

Throughout the chapter, you will see how the Natural Language Acquisition model and critical pedagogy provide the foundation for a transformative educational approach that meets the needs of Gestalt Language Processors (GLPs) and other neurodiverse learners. (GLPs will be defined in detail later in the text.) This framework bridges theoretical foundations with practical applications in real-world educational settings, illustrating the need for systemic change.

As we explore these concepts, the introduction aims to connect the broader goals of decolonising language education with your everyday classroom experiences, equipping you to challenge entrenched practices and implement more equitable

instruction. To support your engagement with the material, you may find it helpful to refer to the glossary of terms at the end of the book, especially as key concepts and acronyms are introduced throughout.

Meet the author

For most of my life, I have been a foreigner – sometimes quite literally, as I've moved across countries and cultures, restarting my life in entirely new contexts. But more often, I've felt foreign in a less tangible way. As an autistic GLP, my relationship with language has always been complex (Hoerricks, 2023; Hoerricks 2024). The words others take for granted as tools of expression often feel distant, foreign objects that I must painstakingly learn, piece by piece, to function in the world.

Each time I had to restart my life in a new location, I was forced to learn the "language" of my new existence from scratch. Whether it was a literal language – English, Spanish, German – or the unwritten social rules of a new community, the process was slow, fragmented, and often frustrating. It always took time for me to get up to speed, and even then, I never felt fully "at home." There was always a part of me that remained foreign, out of place, forever a few steps behind the linguistic and cultural nuances of my new life.

This sense of being an outsider informs the way I see my students today – many of whom are multilingual and neurodiverse, grappling with an education system that, like my own experiences, assumes fluency where there is none. In California's ELD programs, the assumption is often that English is used not just

in school but also at home and in students' social lives. But this is far from true. For most of my students, English is only spoken in the classroom. Everywhere else, their home language dominates – within their families, social circles, and communities. In this environment, how can we expect their English language skills to flourish when the world outside of school is closed off to the language we're trying to teach them?

My experience of feeling foreign in my own body and language has given me a unique lens to see the challenges multilingual and neurodiverse students face in language learning. It is not enough to simply teach a second language in the classroom if we ignore the social and cultural realities outside it. Language cannot grow in isolation. Like me, my students are often trapped between two worlds – one in which they must function academically in English, and another in which their home language provides their only real sense of belonging. The dissonance between these worlds can stunt their language growth and, more importantly, their confidence and identity as learners.

My educational background

In my nearly six decades, my journey through education has been a series of resets, abrupt stops, and restarts. These shifts mark different acts in my life, each requiring me to learn new languages – both literally and figuratively – and often feeling foreign in each new context.

Act I of my life was defined by survival. Circumstances offered no handholds, and I navigated the world in a state of isolation and illiteracy, without the linguistic tools others took for

granted. Act II continued this struggle, as I remained a functionally illiterate adult, relying on strength and instinct to move through life and the globe. My hands understood the physical language of strength and precision long before I could read or write. However, at the end of Act II, I finally gained literacy – a turning point that transformed my path. This newfound skill led to a chance social meeting that opened the door to a career in forensic science, once again resetting my language journey, as I had to learn the technical language and systems of a new professional field.

Act III saw me pursue formal education to solidify this career. I earned a bachelor's and master's degree in Organizational Leadership from Woodbury University, a Master of Education in Instructional Design from Western Governors University (WGU), and a PhD in Education from Trident University. These degrees reflect my work in forensic science, helping me navigate and master the professional systems of power I had entered.

Now in Act IV, I've transitioned into teaching, a field that demands continuous learning. I earned a Master of Education in Special Education from Loyola Marymount University, and I am currently pursuing a Master of Education in English Language Learners from WGU. At the same time, I am completing the induction process at Mt. St. Mary's University to clear my probation as a teacher and earn a lifetime teaching credential. Alongside this, I've earned various certifications, including a 150-hour TEFL certificate from the University of Toronto, a 40-hour Orton-Gillingham certification, and a 90-hour Early Literacy certificate from the Rollins Centre for Language and Literacy in Atlanta, Georgia.

These degrees and certifications are not marks of brilliance or autistic savant abilities but are reflective of the gatekeeping mechanisms within education. Each phase of my life required me to learn the language of new academic, professional, and cultural contexts. As an autistic GLP, learning these new languages has taken time, effort, and significant financial resources, reflecting how power and privilege are maintained in colonial systems of education.

Through my story, I aim to illustrate how language, education, and power intersect to limit opportunities for those outside the dominant framework, while also demonstrating the resilience required to navigate these systems. Elements of my own language learning journey will be woven throughout the coming chapters, serving as an exemplar to ground the theoretical discussions in real-life experiences. By sharing these personal insights, I hope to provide a lens through which educators can better understand the challenges faced by diverse learners and the urgent need for reforms that embrace and support them.

Preparing to study

Before diving into the material, it's important to reflect on the current systems of language education and your own position within them. This book challenges many of the assumptions that underlie ELD programs and seeks to create a more inclusive, equitable approach to language instruction. As you prepare to engage with this text, it's essential to adopt a mindset that is open to questioning the status quo and ready to explore alternative frameworks.

Start by reflecting on your experiences with language, both as a learner and as an educator. Consider the following questions:

- How have you seen power dynamics play out in your language learning or teaching experiences?
- What role do home languages play in your classroom or learning environment? Are they valued or sidelined?
- How do you currently approach neurodiverse learners, such as those who may process language differently, including Gestalt Language Processors (GLPs)?

This book is grounded in the belief that language is not neutral – it is intertwined with culture, power, and identity. As you move through each chapter, you'll be asked to consider how colonial legacies shape the way we teach and learn language, and how we might work to decolonise these practices. Be prepared to engage with case studies, reflective activities, and practical strategies that will help you apply these concepts in your own context.

Take time to think about the home languages of the students you teach or the communities you engage with. Consider how uplifting and supporting those languages can lead to greater language proficiency, cultural pride, and student empowerment. By centering multilingualism and neurodiversity, this book offers a vision of language education that is both inclusive and transformative.

Approach this journey with the understanding that change is possible, but it requires an intentional shift in how we view language, learning, and identity. This book is not just about improving language instruction but about creating a more just, decolonised educational experience for all learners.

The politics of language in education

At the heart of ELD lies a political reality: language instruction has long been shaped by power dynamics that reflect colonial legacies. In many educational systems, particularly those with colonial histories, the prioritisation of English over home languages is not simply a matter of pedagogical preference, but a reflection of entrenched power structures. This practice marginalises both linguistic and cultural identities, forcing multilingual and neurodiverse learners to conform to a dominant language that may not reflect their home or community.

These power dynamics shape how language is taught and whose languages are considered valuable. The current system often imposes English as the sole language of academic success, reinforcing inequalities by sidelining home languages, which play a critical role in identity formation and cognitive development. For many students – especially those identified as GLPs – this imposition creates a disconnect between the language of instruction and their lived experiences, making it harder for them to succeed academically while maintaining a sense of belonging to their cultural and linguistic heritage.

Check for understanding

As you prepare to engage with the material, take a moment to reflect on the key ideas introduced. Think about how colonial legacies may have influenced language education in your context. Do you recognise power dynamics that privilege English over home languages? Consider how this affects both

multilingual and neurodiverse learners in your classroom or learning environment.

Ask yourself:

*   How might decolonising ELD practices change your approach to teaching?
*   What challenges do GLPs face in your current language instruction methods?
*   How can you begin to uplift and support home languages more effectively?

These reflections will help you identify areas for growth and change as you move forward. Be prepared to revisit these questions throughout the book as you deepen your understanding of inclusive and equitable language education.

Some things that might trip you up

Here are some potential challenges that you might face when engaging with this text:

*   **Cultural and contextual differences:** Learners from different countries and educational systems may have varying experiences with colonial legacies in language education. While the book focuses on the context of ELD, readers from non-colonial or non-English-dominant nations may struggle to relate to examples based in U.S. or Western practices. This can lead to confusion about how the concepts apply to their local contexts.

o   Tip: Actively reflect on how your own educational system handles language instruction and whether similar power dynamics are present, even if not in the same form.

- **Understanding neurodiversity, especially GLPs:** Concepts like Gestalt Language Processing may be unfamiliar to you, particularly if you do not have experience working with neurodiverse populations. You might find it difficult to conceptualise how these processing differences manifest in the classroom and why they require specific teaching strategies.

  o Tip: Don't worry. I provide clear, accessible definitions and real-world examples throughout the book to ensure you understand these neurodiverse perspectives.

- **Unfamiliarity with decolonial theory:** Decolonial theory may be new to many learners, particularly those from regions where colonialism's impacts on education are not widely discussed. Terms like decolonisation and critical pedagogy could be difficult for you to grasp, especially if you have not been exposed to critical social theories before.

  o Tip: I'll offer clear explanations of key terms and concepts, supplemented with case studies and practical examples that illustrate how decolonial frameworks work in educational settings.

- **Language barriers and terminology:** Given the global audience of this text, language can be a challenge, particularly if you are engaging with academic English. The specialised terminology used in discussing neurodiversity, language acquisition, and colonialism might require extra effort for non-native speakers to comprehend. Don't worry. I've got you covered.

  o Tip: There's a glossary of key terms and phrases at the end of the book. Additionally, I tend to use accessible language whenever possible to minimise misunderstandings.

- **Application of theories to local contexts:** While the book may provide strategies and recommendations based on a Western or U.S.-centric system, you might struggle to see how these strategies can be adapted for your own educational environment, where resources, policies, and linguistic priorities differ significantly.

    o   Tip: I encourage you to reflect on how the principles of uplifting home languages and supporting neurodiverse learners can be translated into your local context, even if specific recommendations differ.

- **Resistance to challenging established norms:** If you have been trained within traditional educational models, you may find the challenge to the status quo unsettling or difficult to accept. Decolonising language education requires questioning long-held beliefs and practices, which can provoke resistance or defensiveness, particularly if you are unfamiliar with the concept of systemic bias.

    o   Tip: Let's use open dialogue, reflection, and discussion about the discomfort that comes with change. After all, it is part of the learning process.

What can we do about it?

To counter the political forces that shape language instruction, we must actively work to dismantle the colonial assumptions that prioritise dominant languages over home languages. This begins with recognising that language is not neutral – it carries social, cultural, and political significance. By using frameworks like the PTMF and Critical Theory, educators can challenge the power structures that marginalise multilingual and neurodiverse learners.

From a practical standpoint, this means creating classrooms where home languages are seen as assets, not obstacles. By designing lessons that value students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, we can foster inclusive environments where language instruction supports both academic success and personal identity. Rather than enforcing a monolingual framework, we can encourage the use of home languages alongside English to build a more holistic approach to learning.

Moreover, educators can use the PTMF to shift their perspective on language difficulties. Instead of seeing multilingual learners as deficient, we can view their challenges as responses to systemic pressures, advocating for an educational model that uplifts their strengths rather than focusing on their perceived weaknesses.

Summary

Welcome to *Decolonising Language Education*. As you embark on this journey, I invite you to step into a critical space where language, identity, and power intersect. Throughout this book, we will challenge many of the assumptions underlying ELD practices and explore how these systems, rooted in colonial history, continue to shape the lives of multilingual and neurodiverse learners – learners like the GLPs who are so often overlooked by traditional methods.

My own journey has been one of constant resets – a series of starts and stops that have forced me to relearn the language of new contexts, professions, and systems. Like many of the learners we'll discuss in this book, I've felt foreign in every new act of life. These experiences have shaped the way I view education: not as

a one-size-fits-all structure, but as a living, breathing ecosystem that must be adapted to the diverse needs of its inhabitants.

This book asks you to reflect on your own experiences with language. How have power dynamics shaped the way you've learned or taught language? How have the home languages of your students or communities been valued – or sidelined? These are important questions because language isn't just about communication. It's about belonging, identity, and power – the power to express oneself fully or to feel silenced in a world that prioritises dominant languages.

Through the lens of the PTMF and Critical Theory, we will deconstruct the traditional approaches to language education. The PTMF allows us to shift away from seeing learners' struggles as deficits within themselves and instead to view them as responses to a system that was never designed with their strengths in mind. This perspective is particularly powerful for neurodiverse learners like GLPs, whose ways of processing language have often been misunderstood and unsupported. The task before us is to create inclusive environments that validate these learners' experiences and provide them with the tools they need to succeed – not by forcing them to conform to existing systems but by transforming those systems to meet their needs.

At the heart of this transformation is the social function of language. Language is not just a tool for academic achievement; it is a vital connector between individuals and their cultures, families, and communities. We will explore how uplifting home languages within the classroom context does more than improve language proficiency – it fosters pride, confidence, and a deep

sense of belonging. This is a crucial step in decolonising education: recognising that bilingualism and multilingualism are not barriers to be overcome but strengths to be celebrated.

By embracing the ideas in this book, you are beginning a journey that will require you to question, reflect, and adapt. You'll be asked to reimagine your classrooms and teaching practices, not just as places where students learn English, but as spaces where equity and inclusion thrive. I won't claim this journey is easy – change never is – but I believe it is a necessary one. This is not only about improving language outcomes but about creating a more just and equitable educational system – one that honours the diversity of all learners.

So, I welcome you to this learning adventure with open arms. As you move through the pages ahead, think of this as an invitation to step outside the familiar, to reimagine what language education can be, and to take part in a broader movement towards decolonising education. I wish you bon voyage on this journey – may it be one of growth, discovery, and transformation. And most importantly, I wish you *bonne chance* – good luck in applying these ideas in your own context, as together we work towards a more inclusive, empowering approach to language education.

1
The colonial legacy of ELD: Language suppression and the need for dual development

Learning objectives

1. Understand how ELD, rooted in TESOL frameworks, perpetuates assimilation rather than fostering bilingual development.

2. Recognise how a TEFL approach, acknowledging English as context-specific, better aligns with multilingual learners' realities.

3. Identify systemic barriers that prevent home language support and perpetuate inequity.

4. Introduce the necessity of a liberatory pedagogy that fosters simultaneous development of BICS and CALP in both home language and English.

Rationale

The learning goals outlined in this chapter are grounded in a critical examination of the historical and ideological underpinnings of English Language Development programs, particularly those rooted in TESOL frameworks. These goals seek to disrupt the long-standing assumption that English proficiency must be achieved through linguistic assimilation, an approach that has its roots in colonial language suppression and continues to shape educational policy today. By reframing English instruction through a TEFL-informed lens and advocating for the simultaneous development of Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency in both English and students' home languages, this chapter positions bilingualism not as an obstacle but as a vital asset. The objectives also reflect an urgent need to challenge systemic barriers that marginalise linguistic diversity, including English-only policies that reinforce linguistic hierarchies and fail to accommodate the cognitive and cultural needs of multilingual and neurodiverse learners. As the chapter demonstrates, a liberatory pedagogy – one that affirms and integrates students' full linguistic repertoires – offers not only a more equitable model of language education but also a more effective pathway to academic success. These learning goals, therefore, are not merely theoretical but serve as essential guideposts for transforming ELD into a tool of empowerment rather than assimilation.

Introduction: The paradox of ELD

ELD programs are built on the assumption that English should be central to students' lives beyond the classroom, a perspective

deeply embedded in TESOL frameworks. These programs operate with the expectation that students will not only acquire English for academic purposes but will also integrate it into their broader social and personal identities. Burchell et al. (2024) highlight how this assimilationist ideology underpins many ELD policies, treating home languages as barriers to success rather than essential components of a student's linguistic repertoire. The result is an approach that implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, encourages the replacement of students' first languages with English, reinforcing cultural assimilation as an unspoken objective of language instruction.

Housel (2021) further critiques this monolingual focus, noting that many TESOL programs are designed with an assumption that students will transition to exclusive English use, often failing to acknowledge the continued role of home languages in students' lives. This perspective marginalises linguistic diversity and places undue pressure on multilingual learners to conform to an English-dominant framework that does not reflect their lived experiences. When English is framed as the primary and most valuable language, students' home languages are often viewed as secondary, irrelevant, or even detrimental to their academic success. Consequently, educational policies and classroom practices frequently devalue students' linguistic and cultural assets, contributing to linguistic insecurity and identity erosion.

In contrast, a TEFL-oriented perspective offers a fundamentally different approach to English instruction. Rather than assuming that English must become a student's dominant language, TEFL treats English as a contextual skill – one used primarily for

academic and professional settings rather than as a replacement for a learner's home language. Kamhi-Stein et al. (2021) argue that this situational framing empowers learners to engage with English as a functional tool while maintaining their primary linguistic and cultural identities. Unlike TESOL, which often positions English as the end goal of language education, TEFL acknowledges the legitimacy of multilingualism and does not demand linguistic assimilation as a condition for academic success.

This distinction is particularly important when considering the role of schools in students' linguistic development. For many multilingual learners, English is not the dominant language in their home or community, making the expectation of full immersion unrealistic. Burchell et al. (2024) highlight that TESOL frameworks often disregard this reality, assuming that English acquisition should occur at the expense of home language maintenance. However, if schools were to adopt a TEFL-informed approach, they could reframe English as a supplementary skill rather than a replacement language. This shift would not only validate students' linguistic backgrounds but also foster a more inclusive learning environment where multilingualism is recognised as an asset rather than a deficiency.

Reframing ELD in this way challenges the deficit-based narratives that have long shaped language education policy. Instead of positioning English as the singular path to success, a contextual skill-based model acknowledges the rich linguistic knowledge that students bring into the classroom. Kamhi-Stein et al. (2021) emphasise that when educators take this approach, students are better able to engage with English in ways that are meaningful and relevant to their specific needs, rather than being pressured

to abandon their home languages in favour of full assimilation. By recognising school as a 'foreign' linguistic space for many students, educators can create learning environments that support language development without enforcing linguistic conformity.

Ultimately, adopting a TEFL-inspired perspective in ELD programs allows students to engage with English as a valuable but context-specific tool, rather than as a replacement for their existing linguistic identities. This shift not only empowers multilingual learners but also challenges the systemic inequities that have long shaped English language instruction. By moving away from the assimilationist assumptions embedded in TESOL frameworks, educators can foster an approach that honours linguistic diversity while ensuring that students acquire the skills they need to navigate academic and professional spaces with confidence.

Historical context: Colonial language policies and their legacy

Colonial powers have long wielded language as a tool of domination, enforcing linguistic hierarchies that privileged the colonisers' language while systematically erasing indigenous and minority languages. This process was not merely about linguistic replacement but about restructuring entire social systems to align with colonial governance. Colonial governments and missionary institutions understood that severing communities from their linguistic and cultural roots was essential to maintaining control over colonised populations. Jayasinghe (2021) examines how colonial-era education systems deliberately imposed the language of the colonisers, creating a generational disconnect between indigenous communities and their linguistic heritage.

This linguistic displacement was a means of eroding indigenous knowledge systems, enforcing new social hierarchies, and cementing colonial authority.

A particularly egregious example of this was the widespread use of Indigenous boarding schools, especially in North America and Australia. These institutions were designed to strip indigenous children of their languages, cultures, and identities by forcibly removing them from their homes and immersing them in English-only environments. Speaking their home languages was harshly punished, with children facing physical abuse, isolation, or public humiliation for any linguistic transgressions. The ideological foundation of these schools was clear: indigenous languages were seen as obstacles to 'civilisation', and full assimilation into the dominant colonial culture was the expected outcome. These practices were not unique to North America; similar strategies were deployed in British and French colonial territories across Africa and South Asia, where the official languages of governance and education were imposed at the expense of local languages (Kazmi, 2022). The colonial project sought not only to control land and resources but also to control thought and identity – language was the primary means by which this was achieved.

Although overt coercion is no longer the standard mechanism of language suppression, the ideological foundations of these colonial policies persist in modern ELD programs, particularly those shaped by TESOL frameworks. The fundamental assumption remains unchanged: English is prioritised at the expense of home languages, reinforcing linguistic hierarchies and promoting assimilation under the guise of educational advancement. Kazmi