

**Education, Hegemony, and Language: Theoretical Explorations of Experiences from the English Summer Excellence Program in Nukus, Uzbekistan**

Practicum Capstone Paper

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*“Since the EFL “textbook misrepresents the plurality of the local and foreign cultures”, they do not “respond to the local needs, interests, and life experiences of the learners in their own context”, and they decide whose culture, knowledge, and history become legitimized.”<sup>1</sup>*

When deciding how to approach this capstone paper I was struck by the difficulty of grounding a very praxis-heavy practicum in a very theory-heavy assignment. It wasn't until I decided to locate the paper in the historical context of the region before moving on to my more abstracted thoughts on EFL textbooks that a clearer picture emerged. As a result, this paper attempts to incorporate several ambitious topics: the colonial context of Central Asia and its legacy for the 21st century; the role of neoliberalism as a totalizing system and its deployment of a decontextualized, 'neutral' approach to education; and finally a brief set of thoughts on the intersection of neoliberal education, learner positionality, the environment, and the potential consequences.

### **Historical Context: Overlapping Colonialisms**

In order to situate the practicum experience within the broader theoretical and academic framework, I have separated this analysis into two rough categories: first, the geopolitical, colonial-historical, and linguistic context of Central Asia; Second, an analysis of EFL textbooks (including those used in the practicum) and their role in perpetuating hegemonic neoliberal modes of thinking at the expense of organic and culturally adaptive modes of language education.

To begin, it is useful to locate Uzbekistan both historically and geopolitically. More to the point, I believe it is not possible to contextualize the experience of working with the Uzbek Ministry of Education or local Uzbek/Karakalpak teachers during the practicum without first roughly outlining the form and nature of colonialism in Uzbekistan. For various historical reasons, Russian colonial projects are frequently categorized or analyzed outside the rubrics

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<sup>1</sup> Pardo, "Inquiring", 114:

and frameworks of other European colonial powers. This obfuscation, on some occasions, gives rise to the impression that Russia in its iterate forms was somehow less involved (or even, in extreme arguments, uninvolved completely) in colonialism, imperialism, and conquest.

Perhaps this is due to mythological notions that Russia has always existed in some form or another, and that it likewise, in some form or another, has had claim to the territories we as 21st century observers are familiar with. This is not the case. In fact, as several historians have pointed out, the 18th and 19th century colonial process of conquering and settling vast sections of Siberia and Central Asia from west to east almost perfectly mirror the United State's mission of manifest destiny as it moved from east to west.<sup>2</sup> Both empires justified their territorial claims under similar colonial and imperial logics, and both accomplished their goals of continental subjugation in remarkably close succession, within the same decade. Yet, perhaps because of its lack of maritime colonies and substantive navy, the Russian Empire driving towards the western coast of the Pacific with the intent to colonize the entire region is not as clearly recognized by other Europeans as a colonial power in its own right.

This is a critical dimension to understanding the patterns of development and the contingencies of history that have made modern Uzbekistan. Therefore, it is important to be clear— in the context of the ESET practicum in Uzbekistan, I believe the long-term trajectory of the region is best understood not as a collection of nomadic groups that gradually solidified into contemporary republics, but rather as colonized indigenous groups living on what became the territory of a distant European metropole— Moscow. Thus, when American diplomats and NGO workers (myself included for the purposes of this paper) arrive in Uzbekistan with the notion that Uzbekistan has long been a concrete, sovereign political entity, much of the colonial history (including the history of the development of language education), is minimized or otherwise made invisible.

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Snyder: *“Putin and Trump”*, 2022.

While there is much richness in the history and experiences of Uzbekistan in the past several centuries, I would like to briefly focus on the end of the 18th and majority of the 19th centuries, as it is most directly relevant to the context surrounding language education and the colonial experience. Most critically, it is important to understand that English as a foreign language is not being introduced in a vacuum, but rather is following, and perhaps eclipsing the Russian language as a ‘new’ language of international communication and elite prestige. While I would not go so far as to say that English is an explicitly colonial language in this context (although it undoubtedly is in others), it bears many of the same hegemonic structures and understandings as Russian, the previous colonial language. Rather, I think English in this context is best framed as the language of neoliberal hegemony, the language of “a rules-based global order”, as it is often put.<sup>3</sup> Thus, while not explicitly colonial in the territorial sense of its deployment, we should critically analyze the English language (and the means and reasons through which English is taught) in order to be more aware of the ways in which its presence reproduces and concretizes structures and inheritances of more direct forms of Colonialism. All of this to say: the most important context to consider when teaching English as a foreign language in Central Asia is that it is the *second* time this area has been *linguistically* colonized, albeit in a recapitulated, neoliberal form.

A good illustration of this complexity comes from something as ‘simple’ as the alphabet. Or rather, which alphabet? Prior to colonization by Imperial Russia in the second half of the 19th century, the two most prominent language groups of the region (Turkic and Indo-Iranian languages) were written in a modified form of the Perso-Arabic script. In an effort to improve bureaucratic efficiency, the recently arrived members of Russian civil society attempted to standardize the script across several languages, despite their phonological differences. When, in the 1920s, this standardization led to more confusion, a new approach was taken—a complete switch to the Latin alphabet. Informed partly by Turkey’s successful

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<sup>3</sup> Cimmino, Jeffrey. “Strategic Context”, 2021.

transition from the Arabic to the Latin scripts, the assumption was a more universalized alphabet would increase efficiency within the empire. Notably, this period did not last long.<sup>4</sup>

By the 1930s official correspondence, educational materials, and nearly all other forms of public writing were in the process of transition to a modified version of Cyrillic alphabet. This was done partly for phonological reasons, as the Central Asian Turkic language branches were not particularly well represented by the Latin phonology, but more critically the enforced switch to Cyrillic was used as a stepping-stone to install Russian as the default language in Central Asia (the most extreme impacts of this are still felt to this day—the Kazakh language, for instance, has struggled tremendously to recover as a spoken indigenous language to the region).<sup>5</sup>

This top-down approach to education served in a multitude of ways to ‘other’ the colonized Central Asian subject. University entrance exams, military rank advancement, career development all became more and more dependent on the ability of an individual to minimize or conceal their native language-culture and install a Russified (or ‘Sovietized’) worldview through language use. As a result, Russian became a language of education and prestige, and was widely seen as a mode of advancement within Central Asian societies, a trend that was accelerated after the Bolshevik revolution and establishment of the USSR. Thus, by the mid-Soviet period Russian had acquired a deeply-entrenched hegemonic status in Central Asia. This is particularly noticeable in Turkic-language newspapers, where the interstitial use of Russian loanwords rose from 2% to 15% by 1940.<sup>6</sup> By 1991, the notion of a Central Asia without Russia or Russian was almost unthinkable, in the same manner that a South Africa or a U.S. without English is unthinkable today.<sup>7</sup> As a result of the complete transformation of Central Asian culture, institutions, and society via the Russian colonial project and the historically

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<sup>4</sup> Pamir Dietrich, Ayşe, “Soviet and Post-Soviet”, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Bhavna Dave, “National Revival in Kazakhstan”, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Pamir Dietrich, Ayşe, “Soviet and Post-Soviet”, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Hashimova, Umida. “2021: Another Year”, 2022.

contingent collapse of the Soviet Union, the board was set for the ascension of English as the next regional linguistic hegemon, albeit in an internationalized, globalized form.

The U.S.'s war in Afghanistan threw into stark relief the necessity of soft power in maintaining the borders of empire. American interest in military cooperation<sup>8</sup>, economic investment, and grand strategy (vis-a-vis the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China) defined the relationship between itself and the Central Asian republics in the new millennium.<sup>9</sup> In addition to USAID-backed development aid, significant resources were invested to teach English to a wide range of groups in order to cultivate human capital and aid in the gathering of intelligence, especially as it pertained to Afghanistan. Thus, in the centuries-long competition between European empires to control Central Asia, the U.S. inherited the contexts and institutions of the various Russian imperial projects.

I have chosen to elaborate on this history because it offers a microcosm of how language hegemony can operate and how English has inherited the structures and 'legwork' of Russian colonial language education. More specifically, because access to the Russian language promised (among other things) economic advancement, access to European thought, and 'modernity' writ large, the resultant social history and inherited institutions<sup>10</sup> reflect this culture-power asymmetry. Thus, when the Uzbek Minister for Education initiates a program named 'English Speaking Nation', we can see echoes of the same coloniality, the same promise of trading the 'backwardness' of the hinterland for the sophistication and modernness of the Euro-American metropole through the adoption of another hegemonic Euro-American language, this time the English of the information-economy age.<sup>11</sup> In this iteration, however, we should not mistake English as 'only' a colonial language, but rather as a

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<sup>8</sup> US Department of Veterans Affairs, "Karshi", 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Putz, Catherine. "Same Interests", 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Particularly the educational system, (which relied heavily on rote memorization, punishment/shaming, and individual call-and-response exercises between a single student and the teacher) which still has significant impact on pedagogy today, especially among older teachers and professionals.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Mission Uzbekistan. "English Speaking Nation", 2023.

hegemonic language that embodies the ideals of neoliberalism— a topic that will be addressed at length in the next section of this paper.

### **EFL and the Hegemony of Neoliberalism:**

In much of the literature surveyed, a key analytical point emerged again and again: texts (in this case textbooks) are not value neutral, but reflect the values, attitudes, and dispositions of the culture that produced them.<sup>12</sup> This is perhaps unsurprising to readers versed in critical literary theory, or any other number of methodological approaches that take seriously the notion of social construction, but it still bears repeating; perhaps even doubly so when considering the value-neutral way in which language learning is frequently presented.

Because the framework through which the language learning itself is taking place is simultaneously mediated by that same culture that ‘owns’ the language, it is nearly impossible to disentangle the two facets— cultural frameworks and language itself. Yet, the practices of EFL and language learning continues to be presented as a neutral exercise oriented towards integrating the learner into a framework of neoliberal economic success and Eurocentric narratives of ‘progress’.

The frustrating nature of this phenomenon is particularly well captured by Dinçay Köksal and Ömer Gökhan’s analysis of the Touchstone EFL set of textbooks, in a mixed-methods study of their efficacy in Turkish public schools:

*“EFL course books bear socio-cultural characteristics which may be encountered implicitly or explicitly. The implicit feature may be attributed to a hidden curriculum which is the reality of*

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<sup>12</sup> Ulum Gökhan, Köksal, "A Critical Inquiry", 47:

“Intentionally or unintentionally, textbook authors transmit hidden messages to the target society, propagating native speaker values, beliefs, and perspectives and maintaining the supremacy of the source culture over the target culture (Brown, 1995), however, EFL textbooks should also include the characters of the target society in order to refrain from creating the view that native speaker criteria are the headstones for second or foreign language learning and hence preventing linguistic hegemony.”

*any course program. Neither a curriculum nor a teaching material may be neutral, as particular social values are, implicitly or explicitly, ingrained in them.”<sup>13</sup>*

As a result, it is reasonable to assume that when discussing the efficacy or reliability of a particular EFL curriculum or program that there is more than meets the eye— what is said and not said, what is centered as ‘normal’, what is portrayed as ‘correct usage’, and how those usages should be thought about are all heavily mediated by the culture doing the teaching, frequently in support of a hegemonic vision of how and why language learners should approach learning English. Special attention, therefore, should be paid to instances where a specific (and very frequently neoliberal) worldview is being communicated alongside language in a more neutral sense.

To further this point, I believe it is worth considering the degree to which EFL textbooks reinforce and normalize the Freirean notion of a ‘banking’ model of education, wherein students are passive recipients of knowledge, rather than active co-creators. In addition to the dual implicit-explicit framing of socio-cultural characteristics described above, I believe there is a notable minimization and a ‘flattening’ of cultures outside the neoliberal norm that serves to reinforce the implicit notion that the goal of learning English is to join the international status quo. Much of the literature reviewed, (especially pieces produced in Latin America on the nature and role of EFL textbooks) is markedly critical of this tendency.

That is to say— if we consider an EFL textbook to be a ‘window’ into not only another language, but the culture that created and maintains that language, the tendency to ‘freeze’ or immobilize cultural information and shape it into a coherent and convenient narrative across time (and in so doing create the opposite of history— political mythology) results in a pedagogical product that can then be disseminated to learners like they were withdrawing from

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<sup>13</sup> Köksal, Ulum Gökhan. *Analysis*, 47.



a bank.<sup>1415</sup> Or, as Astrid N. Pardo, professor at the international university of Colombia eloquently puts it: “Hence, EFL textbook content (terminology, themes, written and oral texts, iconography, and learning activities) continue to legitimize, naturalize, and perpetuate predetermined knowledge, ways of being, and by exerting power to conceal, distort or misrepresent the multiplicity of sociocultural and political local realities.” In my experience during the ESET program, much of the material was conceptualized of, and presented in, this manner.

Another important dimension to this mode of analysis is the concept of neoliberal regulatory apparatuses, as laid out in the dissertation of Abdullah Al Jumiah, a Saudi scholar and teacher. Al Jumiah lays out four criteria through which mainstream EFL textbooks regulate and recreate their world-logic according to neoliberal principles through language education:

- The private sectors are more efficient and effective than their public counterparts.
- The role of the state is to promote and maintain deregulation and privatization of all public sectors, including schools and educational curricula.
- Students are human capital. They should be taught specific predetermined skills and knowledge to ensure and increase their readiness and competitiveness for the demand of the job market.

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<sup>14</sup> The emphasis on rote memorization, grammatical correctness over fluency, and the tendency to teach language as a set of reducible formulas (rather than as a creative and organic process of connection-building and relationality between subject and language) should also be noted as a related phenomenon — consistency, ‘mass production’, and replicability are hallmarks of neoliberal thinking as well.

<sup>15</sup> Ojeda, “Promoting”, 14:

“In fact, EFL materials often include information about holidays, famous people, food or celebrations among others. Atkinson (1999) calls this a “received view of culture” since they are usually static and homogenous facts in which are merely passed on to language learners. In this sense, a sort of *banking* practice —as Freire would call it—since learners act as passive receivers of this information regarding typical cultural information.”

- EFL learning and teaching are merely functional and instrumental cognitive activities, rather than situated sociopolitical acts.<sup>16</sup>

While perhaps not all four criteria are continuously operative in every lesson, their presence can be seen quite clearly in a number of ways, subtle and unsubtle, across many textbooks. In this next section, I will turn my attention to the ‘Prepare’ textbooks that were used during the ESET (‘English Summer Excellence Training’) practicum itself and analyze their content with these considerations in mind.

### **EFL Textbooks in Uzbekistan:**

Nominally a development project housed within USAID, 6.5 million copies of the ‘Prepare’ series of textbooks were delivered to the Uzbek Ministry of Education at the beginning of the 2022 school year.<sup>17</sup> These textbooks are alleged to represent a new era of Uzbek-U.S. relations, emphasizing a deepening of cultural ties and of mutual cooperation. In one sense, this is true— the gift of these textbooks as a form of development aid represents a concrete and material investment into the growth of human capital and economic expansion between the foreign policy elite of one nation, to the foreign policy elite of another. The ‘Prepare’ series of textbooks (thirty-three volumes in total, across eleven grades) are billed as a comprehensive and all-inclusive language learning experience aimed at overhauling the current English curriculum authorized by Uzbek Ministry of Education.

The launch of the ‘Prepare’ textbook is one specific initiative within a larger program of EFL overhaul, entitled ‘English Speaking Nation’, a nation-wide push by the Uzbek MOE to make English the language of international communication, potentially displacing Russian’s traditional role as the *de facto* language of international and elite communication. The ESET program is also a related sub-project under the ‘English Speaking Nation’ project umbrella,

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<sup>16</sup> Al Jumiah, Abdullah K. 2016. “Language”, 53

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Mission. “Ministry of Public Education”. <https://uz.usembassy.gov/ministry-of-public-education-usaid-collaborate-on-distribution-of-6-5-million-new-textbooks/>.

although ESET is aimed a narrower audience of teachers, administrators, and a handful of teacher-trainers. During the ESET program, the 'Prepare' textbooks were utilized as a repository of potential lesson topics, resources, and general inspiration for teachers as they implemented methods and activities, as described in the first three reports of this practicum. In order to gain a better understanding of the forms of Anglo-American cultural hegemony and neoliberal consensus assumptions that are observable in these texts, I would like to focus on two excerpts from the grade nine student book. It is my hope that these specific sites of inquiry will help better illustrate the larger phenomenon described above.

First, I would like to focus on a subsection of a lesson designed for 9th graders, taken from a lesson entitled 'My Place'. This lesson focuses on vocabulary and reading competencies, and involves reading, writing, and listening activities centered around houses, homes, and how people delineate personal space. The lesson begins with a reading, describing a couple's decision to change their housing. There are several dimensions to the story that I think are worth drawing on, but first I provide a sample excerpt:

*"Paula and Gary lived in a modern house. It had a living room and a kitchen on the ground floor and on the first floor two bedrooms, one with a balcony and a bathroom. Next to the house they had a garage for their car, and they even had a small garden with a little gate painted green. It sounds perfect!"*

Accompanying this paragraph is an illustration of a prototypical American suburban house, with a living room, kitchen, garage, multiple bedrooms, and more. The usage of the word 'Modern' in this instance is notable, and goes a long way to illustrate the cultural 'shaping' dimensions of EFL pedagogy, and more specifically highlights the implicit value-judgements around Eurocentric notions of 'progress'.

By this I mean that there is a tendency to conflate modernity and progress under the same rubric of 'Western-ness', and that by labeling a house as modern, it both labels houses

outside the North American suburban design ethos as ‘not-modern’ (retrograde, primitive, insufficient), and implies that there is a singularly correct line of development, predicated on the Western model. That is to say, if you want to be modern, you must have a modern Suburban American house, with space for nearly as many cars as people, but no space for people beyond the nuclear family. Given that this textbook is being used in locations around Uzbekistan where robust intergenerational living is the norm (sometimes up to 4 generations in a single house), it begs the question (in a pejorative sense): can Uzbek people be modern? Can they be modern and maintain their familial relations and kin structures? Could 9th grade students endeavor to learn the language content of this lesson without internalizing some sense that they might be viewed by Anglophones to be representative of ‘unmodern-ness’?

Or perhaps we could further examine the garden vignette— what is exceptional or even a luxury in the American context *is the space to garden*, the free time to garden, the assumed access to healthy food that comes with having a garden. The fact that the house is referred to as ‘*even* having a garden’ underscores the fact that in this North American-Western model of development, food production and agriculture generally have been commodified, outsourced, and broadly removed from the home. Instead, this image and dialogue in fact underscore that modernity means buying your food, not growing it. Modernity means that you work for a wage and participate in a full-spectrum sense in the neoliberal economic systems that regulate life in the Global North, not be involved in mixed economies, traditional modes of production, or cooperatives. In short, even something as innocuous as a garden carries with it the implicit biases that if you desire economic development, material and financial security, and to be counted amongst the ‘modern’ peoples of the world, then you must conform in one way or another to these global, homogenizing economies and systems.

Of course, it would be hyperbolic to claim that every Uzbek 9th grader encountering this lesson plan would internalize these messages (and indeed, I would bet the majority would think nothing of it in particular), but as Köksal et al. again point out in their article referenced earlier, “Besides the needs of the learners, the texts selected for the book may bear specific

ideologies embodying hidden messages to bolster specific perspectives, values, and attitudes of a community or nation. This masked side of textbooks underlines the sovereignty of education which a social group may manipulate by regulating the educational tools and so the heads of individuals (Asghar, 2014) through an intricate array of social and political movements.”<sup>18</sup> In this sense, I do not think examples even as seemingly trivial or benign as houses or gardens should be left unexamined when considering how best to approach teaching English as a foreign language.

Moving to a second example from the textbooks, also found in the grade nine student book, we see a more clear-cut (and in some respects more tone-deaf) choice in lesson topic. The theme of lesson seven is ‘Adventure Holidays’, and focuses heavily on ideas of idealized future vacations as a way to teach the present continuous (in the future) tense. The lesson highlights a number of activities that I estimate to be outside of practical consideration for Karakalpak or Uzbek teachers, particularly in light of the desiccation of the Aral Sea and the fact that the average public school teacher makes approximately \$250 per month. Most notably, in a country dominated by desert and economically dependent on Russian and Chinese labor visa remittances, the idea of teaching about water skiing, sky diving, kite surfing, zip lining, sailing, and other expensive water based activities, makes little practical sense, and underscores the above mentioned notions concerning what is ‘normal’ or ‘modern’. There are a number of issues with this lesson in my view, but there are three key observations I would like to make.

First (and purely anecdotally), from my experience modeling this lesson for Uzbek teachers the vocabulary, activities, and concepts fail to ‘land’ in a culturally relevant or sensitive way. The idea of teaching kite surfing as relevant and useful activity strictly from a language acquisition standpoint, or even simply as potential IELTS/CELTA vocabulary to 9th graders when their teachers themselves fail to see the usefulness (in a controlled classroom modeling scenario) strikes me as dubious.

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<sup>18</sup> Ulum Gökhan, Köksal, "A Critical Inquiry", 47:

Second, and perhaps relatedly, there is no discussion of cost, price, or money in any sense in the lesson. The activities are presented in a vacuum of ‘normalcy’ with no indication or context clues as to whether or not these activities are accessible, typical, or otherwise common for the average citizen in an Anglophone culture. In a similar sense to the lesson on what constitutes a ‘modern’ house, is it possible that, decontextualized and removed from any discussion of practicality or ‘normalcy’ in the context of a vacation, Uzbek students might assume that these activities are standard vacation ones? This may seem like an asinine point to make, but presenting these activities as aspirational and achievable to the average native English speaker, much less the average English language learner from the global south feeds into similar neoliberal narratives around ‘modernity’, capitalism, and ‘success’.

Vacation, in this *zeitgeist*, is one of the ultimate consumer acts— travel to an ‘exotic’ local made accessible by neoliberal economic interconnectedness and international trade agreements (and entirely dependent on hegemonic petroeconomies), spend significant amounts of money to participate in what is ultimately a ritualized expression of safely experiencing danger (skydiving, zip lining, etc.), and utilize the strength of American or Eurocentric currencies to purchase goods and services at in such a way as to distort local markets in their favor.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps this is a cynical interpretation of the message of this chapter, but again, it begs the question: is this ‘normal’? Is this sense of vacation ‘modern’? If so, is the assumption of the 9th grade Uzbek student that these vacations are achievable? If so, what inferences could this same hypothetical student make about Uzbek or Karakalpak culture and their different understandings (relative to the textbook— and its cultural authority) of what ‘vacation’, ‘holiday’, or ‘free time’ might mean? Could they infer that, relative to the language

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<sup>19</sup> Pardo, “Inquiring”, 121:

“However, global capitalism, represented through the ‘cosmopolitan’ or ‘global’ EFL textbook, idealizes and naturalizes consumerism practices including international trips, entertainment, and free time activities that impose the idea to irrationally spend money on gross luxuries (e.g. visiting exotic international landmarks and spatial touristic places). While teachers turn into naive consumers instead of critical producers of knowledge, students become dependent users, who can memorize and mechanically learn grammar structures, and who neither develop their communicative competence (Bandura & Sercu, 2005; Gómez, 2015), nor their intercultural communicative competence (Rico, 2012).”

and culture they are attempting to learn, they could assign in some way the label of ‘not modern’ to their own culture? And if so, what could that mean, to live in an extant and durable culture that is nevertheless marked as ‘not belonging to the modern world’, despite its richness, creativity, and demonstrated longevity? In short— is this hypothetical student being served by these lessons that are far removed from their lived experience while simultaneously being presented as normative in a neoliberal-global north sense of expectation and an ever-increasing standard of material and experiential comfort?<sup>20</sup>

Finally, as a brief observation— unlike in other chapters in the textbook, every single photo of a person (thirteen in all) in this lesson is white. While neoliberalism is not synonymous with White Supremacy, historically they share a common ancestor in colonialism (and quite arguably its afterlives). Uzbekistan’s experience during Russian Imperial colonialism and Soviet centralization are relevant here— discussions of dark skin tone and perceptions of beauty between ethnic groups are still relevant to this day, as are the segregating effects they enact. I am not suggesting that the inclusion of exclusively white images is something as straightforward as a White Supremacist plot, or even a conscious message— either in a Russian colonial context or an ‘end of history’, *Pax Americana* context. What I am noting, however, is that in this lesson, the material being taught is fundamentally about the ability to

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<sup>20</sup> Pardo, “Inquiring”, 114.

\*\*\* I found this proposal to be extremely helpful in organizing my thoughts, as well as providing critical perspectives on the multiplicit nature of identity formation and representation in EFL textbooks (in this case in the Columbian context).

“Since the EFL “textbook misrepresents the plurality of the local and foreign cultures” (Núñez-Pardo, 2018b, p. 1), they do not “respond to the local needs, interests, and life experiences of the learners in their own context” (Núñez-Pardo, 2020a, p. 23), and they decide whose culture, knowledge, and history become legitimized. This proposal aims at unveiling the ontological, epistemological, and power criteria, rooted in critical interculturality as a decolonial alternative, to orient the development of other contextualized materials, created by other teachers, and for other students within their own particular context in the periphery countries. It seeks to overcome its decontextualization and long dependence on foreign ideologies, and to offer spaces for the local, stemming from Colombian teachers’, experts’ and authors’ voices. Critical interculturality, inspired in the decolonial turn, seeks to contribute to the negotiation of socio-cultural diversity and to the conciliation of the difference between what is local and what is foreign, or different (Walsh, 2005a). Hence, EFL textbook content (terminology, themes, written and oral texts, iconography, and learning activities) continue to legitimize, naturalize, and perpetuate predetermined knowledge, ways of being, and by exerting power to conceal, distort or misrepresent the multiplicity of sociocultural and political local realities.”

stop working when desired, extricate yourself from obligations to kin networks, and go on vacation to visit where ‘the other’ lives. More to the point, it is to go on an expensive, ‘exotic’ trip to far-flung locales to enjoy capital-intensive forms of vacation designed to in some way simulate a sense of adventure while insulating the participant from the true economic, ecological, and frankly inhumane impacts the selfsame neoliberalism has wrought in those areas. In order to expand these ideas further, in the next section I will incorporate environmentalist perspectives, as well as perspectives from EFL researches on the interplay between the environment, neoliberalism, and textbook representation.

### **The Environmental Cost:**

In some senses, my fortuitous placement in Karakalpakstan for the ESET program allows for an even more refined analysis of one of the functions of EFL textbooks and accompanying neoliberal pedagogies.<sup>21</sup> In this section, I would like to briefly explore an additional and unexpected area of overlap in topic matter— the normative, hegemonic dimensions of how foreign language is taught under a neoliberal regime, and the normative, hegemonic dimensions of how the ‘natural world’ is conceptualized and reproduced.

More specifically: Karakalpakstan is home to what remains of the Aral Sea, one of the largest ecological disasters of human history. Briefly put, the Aral Sea has been mismanaged and exploited to such a degree that approximately 75% of all water has evaporated, and toxic levels of minerals and mining chemicals have been concentrated to such a degree that mass die-off of a significant number of species has occurred.<sup>22</sup> This gratuitous mismanagement

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<sup>21</sup> Al Jumiah, Abdullah K. 2016. “Language”, 54:

“Thus, I argue that neoliberals control EFL-textbook production and distribution to globalize certain ideologies related to social power and identity in terms of gender and race such as white male supremacy, sexism and women’s subordination, meritocracy, individualism, the achievement ideology, functional literacy, and conceptualizing students as human capital. In addition, banking education is used as a theory of EFL textbook design and development so that neither students nor teachers are provided with the opportunity to challenge any of the content in these textbooks. In this way, while neoliberalism serves to globalize certain ideologies as related to social power and identity in terms of gender and race, banking education functions to make sure that these ideologies remain unchallenged.”

<sup>22</sup> Robertson, *ARAL SEA CATASTROPHE*, <https://intlpollution.commons.gc.cuny.edu/aral-sea-catastrophe/>.



occurred under Soviet control for the express purpose of irrigating massive amounts of cotton; cotton to be sold on international commodities markets or otherwise shipped to distant Soviet regions for value-added processing.

This juxtaposition of the past and future participation of Karakalpakstan-Uzbekistan in globalized capitalism (large-scale profit-driven ecological destruction in order to remain competitive in global commodities markets, contrasted against the desire for increased nationalized human capital capacity through language training in order to remain competitive in a migrant-remittance based market economy) calls attention to narrative and justification in textbooks— that is, the way individual and collective agency is portrayed and taught in the face of ecological catastrophe and economic ‘necessity’ in the EFL classroom. More importantly for the purposes of this paper, the awareness and acknowledgment of pedagogical narrative as a force for shaping consciousness allows us to examine EFL textbooks and their relationship to agency and neoliberal ecological-economic *Weltanschauung*, both broadly conceived and as they relate to the ESET practicum experience.

The notion of EFL/ESL materials and pedagogies as tools of neoliberal consciousness shaping has been raised before by many others, particularly those engaged in post-colonial or poststructural analysis of education and globalized economics. However, it is not nearly as common to find these methods and approaches applied to specifically environmental considerations. Thus, by focusing on the manner in which EFL materials and pedagogies treat (or circumvent) questions of environmental impact, personal and collective responsibility, and ideas of agency, a further layer of critical analysis is uncovered.

Interestingly, some of the most elaborated thinking on the relationships between second language learning and the ecological slights-of-hand pulled by EFL textbooks comes from scholars in central and western China, an area that once made up a considerable amount of historical Turkistan— a polity that extended beyond modern day Karakalpakstan in the west, to the silk road terminus of central China in the east. Thus, in some senses, the observations and analysis of Chinese scholars point to similar trends occurring in both Karakalpakstan-

Uzbekistan, and central-western China. These analyses offer a critical insight into ways that EFL textbooks participate in the neoliberal project of globalized resource extraction and relentless commodity production, even when located in nominally anti-globalized capital societies, such as China in the post-Deng turn, and the USSR from Krushchev to Gorbachev. As Tao Xiong, a professor at the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies has articulated it: “An ideal subject position has been created for the student readers who are linguistically led to believe environmental problems can be satisfactorily tackled by employing the recommended means, making it more difficult for them to reflect on the dominant taken-for-granted obsession with material growth, which is ecologically unsustainable.”<sup>23</sup> In essence, by obfuscating the true cost of unchecked, consumer-driven lifestyles of disposability and material consumption, EFL textbooks continue to bind language learners into a framework where western materiality, financial growth, and neoliberal consumer culture are taken not only as givens, but as goals in and of themselves.

Thus, it is entirely possible, (and indeed occurred with some frequency in my classroom) to teach a ‘successful’ lesson where on the one hand participants expressed a deep sense of loss and worry about the state of the Aral Sea, and at nearly the same moment espouse a desire to teach their students effective English in order to allow them to participate in labor market under the same set of global conditions that inexorably led to the desiccation of the sea. This is not to suggest that participants were unable or unwilling to see the connection between these realities, nor that they were somehow ‘fooled’ into thinking that learning English would be an economic and cultural panacea. Rather, it is my impression that the types of language taught (a strong emphasis on personal and consumer choice as a form of ‘responsibility’), and the *rewards* of integrating more completely (through learning English) into the exploitative world-economic systems implicitly ‘promised’ from the examples provided in the textbooks (a better salary, a bigger house, a newer car) established a framework of ‘how’ the language could be constructed and used as a foreign language learner. In a sense, the

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<sup>23</sup> Xiong, *Shallow Environmentalism*, 249.

teaching of the language through these books was more about the teaching of normative or 'correct' attitudes towards values, economics, and culture from a western perspective than any neutral sense of EFL teachers conveying the necessary information to construct independently meaningful statements in English— irrespective of the positionality of the language learner.

Of course, it is unreasonable to present EFL textbooks as something akin to 'mind control' devices— that is not the impression I am trying to convey in this analysis. Rather, I think they are most helpfully thought of as highly normative, highly subjective 'default' templates available to the EFL/ESL teacher that provide prescriptive impressions of how English is used, and how it must be thought about when using it. That is, it is not that textbooks force students to use language in only one way (although a point about grammar prescriptivism and diminishing in-language variation as a form of 'othering' would not be amiss here), but that the process of language learning is inherently difficult and vulnerable; and a conveniently formatted, highly simplified view of the world that installs the Anglo-American interpretation of human behavior and environmental responsibility through an EFL textbook is a simple but effective mode of internalizing these views without allowing space for critical reflection on what is language learning in a merely mechanical sense, and what is ideology represented through deliberate language construction choices.

When viewed through this heuristic, relationship between EFL textbooks and the implicit worldview taught in them as it relates to ongoing environmental catastrophes around the colonized world comes into clearer focus: learning English does not mean learning just a language. Learning English in the manner taught by most EFL textbooks means assenting to a regime of knowledge and power in the form of globalized neoliberal capital in order to take one's place as a hyper-individual agent above nature, superior to nature, and capable of extracting what is 'needed' from nature in order to advance one's economic goals. Thus, I think it is well worth the time to dwell on this ecological-economic dimension to the coloniality of EFL and the reality they teach.

**Conclusion:**

Language education does not take place in a vacuum. Not only are historical legacies and contexts extremely important to understand, it is necessary to interrogate the implicit and explicit biases, assumptions, and positionalities inherent in the teaching of language. These are not best explained as 'differences in perspectives', but rather as potentially coercive features of the modes and methods through which hegemonic language is taught. In the case of the ESET program in Uzbekistan, the partial inheritance of in-country methods and institutions of the Russian colonial project undergird American attempts to establish a hegemonic form of 'soft power' in the region through a decontextualized, 'frozen' approach to teaching English. Likewise, the promises of neoliberalism can be implicitly found in the manner English is taught – the student is the passive recipient of knowledge in the same manner they are a passive consumer of goods, and that the ultimate goal of education is the ultimate goal of society itself: to train future economic subjects for employment, but not the cultivation of other, non-monetary human qualities. Through an analysis of the Colonial history of Central Asia, EFL textbooks, (both specific to the ESET program and more broadly in the global south) I have attempted in this paper to draw meaningful connections between these threads of colonialism, neoliberalism, and education across time and space. If there is one unifying thought I would like to emphasize for a final time, it is that these specific modes of education addressed in this paper serve one purpose above all others: the creation of the English-speaking Neoliberal global subject.

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