

***English Language Teaching in South America. Policy, Preparation and Practices. 2017.*** Edited by Lia D. Kamhi-Stein, Gabriel Díaz Maggioli and Luciana C. de Oliveira. Bristol & Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters

Approaching education in general or ELT from a regional point of view is not new. This can be an institutionalised practice such as the SEAMEO RELC; official documents such as the CEFR, or academic publications such as Ragajopalan (2005), a collection of papers on applied linguistics in Latin America. As its title suggests, the volume we are reviewing takes a similar regional view; its 12 chapters showcase ELT developments in seven countries in the region: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Uruguay and Venezuela, all of which have invested considerable resources in the development of policies, programmes and materials to promote the learning of English as a foreign language. This collection thus provides important insights into ELT developments in a region which we are not used to hearing about in scholarly discussions.

One important achievement of this volume is that the contributors in the first two sections – the ‘policy’ and ‘teacher preparation’ of the title – have been intimately involved in the policies they describe and analyse. What we get are often first-hand accounts of policy decisions by the main actors in writing and implementing of these policies. In addition, the book also documents the implementation of these policies and, in some cases, the struggles of the teachers to enact them successfully in contexts where issues such as resources, teacher education, and student needs can present challenges. We ourselves approach this volume through the lenses of our own experiences in the region: Luis as an English language learner, and later an English teacher and teacher educator in Chile, and Amos through working with Chilean and Brazilian teachers in the UK and in-country.

Any regional approach raises issues about whether there is something special about the region that deserves mention or note and which makes it different from others. We believe the main reason for the focus on the South American context is laid out in Díaz Maggioli’s chapter, which points out two important phenomena. The first region-wide observation which Díaz Maggioli makes is the way in which ELT in South America is politicised, and the way in which the connection between ELT and neoliberal discourses is reflected in commodified views of language and teaching. Díaz Maggioli’s analysis of the standards documents of Uruguay, Ecuador and Chile reveals the ways in which, in spite of being couched in more progressive terms, the documents still express underlying neoliberal ideologies; in fact, we would suggest that the standardisation of teacher education can be argued to be in itself a neoliberal practice. Díaz Maggioli’s view is corroborated by much of what the other chapters present – a configuration of ELT aiming to promote the countries’ socioeconomic development and competitiveness in the global market. Although in their introduction, Kamhi-Stein, Díaz Maggioli and de Oliveira claim that ‘in the 2000s English began to be seen as an instrument of empowerment and contestation of the current reality in the region’ (p. 1) and that ‘English has become a key in the promotion of a more socially just approach to our understanding of the world’ (p. 2), we were still left wondering to what extent this has really happened in practice, and to what extent the chapters in the book reflect this view. As we show below, many of the chapters present typical neoliberal practices in ELT: in the emphasis on standardised testing and evaluation of both teachers and students, in the development of standards, in the McDonaldisation of teaching, and in the precarization of labour (see del Percio and Flubacher 2017) resulting from the unprecedented pressures on teachers who do not accomplish the goals expected of them. This educational climate, as observed by Hayes (2014), is likely to make ELT teachers in the region struggle to cope with even the short-term demands imposed on them.

The second point Díaz Maggioli makes relates to the creation of teacher education standards in Uruguay (with him and Natalie Kuhlman as the authors), Chile (chapter by Abraham and Ríos), and

Ecuador (chapter by Kuhlman and Serrano), and how these standards have circulated in the region. Díaz Maggioli analyses this as a case of policy transfer: an important theoretical construct for a region where, we would argue, it is highly likely that policies will be borrowed, which may have positive or negative implications for each country depending on the degree of adaptation at play. We believe it would have been fruitful to reflect on the actual gains standardisation has to offer, or on the problems raised by standardisation, especially because Díaz Maggioli highlights the neoliberal discourses framing the policies in these countries. Díaz Maggioli seems to criticise the way in which the policy is framed, but we were left wondering what his stance towards standardisation is.

There are many other threads that connect the chapters in the book. Almost every chapter reveals the lack of qualified teachers of English to cope with the frequent top-down educational policies each country has devised. In this regard, the book also exposes the frequently failing attempts by the national authorities to cope with this issue, despite the investment of vast resources in different professional development programmes such as studying abroad (chapter by Kuhlman and Serrano), the free delivery of materials (chapters by Tenuta, Jorge and de Souza and by Abrahams and Silva Ríos), or the delivery of free resources for students and teachers (chapter by Veciño). As documented in some of the contributions, this lack of attainment has also put these teachers under unprecedented pressures, and in some cases, even at risk of losing their jobs, as Kuhlman and Serrano report in their chapter about Ecuador. These problems, of course, are not only limited to ELT, and are well-documented (e.g. Alvarado and Bretones 2017 on the teaching conditions in Ecuador). Indeed, one point that would have helped readers understand the situation described in each chapter would have been presenting ELT within the broader educational context of each country.

Some of the solutions presented in this volume to this lack of achievement are ingenious – but some in fact are more problematic than they seem. For example, the Plan CEIBAL in Uruguay (described in the chapter by Banfi and in greater detail in the chapter by Brovetto), designed to cope with the lack of qualified teachers of English in Uruguay, involves a combination of qualified distance tutors and on-site teachers with very little English (if any) and no language teaching training. However ingenious this solution, Plan Ceibal looks uncomfortably like the McDonaldisation of teaching: the lessons are pre-planned, delivered by an individual who is merely the deliverer of content, but has had no hand in its preparation or in the design of the delivery. Although the progress of learners described by Brovetto seems impressive, and though she claims that the classroom teachers function as facilitators and models of learning, we were left wondering whether this apparently extremely technocratic model of teaching can ultimately successfully respond to the long term needs of EFL learners in Uruguay.

Much of the third part of the book, 'School-based research and innovative practices', makes connections between teaching English and other areas of the curriculum, but interestingly it also highlights the problems concomitant with the spread of English, and throws light on the other chapters and on the book as a whole. Pozzi's exploration of the way in which 'access to English ... contributes to a class-based divide in the City of Buenos Aires' (p. 142), in particular, shows how issues of class size and of socioeconomic background impact on the way resources are used (e.g. how students interact with the technology they are given). Pozzi provides specific examples of the disconnect between policy and practice in pedagogic situations where a 'basic' topic like 'home' confronts learners who live 10 in a room with houses where children have playrooms of their own. Chacón, in a chapter on film in an EFL classroom in Venezuela, is surprisingly the only chapter where race – a major issue in most educational systems in South America – is mentioned. Almeida and Souza discuss incorporating multimodality into English teaching in the Brazilian context; and

Rodriguez-Bonces discusses moving to a content-based instruction model in a Colombian school. All these chapters illustrate a strong connection with the general educational situation and the larger socio-economic picture, and reinforce the point we made earlier about the importance of considering contextual factors outside the ELT bubble. The contextual factors also come to the fore in the chapter by Valsecchi, Barbeito and Olivero, who report on a large scale survey of EFL learners' beliefs in Cordoba, Argentina. In their focus on the importance of CPD in introducing change, they reinforce the points made by Hayes (2014) and note that 'long-lasting changes, conducive of potential success, tend to be those that are gradual and bottom-up instead of radical and imposed in a top-down manner, for example, by government policies' (p. 199). Again, we wondered whether the processes described in some of the other chapters reflect this point of view.

Two additional issues arise from considering this volume as a whole. One is the issue of geographical representation: the volume presents chapters about seven of the 13 South American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Uruguay and Venezuela), which suggests good coverage. However, there is an over-representation of Argentina in the chapters, including, in fact, an over-representation of Buenos Aires (three of the four chapters about Argentina). That creates a bias, though a fairly obvious one (and we are, of course, aware of the issues surrounding choice of chapters for edited volumes). Other biases are less obvious, and this is our second concern. As we mentioned earlier, many of the contributors are actually policy makers; in some cases this is acknowledged by the writer (e.g. Díaz Maggioli), but in other cases this is less evident (e.g. the chapters by Kuhlman and Serrano and by Abrahams and Silva Rios), and the reader is left to gather this from their knowledge of the contexts, rather than from the authors' own commentary. Some chapters come across as promoting the authors' work as opposed to critically assess it, and this is fine – but only provided the authors are up front about their connection with the work they are describing, which is not always the case here (for example, in the chapters about Plan CEIBAL and the Chilean teacher education standards).

These points aside, this is, in many ways, an extremely important book. It documents important movements, even if our view of these movements is different from that of the writers. The chapters are highly authoritative, and are, without exception, very informative. What is more, the volume as a whole does not only tell us the official story through the descriptions and analyses of different ELT policies across the region, but also tells us how such policies are being enacted in various contexts, which is where we start to see how ELT fits within the broader education contexts referred to in the book. We highly recommend this volume to those working in ELT policy making in the region and beyond, South American teacher educators, and undergraduate and postgraduate students of ELT and Applied Linguistics.

## References

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