Editors’ Introduction

Decolonizing Research in the Teaching of English(es)

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The history of knowledge-making in modern Western history from the Renaissance on will have, then, theology and philosophy-science as the two cosmological frames. . . Both frames are institutionally and linguistically anchored in Western Europe. They are anchored in institutions, chiefly the history of European universities and in the six modern (e.g., vernacular) European and imperial languages: Italian, Spanish and Portuguese, dominant from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, and German, French and English, dominant from the Enlightenment onward. Behind the six modern European languages of knowledge lay its foundation: Greek and Latin—not Arabic or Mandarin, Hindi or Urdu, Aymara or Nahuatl. The six mentioned languages based on Greek and Latin provided the “tool” to create a given conception of knowledge that was then extended to the increasing, through time, European colonies from the Americas to Asia and Africa. (Mignolo, 2009, p. 6)

This issue marks the end of the 49th volume year for RTE. Entering the 50th year of publication, we take this time to reflect on the nature of knowledge-making unfolding in these pages. Why English? Why English only? Research in the Teaching of English, as a journal and disciplinary formation, is framed by linguistic and institutional tenets. It works from the tacit assumption that the English language is a neutral object. A monolithic whole. The gold standard of languages. The natural object of analysis for scholars and teachers in Canada and the United States. The top of the language hierarchy that mirrors the social one in which whiteness is presumed to also be a monolithic baseline against which all others are labeled (e.g., as diverse, people of color, marginalized, etc.). The presumption of the journal has been that fluency in English is a natural(ized) objective for all peoples in the twenty-first-century global economy, particularly in the United States, where the English Only movement has gained even more momentum in recent years. Such a presumption reifies the position and imposition of English only—as it simultaneously erases the historical roots of whitestream, standard English as an imperial language.

The institutional imperialist frame of Research in the Teaching of English works with and alongside the linguistic imperialist frame, providing “the ‘tool’ to create
a given conception of knowledge that was then [and is now] extended” through the Americas and abroad (Mignolo, 2009, p. 6). Knowledge made in the pages of this journal centers literacy as knowledge, the literate as knower. To begin the work of decolonizing the institution of knowledge-making in RTE requires a shift “in the terms that one might typically use to describe reading and writing: letters, literacy, literate and the alphabet” (Cushman, 2012, p. 552). The etymologies of these words link them to Western language families and their alphabetic writing systems. Being lettered is synonymous with being a knowledgeable, learned, and accomplished intellectual: “To be literate is to be fluent with the letter or to be lettered, from the Latin, Literatus” (Cushman, 2012, p. 552). The work of this journal, then, has historically been tacitly complicit with the linguistic and institutional work of maintaining the imperialist roots of English only.

As we reflect on the 49th year of this journal’s history, we are mindful of this legacy as we hope—in the company of many others—to continue the work of decolonizing research in the teaching of English. One facet of our editorial vision has been to include work of early career scholars, who also have explicitly and implicitly asked: Why English? Why not Englishes? Why not multiple ways of knowing in addition to being lettered? Why not multiple means of expression in addition to the letter? And moving beyond Mignolo’s concerns above, why not feeling, affect, and being in addition to knowledge-making? Adding to the voices of scholars published in previous volume years, Peter De Costa (2014) conceptualized cosmopolitanism in language and literacy education to study youth negotiating linguistic and literate practices in a multilingual school in Singapore. Michael Sherry (2014) illuminated new possibility for dialogic classroom relationships by showing how an artful African American preservice teacher leveraged African American language to engage urban students in collaborative disagreement in literary discussion. And Gholnecsar E. Muhammad (2015) conceptualized a full vision for understanding young African American women writers through studying their agentive construal of ethos that created powerful counter-narratives to the demeaning mainstream media representations of who they are and might become.

Writers new to RTE and seasoned authors alike have questioned how power works in classrooms and in the profession. Though not explicitly pointing to these writers’ research as decolonial in its framing or analysis, these articles do reflect on the longstanding ways inequity has been or continues to be reproduced. Each of these articles, in its own way, questions the content of what counts as research in the teaching of English. In the spirit of these conversations, the journal has worked to become more multilingual this past volume year by publishing article abstracts in eight languages. And international writers are seeking out RTE as a venue for their work, as demonstrated by the increased numbers of submissions from international writers in the last two years. Yet these steps are but initial gestures toward the project of decentering the presumed, taken-for-granted primacy of dominant American English.

To this end, the present issue takes up three sites of critical research on neurodiversity, language diversity, and antiracist pedagogies. The forum essay concludes
with a provocative call for teacher education in language and literacy to concern itself more with the landscapes of relationships happening among teachers and students in classrooms, particularly through the regulation of emotion and bodies.

Shannon Walters’s article, “Toward a Critical ASD Pedagogy of Insight: Teaching, Researching, and Valuing the Social Literacies of Neurodiverse Students,” leads this issue with an important and timely study that begins from the insight that existing studies of Autism Spectrum Disorders tend to be written about students from deficit and managerial perspectives, rather than from the perspective of students. Walters corrects this with her focus on two college writing students who self-identify with Asperger syndrome. Using a critical disability framework to analyze their writings and interview data, Walters approaches their experiences as potentially offering insight into the possibilities and promise of these students, who are writers inside and outside of the classroom. Their perspectives lend insight into their experiences in first-year writing classrooms to demonstrate ways in which they struggle and succeed in these classrooms. These students experience the highly structured, staged approach to writing process pedagogy in their classrooms as rigid and stifling. “Unfortunately, the stages of process pedagogy,” Walters finds, “rest on the assumption that most students think and write the same way—neurotypically” (p. 349). Many kinds of students experience similar frustrations with linearly structured, process-based approaches to writing (i.e., prewriting, drafting, peer review, editing, portfolio). However, the degree to which AS students experience these frustrations and struggles may be markedly different.

The classrooms experienced by these students offer assignments that employ student-centered approaches, informed by critical pedagogy and culturally relevant pedagogies. These assignments are designed with the understanding that written products result from particular, neurotypical forms of social activity. From the perspective of these student writers, though, what counts as social activity is at odds with their understandings and experiences of social activity. Both the student writers profiled in these cases engage in multiple forms of social writing (e.g., blogs, fan fiction, and regional, environmental, and local histories and geography). Yet these writings are not valued in the writing class as academic genres. Walters demonstrates types of writing and peer response that these AS students engage in outside of class that help to shape their writerly selves, yet these are often curtailed by the rigid, linearly structured nature of response, peer review, and class discussion. Smagorinsky (2014) argues that neurodiversity should be seen as an area of cultural difference that merits inclusion in discussion of multicultural education. He finds that “changes in school climate can contribute to the emotional well-being of neuroatypical students” (p. 19). Changing the classroom setting of people of difference might involve educating people in the setting about how to view those with extranormative physical or mental makeups and treat them respectfully and in light of their potential. Walters’s study extends a line of much-needed research on neurodiversity by offering several suggestions for how instructors can begin to change the classroom setting and their own views of ASD students.

Anny Fritzen Case’s article, “Beyond the Language Barrier: Opening Spaces for
ELL/non-ELL Interaction,” continues this issue’s focus on diversity and inclusivity in the English classroom. Too little research exists that examines interactions in the context of collaborative projects from both the ELL and non-ELL student perspectives. To address this lacuna, Fritzen Case traces the interactions of a group of refugee and immigrant high school students (ELLs and non-ELLs) as they collectively create a digital video. Complicating understandings of the “language barrier,” she examines ELL/non-ELL interactions in a five-and-a-half-week after-school project through a Levinasian philosophy to surface the relational and ethical aspects contributing to these students’ work. Through several illustrative examples drawn from interview data, artifact analysis, and observation, Fritzen Case demonstrates that the problem with the language barrier in English classrooms isn’t as much about language proficiency as the literature suggests. Rather, the problem rests in creating an inclusive environment where the relational and ethical work of understanding each other becomes of central importance to facilitating learning. “The rich perspectives of the participants, together with a Levinasian lens,” Fritzen Case finds, “offer another possible approach: opening spaces for negotiating interaction and meaning between ELLs and non-ELLs in mutually responsive ways that are not solely dependent on a narrow view of the language barrier” (p. 379). Reframing an inclusive classroom this way would create the possibility for students and teachers alike to value linguistic difference as an “invitation to engage in Other-centered interaction that could reframe the ‘problem’ of the language barrier from ‘making them understand’ to a more generous and humble stance of seeking to understand what the Other needs or wants” (p. 380). The long-overdue move here is to shift the research and pedagogical focus away from the language barrier, which is centered on the ongoing need for Others, in this case immigrants, to acquire skills, features, and accents that mark one as fluent in English. Rather, as Canagarajah (2013) and Campano, Ghiso, and Sánchez (2013) argued in our lead issue, the focus of literacy research and teaching is on the interactionally situated, creative, tense, and full-of-potential negotiations of meaning. Such small-scale negotiations can epistemologically level classrooms to frame all learners and teachers as authorized knowers and language users.

Maneka Deanna Brooks offers insights into how five Latina long-term English learners perceive and experience reading in classrooms in ways that complicate the limited and limiting story told by standardized test scores of their reading abilities. Drawing on ethnographic data collected during biology and English classes, as well as interviews with the five students, Brooks finds that the everyday experience of in-school reading centers on discussion of texts with peers and teachers to create a collective experience of texts and meaning-making. These reading experiences are often at odds with testing methods that presume reading should be a highly individualized experience of silently processing discrete pieces of information. Brooks moves the field of research in the teaching of English away from notions of reading fluency that encompass only atomistic, testable indicators of English language proficiency. In the end, her article “highlight[s] the problematic nature of exclusively interpreting low reading test scores as evidence of and/or solely attributable to ‘limited English proficiency’” (p. 403). When their reading experiences
are holistically taken into account, long-term English learners will demonstrate deeper engagement with texts through a variety reading activities and practices across disciplines.

Carlin Borsheim-Black delivers the capstone article in this issue, based on her research in a secondary English classroom studying *To Kill a Mockingbird* (TKAM). Borsheim-Black uses critical race theory to analyze the negotiation of an antiracist literary pedagogy by an early career White teacher, Ms. Allen. Working in a pre-dominantly White and socioeconomically privileged classroom and community, Ms. Allen uses an antiracist approach that proactively seeks to interrupt racism. A critical Whiteness studies approach allows Borsheim-Black to trace four lines of opportunity and challenge posed by this antiracist approach to TKAM related to Whiteness at individual, institutional, societal, and epistemological levels. Borsheim-Black attempts to destabilize Whiteness as a seemingly neutral category and to reveal the ways it functions as an ideology that maintains privilege.

Questions of ethical relationality thread through our reading of all these papers: What do we or should we—as scholars and teachers—make of the reality that all but one of these authors identify as White, non-ELL, and (so far as we know) neurotypical? Who has the right to tell whose story, and when, under what conditions, for whom? At what point, if ever, does an outsider to a historically colonized group become an insider or vice versa? When is telling someone else’s story, particularly the stories of historically marginalized peoples, yet another form of linguistic colonization? Indeed, how might the project of decolonizing English(es) reframe relations among researchers/writers, research participants, editors, readers, and the texts and languages with which we work? Addressing these questions seems vital to the work of scholarly ethos building within the project of decolonizing research in the teaching of English(es).

Such questions about representing self and other, and even questions about processes of navigating boundaries between self and other, saturate student worlds inside and outside the English classroom and anywhere language and literacy learning and practice take place. The articles in this issue take fresh positions and stances on these topics. The Forum essay punctuates the issue’s theme of decolonizing research in the teaching of English, driving home the importance of scholarly and teacher ethos: who we are (always in the process of becoming) as complex, multifaceted human beings matters for the life of our classrooms and for the credibility of our scholarly work. Gail Boldt, Cynthia Lewis, and Kevin M. Leander’s Forum essay invites English educators to turn away from the fetishization of standardization, testing, and methods and to lean into emotion. Classroom and school environments that embrace affective intensity as part and parcel of literacy education begin to open spaces for learners and teachers to tolerate—indeed cultivate—ambiguity, improvisation, and disruption. Thus do classrooms become redefined as spaces of living, feeling relationships that implicate the whole person as embodied, emotional, and intellectual being. Their Forum essay, too, expands the genre by enacting a Deleuzo-Guattarian juxtaposition that lays perspectives side-by-side, inviting readers to construct connections, relationships, and possibilities.
In all, Volume 49 has engaged us—and we hope, the field—in a process of diversifying the articles, content, methodologies, and authors’ perspectives in this journal as part of the bigger project of questioning the imperialist tenets of research in the teaching of English. Yet we have a long way to go as a field. Even in writing this essay, we are aware of the unconscious ways we have been brought into long-standing colonial discourses that lead us to use certain labels and binaries (e.g., ELL and non-ELL; multilingual and monolingual; marginalized and dominant) that themselves betray a troubled history in which scholars and teachers are implicated. We remain mindful that many of the research methodologies appearing in these pages, though ethical and rigorous, also serve to position knower and known in imperialist enunciations of knowledge. In upcoming volumes, we seek to publish research that engages more deeply with the multiple ways to decolonize methodologies (Kovach, 2010; Smith, 1999) and genres used to report this research (Paris & Winn, 2013). With the recognition of our own—and the journal’s—complicity in historically situated inequity, we continue our aim of building scholarly capacity in the field, particularly among emerging scholars. This past volume year, for example, we designed a “How to Review” tutorial, now available on the RTE homepage. We also piloted a graduate student workshop at the Michigan State Literacy Colloquy about reviewing and writing for RTE and other scholarly journals.

Heading into the next volume year, we intend to continue these efforts toward cultivating new voices and decolonizing the work of the journal, and we ask for our readers’ help in inspiring and sustaining this work. If you have graduate students to recommend or would like to review for the journal, please write to us at rte.ncte@gmail.com. We are keenly interested in research in English language classrooms that promotes border thinking, multiplicities of languages and Eng-Englishes, and decolonial approaches to the teaching of heritage languages alongside English. In the volume year ahead, we anticipate marking the 50th anniversary of RTE through developing innovations, ongoing retrospections, and reaching out to new audiences for the journal.

REFERENCES


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Search for New Editor of College English

NCTE is seeking a new editor of College English. In July 2017 the term of the present editor, Kelly Ritter, will end. Interested persons should send a letter of application to be received no later than September 4, 2015. Letters should include the applicant’s vision for the journal and be accompanied by the applicant’s vita, one sample of published writing (article or chapter), and two letters specifying financial support from appropriate administrators at the applicant’s institution. Finalists will be interviewed at the NCTE Annual Convention in Minneapolis in November 2015. The applicant appointed by the NCTE Executive Committee will effect a transition, preparing for his or her first issue in September 2017. The appointment is for five years. Applications should be submitted via email in PDF form to kaustin@ncte.org; please include “College English Editor Application” in the subject line. Direct queries to Kurt Austin, NCTE Senior Developer for Publications, at the email address above, or call 217-328-3870, extension 3619.