

ASOCOPI for the Periphery: ELT Development in the Caribbean Region from 1989 to 2018

ASOCOPI para la Periferia: Desarrollo del ELT en la Región del Caribe de 1989 a 2018

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Abstract

The history of the Colombian Association of Teachers of English (ASOCOPI) has been linked to political aspirations to build a sense of unity and belonging from the center to the country's periphery. The strategic mobility of annual congresses organized by ASOCOPI has led to partnership efforts that depict the association's struggles to improve and maintain a locus of enunciation in which all regions of Colombia can feel represented. The *licenciatura* programs in English language teaching in the Caribbean region have faced difficulties gaining quality and exposure; their advocacy and academic work in intercultural understanding and regional cultural repertoires call for greater attention and recognition. The imbalance of power between ELT communities in the Colombian capital and those in the periphery will be examined using the center-periphery metaphor. This article examines the presence of ASOCOPI in the Colombian Caribbean region from 1989 to 2018, analyzing its contribution to the advancement of the English language teaching profession and its possible impact on the region. Critical concerns about the senses of association and representation will be addressed by document analysis procedures combined with the authors' autobiographical data.

Keywords: Association, Center-periphery, Colombian Caribbean, representation

Resumen

La historia de la Asociación Colombiana de Profesores de Inglés (ASOCOPI) ha estado ligada a las aspiraciones políticas de construir un sentido de unidad y pertenencia desde el centro hacia la periferia del país. La movilidad estratégica de los congresos anuales organizados por ASOCOPI ha dado lugar a esfuerzos de cooperación que describen las luchas de la asociación por mejorar y mantener un lugar de enunciación en el que todas las regiones de Colombia puedan sentirse representadas. Los programas de licenciatura en enseñanza del idioma inglés en la región del Caribe han enfrentado dificultades para ganar calidad y exposición, y el trabajo de promoción académica en el entendimiento intercultural, así como de los repertorios culturales regionales exige una mayor atención y reconocimiento. Se examinará el desequilibrio de poder entre las comunidades de ELT en la capital y las de la periferia utilizando el modelo centro-periferia. Este artículo examina la presencia de ASOCOPI en la región Caribe de Colombia entre 1989 y 2018, y analiza su contribución al avance de la profesión docente en la enseñanza del inglés y su posible impacto en la región. Las preocupaciones críticas sobre los sentidos de asociación y representación se abordan mediante procedimientos de análisis de documentos combinados con los datos autobiográficos de los autores.

Palabras clave: Asociación, centro-periferia, Caribe colombiano, representación

Introduction

The authors of this paper are teachers from the Caribbean coast of Colombia, whose professional development has been partially or entirely dependent on the education they received in the Caribbean region. Pilar Méndez studied the *licenciatura* program⁴ at Universidad del Atlántico from 1994-1999 and was a former student of Professor Steffanell, who studied the same *licenciatura* program from 1985-1990. The third author, Francisco Pérez Gómez, received a *normalista* education⁵ in Montería, Córdoba, and finished his Bachelor of Arts in Languages in 1999. The three of us have been members of ASOCOPI in an itinerant way and have witnessed the importance of its influence in the center of the country and the periphery. The significance of this autobiographical data lies in its capacity to demonstrate that the disparities in our trajectories to become professional language educators have been influenced by the power disparity between English language teaching (ELT) communities in the capital city and those located in the periphery or distant areas.

When addressing the issue of ELT national development in research and teaching education, most studies tend to focus on the central region of the country, with only a few mentions of ELT in the Caribbean region. It seems that the concentration of specialized journals in the ELT field has helped to invigorate a sense of a unified community (Lucero & Castañeda-Londoño, 2021; Lucero & Díaz, 2016). Despite the concentration of resources and means at the center, it would be incorrect to presume that the dispersed and fragmented efforts undertaken in the Caribbean have yielded insignificant or negligible outcomes in the advancement of ELT at the national level. It would also be mistaken to ignore the contribution of ASOCOPI in promoting annual congresses in the regions. The center-periphery model illustrates how isolation from coordinated cooperation mechanisms, such as those promoted by the association, can result in political and social ostracism (Batur, 2014). The promotion of national and international cooperation must be strengthened politically.

The Presence of ASOCOPI in the Caribbean Region

Considering the chronological order of congresses, we discuss the impact of the national congresses chronologically. The levels for presenting the analysis and discussions are the following: 1) A descriptive level. This level explains the main focus of the congress, describing the nature of the presentations and various stakeholders involved in their organization. 2) A

⁴ *Licenciaturas* are undergraduate programs (Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Education) that Colombian universities offer for teaching education and professionalization in various disciplines as English teaching, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, Math, and Physical Education, among others. These programs usually take four or five years to complete.

⁵ *Normalista* education refers to the teaching education received at normal schools in Colombia. These schools focus on preparing individuals to become schoolteachers.

contextualizing level. This entails, on the one hand, comprehending several socioeconomic and political circumstances that education in the Caribbean faced during the period of the event. On the other hand, it seeks to examine the prevailing focus on language and teaching in the heat of the moment. 3) A critical level. This interconnects the two previous levels with the lived experiences of authors to explain the conditions of ELT and personal and professional development in the periphery.

ASOCOPI's political commitment to connecting English language teachers has been materialized in the mobility of its annual congresses. ASOCOPI has contacted several universities in the Caribbean region to promote such congresses, which focus on different topics. In the Caribbean region, there are nine departments (San Andrés, Providencia y Santa Catalina, La Guajira, Magdalena, Atlántico, César, Bolívar, Sucre, and Córdoba), and up to this day, the annual congress has been present in the Caribbean region in seven opportunities as can be seen in the Figure 1.

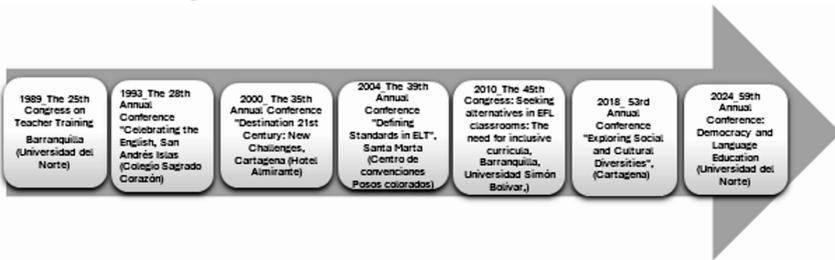


Figure 1. *ASOCOPI in the Caribbean Region*
Note. Own work

According to the SNIES (*Sistema Nacional de Información de Educación Superior*), there are more than 15 programs in foreign languages among *licenciaturas* and master's programs in the Caribbean region (see Annex 1). However, in 1989, when the 25th Congress on Teacher Training took place in Barranquilla, the number of master's programs in foreign languages was scarce in the region. Currently, most of the universities in Annex 1 have journals in education, history, and literature in which some local scholarly work by English language teachers is visible in the region. At the end of the 1980s, only a few journals existed, with limited space for English publications⁶. In fact, there are no specialized journals in ELT or applied linguistics for the teaching of foreign languages in the region, as there are in some universities in Bogotá, Medellín, Tunja, and Manizales. This absence of publications explains the dispersion of some research and reflections done in other journals.

⁶ Amata (1984) e Historia Caribe (1995) de la Universidad del Atlántico; Huellas (1980) y Memorias (2004) de la Universidad del Norte; El Taller de la Historia (2001) de la Universidad de Cartagena y Clío América (2007) de la Universidad del Magdalena.

1989_The 25th Congress “Teacher Training in Colombia” (Barranquilla)

Situated in the late 1980s, the 25th Congress on Teacher Training was held in Barranquilla in 1989. Before the congress, extensive pre-congress activities were organized to ensure the cooperation of several professors from Universidad del Norte and Universidad del Atlántico. Local and national institutions were also involved⁷. The discussions held were oriented towards embracing a more communicative language approach to overcome some practices of the grammar-based model still dominating teacher education at the time (Bastidas, 2017). The two-day congress addressed topics such as facilitating language acquisition in the 1990s (by Leland Northam as plenary speaker), teaching practice and theory of language teaching (by José Caicedo Abadía, Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas), the search and selection of texts in ESP for reading courses (by Nora Choperena Ramos, Universidad del Norte), Current Issues and Trends in Language Teaching (by Michael Klink), and the Panel: “Teacher Training in Colombia” led by universities from the center. This panel, delivered by the British Council, Universidad Nacional, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, and the Centro Colombo Americano, paved the way for the Colombian Framework for English -COFE-Elto- Project. Later, in 1994, the project invited several professors from the Caribbean to be trained abroad. After receiving this training, these professors assisted in developing language labs at local universities. Various local presentations were devoted to literature and cultural manifestations, causing us three to reflect on the emphasis the event placed on language teaching and practice from a more international perspective.

Although the Caribbean was distant from the center of the country, the region certainly was not absent from historical protests developed at the national level to make visible the problems teachers and education more broadly were facing⁸. During the 1990s, the Caribbean region underwent a significant transformation in teacher training and education, as mandated by the General Law of Education (Law 115 of 1994) and Law 30 (1992) to regulate higher education at universities. One of the greatest benefits of teaching foreign languages has been the interaction between local culture and foreign culture, as *licenciatura* programs prepare teachers to teach French, English, and Spanish. Our identification as “costeños” has inspired some intellectuals in the region to explain our ties and cultural repertoires. In the book “Double History of the Coast” by Orlando Fals Borda (2002), the notion of the

⁷ Margaret Gillian Moss and Ofelia May facilitated a rich exchange of knowledge and practices. Ministry of National Education, the Departmental and District Secretary of Education, and the British Council.

⁸ The Hunger March was a social protest initiated by the teachers of Magdalena in 1966, which aimed to undertake a march from the city of Santa Marta to Bogotá to make visible and provide a solution to the social, economic, and educational problems that educators were facing throughout the country.

“ethos costeño,” in contrast to the “ethos andino,” was associated with the relationship with the territory. This, according to him, exacerbated ideological elements of the lifestyles of the amphibian culture, the physical space, and its modes of production. Nonetheless, the foundational studies conducted by Gustavo Bell⁹ (1988) and Eduardo Posada¹⁰ (1988) on the Caribbean region aimed to explicate the issues of provincial fragmentation with central power, wherein resistance to accommodate has been a component of our individualization.

2004_The 39th Annual Conference “Defining Standards in ELT” (Santa Marta)

The reliance on American and European pedagogical models, which are not aligned with Latin American contexts, has contributed to the perpetuation of what is considered a form of academic colonization. The emphasis remains on perfecting English phonetics, imitating American slang from the media, and submitting Latin American culture and context to the standards established by the United States and Europe. The papers presented at the 39th annual ASOCOPI conference were focused on the decontextualized implementation of standards that were adapted and/or adopted from overseas (Ayala Zárate & Alvarez, 2005) although some were trying to explore alternative approaches to defining standards (Jerez, 2004) or later suggesting mediating standards with L2 instruction to go beyond training (Sánchez & Obando, 2012). Although some scholars have questioned the implications of such implementation (as González, 2010; Guerrero, 2008; Usma Wilches, 2009), these critiques tend to fall short of providing practical solutions. The decolonial turn that the local ELT has recently taken acknowledges that English language instruction in Colombia continues to be colonized by influences from standardized Western ideas. However, proposals for change have not been collectively led by the association or scholars researching language policies. We think that the critical movement that has emerged must lead to action. In this sense, it must come from the scholars who have been leading this critique to go beyond individual work to lead a collective proposal.

The integration of intercultural issues within foreign language education and the effective acquisition of foreign languages remains an underexplored area in existing Western standardized frameworks. This is a vital need and one that must be further explored for the academic growth and development of foreign language acquisition across all Latin American contexts. The predominant emphasis on standardized Western language frameworks, primarily centered on North American and European English, fails to encompass the

⁹ The article “Regional Conflicts and Centralism” discusses the various factors of local division that prevented regional political unity in the face of the central government during a crucial period of development.

¹⁰ This study emphasizes the role played by business leaders in the regional alliance and highlights the complexities of the relationship between the national state and the coastal region, which ranged from fear of separatism to racist prejudice.

diverse range of English spoken globally, including dialectic intricacies, African English, and those variations from other regions. This continues to exacerbate the deficit perspective on teachers and the discourse that blames teachers for low learning scores on standardized tests, which some authors in the Caribbean found problematic (Collante & Caro, 2012). This oversight neglects the rich cultural and linguistic landscape found across Latin America and marginalizes local variations and idiosyncrasies. To address this gap, ASOCOPI congresses must persist in emphasizing the distinctive linguistic and cultural contexts of the Colombian territory to foster teachers' pride and self-assurance in their English proficiency.

Given its rich cultural context and linguistic diversity, the Colombian Caribbean is characterized by being upbeat, lively, and noisy. There is a complex blend of cultural and ethnic identities across its extensive land. The Colombian Caribbean maintains traditional practices in both culture and language, which often leads to resistance against contemporary academic norms. This region possesses a profound oral affluence that has not been adequately documented or integrated into modern academic writing and bureaucratic standards and actions of the Colombian bilingual program (Correa & Usma Wilches, 2013). The bureaucratic apparatus that organizes academia and the communicability of knowledge has granted supremacy to academic language and writing over oral and narrative language, which marginalizes participatory alternatives charged with Caribbean imagery and oral tradition.

The Colombian Caribbean's traditional and indigenous cultures and languages are regularly dismissed rather than valued as unique perspectives that could enrich linguistic and academic development. For instance, the academic elite worldwide has created a publishing environment dominated by internationally indexed journals, adhering to global standards that frequently overlook or dismiss oral traditions. It is crucial to recognize that academia, particularly from a decolonial and intercultural perspective, should not be confined to writing alone, a practice typically rooted in Western and European methodologies. Instead, the Caribbean's ancestral knowledge and empirical wisdom must also be considered valuable research contributions. The knowledge produced in the margins and periphery operates according to its standards and methodologies. Therefore, it is critical to challenge conventional academic practices and overcome the barriers of ignorance and elitism that currently define centralized scholarly perspectives. These barriers are the legacies of colonialism that inhabit our way of viewing others as inferior and lacking in their capacities. The ELT field in Colombia must look south to avoid its whitening and the neutralization of the characteristics that make us different. The marginalization and invisibility of intellectualism in the Colombian Caribbean context have been evident, particularly in the context of English language teaching (ELT). Specifically in this context, there is a noticeable deficiency in the development of foreign language education. A limited number of events and conferences highlight the ongoing need for enhanced support and financial resources to advance projects of this nature. The bureaucratic challenges associated with financial constraints have effectively isolated us intellectually. This

is why participation in meetings and reunions with colleagues is crucial for developing new pedagogical and scholarly strategies to achieve our longstanding aspirations. Addressing these challenges has proven to be a significant difficulty for individuals residing in the Caribbean and participating in their universities. The issue extends beyond mere language concerns to encompass social change, political instability, and educational shortcomings related to the inadequate governance and recognition of foreign language educators and their disciplines.

Alexander's Professional Development: From the Colombian Caribbean to the USA

In the year 2000, I relocated to the United States to pursue graduate studies in foreign languages and literature. At that moment, I became part of the Caribbean intellectual diaspora, commonly referred to as the “brain drain.” I completed both a master’s and a doctoral degree in the United States, subsequently becoming a Spanish professor and Latin American scholar based there. Despite my academic and professional accomplishments abroad, I have successfully maintained a deep connection to my beloved Colombian Caribbean roots. I continue to return to my homeland for research and to collaborate with local colleagues, and I observe that little has changed in their academic world. Colombian scholars persist in replicating practices and academic habits that mirror those of North American contexts. They often disguise these practices with superficial Colombian elements while continuing to adhere to a Eurocentric ideology, specifically in the teaching of English as a foreign language.

Back in time, near the late 90s, as a teacher of high school students and college students attending ASOCOPI events, I observed a subtle yet notable bias against English Language Teaching (ELT) professionals from the Caribbean coast. This subtle disdain was evident throughout the association, frequently manifesting in a condescending attitude that implied a superiority of knowledge. The ASOCOPI council was predominantly composed of individuals from the central regions of Colombia, with minimal representation from the Caribbean, which I refer to as the periphery or margins. This centralization led to a “whitening” of the organization, where Caribbean professionals were perceived as “second-rate” and in need of guidance and coordination from their central counterparts, who were considered more knowledgeable in ELT. I hope this has changed not only in content for discussion but also in real involvement for association and representation.

Often, institutions in central locations such as Bogotá and Medellín obscure our intellectual contributions, leading to a form of mental colonization that undermines our scholarly achievements and unique perspectives. Although I live and work in the United States, my perspective remains rooted in the Colombian Caribbean context, reflecting my cultural identity, despite residing far from my homeland. As has been shown, the Colombian Caribbean government entities have recently engaged in foreign language programs, but

government support remains insufficient in promoting resources and funding to preserve and revitalize foreign languages. This lack of governmental support includes the minority languages that are not officially recognized by the Ministry of Education in Colombia, which becomes problematic for English language teachers who work with native languages in contact with Spanish.

In this context, there is still a need for a comprehensive and inclusive curriculum that recognizes and supports non-Western languages, such as Creole and indigenous languages. This inclusion would ideally foster a richer intercultural environment and support the diversity inherent in the Colombian-Caribbean context. Currently, the focus of bilingualism is often in the central areas of the country, neglecting the linguistic diversity present in the margins and peripheries. The exclusion of the more marginalized or neglected areas of Colombia is a major oversight in the country's academic development in these vital areas of linguistic development.

2010_ The 45th Congress “Seeking Alternatives in EFL Classrooms: The Need for Inclusive Curricula” (Barranquilla)

In 2010, when the 45th Annual Congress took place in Barranquilla, the issue of inclusion in education was a fertile topic of discussion for the educational academic community. Various local authors in the Caribbean region were problematizing the major challenges in implementing and effectively enforcing the large amount of national and international legislation. This includes gender equality (Morales-Ortega & Herrera-Sarmiento, 2007), functional diversity (Jaimes et al., 2009), teachers' perceptions of inclusion (Díaz-Haydar & Franco Media, 2010), LGBT inclusion (Castañeda-Castro, 2010), and teachers' actions for inclusion (Saumeth & Porto, 2010). In the context of the English language teaching field, it was imperative to consider the importance of addressing inclusion in a country like Colombia, where the disparities created by diverse socio-economic conditions make “the provision of high-quality foreign language education a significant challenge for teachers” (ASOCOPI, Newsletter, 2010).

Once again, the efforts of a group of professors from the Simón Bolívar University (another private university like Universidad del Norte) (Keiby Caro Oviedo, Jhon Carrillo Ramos, Eligio Castaño Ruíz, Carlos Castillo Marmo, Maureyra Jiménez Castro, Carmen Alicia Moreno, Viviana Parra Cera, Manuel Romero Pérez, Yessica Sánchez Mendoza, Milena Vergara Luque, and Darío Villareal Angulo) and ASOCOPI, among other institutions, made possible the activities of the congress, as well as the various preparatory workshops and conferences (ASOCOPI, newsletter, October 2010). The plenary session speakers, Dr. Ana Maria F. Barcelos (Universidade Federal de Viçosa, in Brasil) tackled the issue of language learning beliefs as keys to inclusive curricula, which emphasized the phenomenon

of believing (or giving personal meanings) to promote inclusive curricula (Barcelos, 2016; Thomas Gardner, Richmond Publishing). They talked about accent awareness as a path to cultural inclusivity to reflect upon differences and variants in English speaking. In her turn, Dr. Paula Golombek (University of Florida, USA) discussed the importance of dynamic assessment to promote inclusiveness, while the national keynote, Dr. Adriana González (Universidad de Antioquia) (invited by ASOCOPI) introduced a critical look at the national bilingual policies to assess the challenges universities face in their implementation. Other keynotes were Dr. Nora Basurto (Universidad Veracruzana, Mexico), Dr. Ismael Garrido, M.A. (State University of Puebla, Mexico, and sponsored by TESOL), and Aaron Rogers, M.A. (Pearson Longman Colombia). An image of that year's conference program can be seen below.

The national bilingualism program had already been in place for several years, which had exacerbated the significant differences between the Andean region and the Colombian Caribbean in terms of actions and investments for the inclusion of English in schools. Despite

45th ASOCOPI Annual Conference "Seeking Alternatives in EFL Classrooms: The Need for Inclusive Curricula" October 14 - 17, 2010, Universidad Simón Bolívar, Barranquilla	
Academic Program	
Thursday, October 14th	9:00 am - 4:00 pm Registration - ASOCOPI Table 5:00 - 5:30 pm Opening Ceremony and Keynote Speech: Melba Libia Cárdenas, Universidad Nacional de Colombia – Bogotá, ASOCOPI President 5:30 - 6:30 pm Plenary Session 1: Language Learning Beliefs as Keys to Inclusive Curricula Ana María F. Barcelos, Universidade Federal de Viçosa 6:30 - 7:00 pm Opening Cocktail
Friday, October 15th	9:40 - 10:40 am Concurrent Session 1 10:40 - 11:00 am Coffee Break 11:00 am - 12:00 m Plenary Session 2: Accent Awareness: A Path to Cultural Inclusivity Thomas Gardner, Richmond Publishing 12:00 m - 2:00 pm Lunch Break 2:00 - 3:00 pm Concurrent Session 2 3:10 - 4:10 pm Plenary Session 3: Using Dynamic Assessment to promote inclusiveness in second language learning and teaching Paula Golombek, University of Florida 4:10 - 4:30 pm Coffee Break 4:30 - 6:00 pm ASOCOPI General Assembly For ASOCOPI Affiliates only 6:00 - 7:00 pm Cultural Activity
Saturday, October 16th	8:30 - 9:30 am Plenary Session 4: Motivation as a Key Factor in an Inclusive Curriculum Ismael Garrido, Puebla State University, Mexico 9:40 - 10:40 am Concurrent Session 3 10:40 - 11:00 am Coffee Break 11:00 am - 12:00 m Panel 1: Seeking Alternatives in EFL Classrooms: The Need for Inclusive Curricula 12:00 m - 2:00 pm Lunch Break 2:00 - 3:00 pm Concurrent Session 4 3:10 - 4:10 pm Plenary Session 5: The Three C's as a Means to an Inclusive Classroom in a Diverse Society Aaron Rogers, Pearson Education 4:10 - 4:30 pm Coffee Break 4:30 - 5:30 pm Cultural Activity
Sunday, October 17th	8:30 - 9:30 am Plenary Session 6: Trends in the Implementation of ELT Language Policies in Colombia: Are Our Universities Prepared to Face the Challenges? Adriana González, Universidad de Antioquia & ASOCOPI Secretary 9:30 - 10:30 am Plenary Session 7: Listening to at-risk Students: Who Are They and What Can Be Done for Them? Nora Basurto, Universidad Veracruzana 10:30 - 11:00 am Coffee Break 11:00 - 12:00 m Panel 2: Seeking Alternatives in EFL Classrooms: The Need for Inclusive Curricula 12:00 m - 12:30 pm Closing Ceremony

Figure 1. 45th ASOCOPI Annual Conference Academic Program

being viewed with skepticism and criticism in the center of the country, the Caribbean region embraced the program as a state policy and demanded greater participation and coverage (El Universal, 2014). Many sectors in the region thought that it was important as a driving force for the region's tourism and work economies. Since then, various strategies and programs have been promoted to increase the number of English language learners sponsored by local authorities with the cooperation of some institutions. These include the British Council, the Cultural Center Colombo Americano, and SENA, among others. In fact, local newspapers often highlight international rankings, as in the case of Barranquilla, where Education First 2023 classified Barranquilla as a city with better results than other Caribbean cities, even surpassing Bogotá (Zona Cero, 2023). However, teachers from Guajira proposed to the Ministry of National Education the creation of a program equal to or better than *Todos a Aprender* to continue teacher trainings in English, suggesting "that the selected teachers hold a degree in Modern Languages" (Administrador, 2019), which shows a care for the profession.

Among the criticisms in the region, there are several interesting papers concerning the problematization of bilingualism. The official promotion of bilingualism as English/Spanish conflicts with the presence of indigenous communities, *Raizales*, and the contact between Spanish and native languages. One of these papers examined the reasons behind myths, facts, and challenges in building consensual concepts relating to a national bilingual plan in the Archipelago of San Andrés, Old Providence, and St. Kathleen (Ardila, 2006). The author explained the complex sociolinguistic composition of the islands concerning contact with three languages: Creole, standard Caribbean English, and Spanish, and the inconveniences of a national bilingual program in the form it was developed. The paper expressed strong criticism of "the lack of knowledge of the sociolinguistic realities of the island and the favoring of a canonical and hegemonic vision of bilingualism that continues to be equated with English and not with Creole or an English-based Creole language" (p. 110).

Other studies have examined the pre-existing displacement suffered by the Wayuu community in the Lower Guajira of Colombia due to contact with Spanish (Etxebarria, 2012; Ángel-Rodríguez, 2014), whereas others have focused attention on Palenquero language to discuss varieties of Spanish (Lipski, 2012). The authors emphasize the need for language policies aimed at revitalizing and maintaining indigenous languages and the core values of endangered communities. All these studies in the region aimed at showing the characteristics of a multicultural and multilingual territory without hiding the various conflicts that have been experienced throughout history, with an emphasis on bilingualism and inequality (Trillos-Amaya, 1996, 2001, 2011).

The socio-critical turn towards reflecting on language, society, and culture meant for the Caribbean region the appropriation of a sense of belonging. In this sense, representation for a group of scholars acquired a political and differentiated treatment of language and social

policies. This made visible the abandonment of the state and the increase in discourses that homogenize identities, forms of being, and acting. In the region, Soto Molina's (2008) work began to inquire about the implications of embracing multicultural and global notions of bilingualism, without acknowledging the ideological biases behind English language teaching. When it comes to teaching English, there are aspects of culture, differences, and territories that differ from region to region, even within the same country.

2018_ The 53rd Annual Conference “Exploring Social and Cultural Diversities” (Cartagena)

The 53rd annual conference allowed participants to discuss the intricate relationships between culture and diversity in English language teaching and learning. The main plenary sessions discussed important aspects of decolonizing our practices. Some plenary sessions focused on gender blindness in ELT (Dr. Harold Castañeda-Peña, Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas) and the role of intercultural translation (Dr. Lynn Mario T. Menezes de Souza, Universidade de São Paulo). Others discussed the significance of translanguaging for decolonizing English language teaching (Dr. Ofelia García), the challenges of social, linguistic, and cultural diversity in higher education (Dr. Jaime Usma, Universidad de Antioquia), and the identity of rural Colombian English language teachers (Dr. Ferney Cruz-Arcila).

As evident, there was not a single Caribbean keynote, as had occurred in several previous conferences. Similarly, despite the extensive and intense program of concurrent sessions, workshops, and plenaries, it is regrettable to observe the low participation of teachers from the Caribbean region. This is a clear call for both the organizers and the host region, since a balance in participation between the center and the periphery contributes to making the country's educational developments visible¹¹. However, in the concurrent sessions among the few presenters from the Costa Atlántica, we find Sergio Meza, who on behalf of Universidad Autónoma del Caribe, presented how adjusting several instructional components make possible for language teachers to provide a differentiated instruction for all learners in the classroom; María Victoria Pardo, who represented Universidad del Norte from Barranquilla, and introduced the audience to the most common errors a group of undergraduate *costeño* students made when writing in English; Ximena Buendía Arias and Andrea André Arenas, from Universidad de Sucre, who gave a full account of how a group of eight Caribbean students constructed their teacher identity through their teaching practicum; and Jhorman Cantilla, professor to Universidad Tecnológica de Bolívar, who reported on the potential correlation between the way some English language teachers at the language center from this

¹¹ This situation contrasts with what was observed at conferences in other regions, where host regions actively participate.

university assessed their students and the academic achievement of these learners within a diverse language classroom.

These observations of inadequate representation reveal why the association should ensure that at least one or two keynote speakers are scholars and professors from the host region and help members of the committee create a strategy to increase the number of participants from the Caribbean region. This structure of organizing individuals and providing space for active participation is currently under consideration to encourage more diverse dialogs as opportunities to understand what makes us a community in which the regional identities of teachers matter.

It is interesting to note that the socio-critical turn in ELT concerning national policies and programs has created opportunities for in-disciplining the field. We have observed an increase in the number of Colombian English language teachers who are confronted with education, both within and outside the discipline. Although incipient, the interest in the decolonial project has stimulated the reading of intellectuals and scholars from the South (both geographically and epistemologically), giving space to reading and consuming knowledge produced in Spanish and indigenous languages. We wonder to what extent the knowledge produced in different regions of Colombia may inform the senses we give to a national notion of community. Perhaps we should continue to create tactics of inclusion in the center, in which differences, contradictions, and self-criticism are welcome. In the same way, the Caribbean region should create a regional agenda regarding languages in contact and language teacher education (not only ELT) to invigorate a sense of togetherness and alliance and make interconnections clear.

Pilar's Professional Development: From the Caribbean to the Capital

I am a teacher from the diaspora of *costeños* who moved to Bogotá in the early 2000s to study as a fellow in a master's program in linguistics due to a lack of postgraduate academic offerings in my region. I have observed significant differences between the models of foreign language teacher education in the capital and the Caribbean, as well as cultural differences in ways of being, thinking, and acting. After a period of adaptation, I missed Caribbean cultural expressions such as music, dance, literature, and traditional festivals, not only in the learning content but also in my contact with new rhythms (*carrangas* and *bambucos*) and pleasures (cinematheque, storytelling, and the culture of coffee). At the beginning, the adaptation process was not easy: I had to learn to speak slowly, try to pronounce complete words, and laugh with candor and dissimulation. Subsequently, I was compelled to abandon prints and bold and intense hues, conceal my curves, straighten my hair, and embrace shades of gray, navy blue, and black.

I was delighted to hear the elegant, slow, and respectful manner of speaking in the capital. The everyday “*usted*” felt alienated and singled out to me. It took me a while to grasp that this is part of a cultural spectrum in which respect for individual and private space is defined in language. I became a target of correction and ridicule daily as a Spanish and English speaker. At the professional and occupational levels, I was targeted as a subject of study by many students who interviewed me to compare my accent and linguistic repertoire. Although the topic of the Englishes of the world can be appreciated in literature and the content of some English language textbooks, it was quite offensive to hear some students mocking teachers for their English not being native or their Spanish sounding different. It appeared that theory and practice did not align, and efforts to challenge conventional perceptions of teachers’ bodies are still in progress.

In Bogotá, there was a greater demand for English proficiency in comparison to the preceding decade, when *licenciatura* programs primarily focused on English, French, and Spanish. Although national reforms demanded that these programs adopt an emphasis on a target language, the ‘only-English’ policy was part of program leaders’ conviction to improve prospective teachers’ English proficiency. Today, this continues to be a strong tendency, and the abandonment of Spanish as a teaching content has become a great loss for new generations of teachers. As a graduate of a program situated on the Caribbean coast, I never felt disadvantaged in terms of pedagogy, linguistics, or teaching. I was fortunate to have professors who were writers, poets, storytellers, and passionate scholars of local culture (Ramón Molinares, Ariel Castillo, Edmundo Ramos, Julio Escamilla, José Arroyo (RIP), Jairo Soto, Bolaños, and Iván Campo, among others). Many of them held master’s degrees overseas, and some spoke more than one foreign language. On the contrary, I observed that professors in Bogotá were more focused on formal aspects of English language learning and effective teaching practices that gradually moved to sociopolitical concerns and critical tenets in ELT. A sense of academic professionalism is encouraged by the confluence of teachers who are active members of the ASOCOPI. Located in the center of the country, it makes it easier and more accessible to build community and involvement. Teachers are eager to participate as presenters in ASOCOPI activities and are quite enthusiastic about assessing what the rest are doing. It has been difficult for me to adjust to a more intense pace of work and competitive work environments.

My professional development has demonstrated that our identities are also shaped by work contexts and lived experiences. As a professional in education, I owe a lot of gratitude to my native land. I feel satisfied with the education I received, which is why meeting again with Professor Steffanell brought me joy and pride. Francisco and I met in Liverpool in 2006, and we instantly became friends because of our Caribbean heritage. Our colleague-friendly environment also signifies our friendship. I have had the chance to deliver various presentations at ASOCOPI congresses, which have strengthened me. I am deeply indebted

to Bogotá, where the centripetal force on teachers can trigger action and stability that is not easily achieved in the periphery, where the sense of a regional community has not been achieved, despite proximity among cities. The sense of professionalism built in ELT at the center of the country, although very competitive, has increased academic productivity.

Francisco's Professional Pathway: Moving from a Small Caribbean Town at the Periphery to a Melting Pot at the Heart of Colombia

Being educated as a *normalista* in Montería gave me a sense of community through a simple lifestyle closely aligned with the conditions of the people. As a very young student-teacher, I was exposed to rewarding teaching experiences in self-contained and multigrade classrooms. About my learning experience from this Escuela Normal, I still remember with all my affection my English schoolteacher, Ada; she was so enthusiastic and passionate about relating grammar topics and material content to local culture. She wanted me and my classmates to value our regional cultural identity and thus, make our learning situated and significant. In the late 1990s, I decided to move to Bogotá to pursue a major in teaching languages. There were *licenciatura* programs in languages in Barranquilla and Santa Martha, but my decision to go to the capital city was influenced by a major reason: I had been taught by some remarkable *costeño* secondary school teachers, who had done their undergraduate studies in Bogotá and held the view that studying a *licenciatura* at the center was far better than doing it down there in the Caribbean Region. In 1995, I was admitted into a Bachelor of Arts in English and Spanish at a public, national university in Bogotá. In this program, there was a strong emphasis on the disciplinary and didactic components of the major: learning English, learning about English, and learning to teach English. Owing to this, I felt that I missed the cultural component in my learning process and that I missed the experiential and memorable activities I had been exposed to in my English classes. It was nearly at the end of my undergraduate studies when I started to value and comprehend why my English professors from the university insisted that it was paramount to be knowledgeable about how this language works, how it should be used, and how it can be taught. I developed these connections between what I had learned and what I experienced through a part-time job as an English language teacher in a secondary school.

Upon my graduation as a *licenciado*, one of my concerns was to learn how to reconcile the two views that had dominated my experience as a learner of a foreign language: the one present at the Escuela Normal, where English was a vehicle for teaching students something beyond the language *per se*, and the one underlying the Bachelor of Arts in English and Spanish at the university, where English was the end to be mastered by learners in their communicative skills, particularly in the first semesters of the major. The balance I tried to incorporate in my first jobs as a teacher showed me the importance of the metalanguage I had learned, the way I spoke and wrote in English, and how familiar I was with the prevailing

teaching methods of the time contributed to teaching quite effective lessons for the teens I was instructing at that private school.

Bearing this concern in mind, I looked for strategies to uphold in my teaching the view I had obtained at the periphery and the one I had received at the center. Since then, one of my resolutions was to attend as many academic events in ELT as possible every year. This is how, during 15 years of professional experience as a language educator, I attended ten ASOCOPI congresses and at least twenty ELT seminars or lectures organized by different institutions in Bogotá. It is undeniable that historically, ASOCOPI has tried to draw the attention of English language teachers from all around Colombia by holding a plethora of enriching lectures at the same event. Yet, on numerous occasions, some of my *costeños* colleagues, who work in the Caribbean Region, have told me that, at the ASOCOPI congress, there are alluring presentations that are impossible to attend because they are delivered simultaneously. Due to the reality that institutions do not give financial support to teachers who simply attend these presentations without delivering a lecture, pitifully, the congress became an event for a multitude of presenters and fewer attendees.

At that time, I saw myself as an “active” participant in these scholarly gatherings, scavenging for the latest, most intriguing trends in the ELT field and looking to become acquainted with the lenses of other English language teachers who taught differently. In the year 2015, I realized I had a lot to say regarding ELT, and I began to attend academic events as a lecturer. Hitherto, I have been alternately a lecturer and an attendee at ELT events in general. When congresses are held in cities distant from Bogotá, it is not always easy to acquire the resources to travel, as the congress has been allocated during holidays, making it expensive to book tickets for flights and rooms for hotels.

I should acknowledge publicly that I am immensely thankful to events such as the ELT congress organized by ASOCOPI, as they helped me gain valuable insights and experiences that would pave the road for my teaching as an English language teacher and offered me incredible resources and connections, especially when I was a novice educator. Yet, I have to confess two undesirable situations I witnessed several times at these congresses that bothered me: listening to conversations of a few colleagues from the center of the country as they judge some lecturers from the periphery on what they labelled as “strong accents” and hearing some other colleagues (even a couple of authorities in the ELT field) adamantly complain about the lack of originality and relevance of lectures given by presenters from the periphery. While my perception could be to blame, unpleasant experiences like these may deter English language teachers from attending these events and ones like them. Regarding the issue of stereotyping individuals on the periphery, we need to work in developing an understanding that even though ASOCOPI has pinpointed research topics and themes, this organization cannot rule everything; there are other prominent research agendas, or even traditional topics, ingrained in our discipline that still mobilize teachers in the country. In

the words of Batur (2014), “the center and the periphery of the world system include other centers and peripheries in their structures” (p. 212).

As an English teacher from the diaspora of *costeños* who moved to the center of the country, who loves Bogota and its culture, and who values all what this city has given me, I hold the opinion that ELT event organizers and attendees should genuinely embrace cultural diversity, not just in their intention but also in their hearts, and rethink their views about what English means for them. Establishing a sense of English’s importance to one’s individuality and professional career is of value as ELT congresses can sometimes seem to lose their roots in supporting teachers of English and giving a voice to those who teach English in unprivileged conditions; instead, these congresses can become flooded with external agendas which, while often relevant to the prevailing issues of society and the cultural contexts of the current time, are not only of the exclusive domain of the ELT. We must continue to work in a sense of community and representation that places all colleagues on the same footing to continue working in a cohesive professional atmosphere that reduces the perception of hierarchical distinctions between researchers and general attendees, which has been the framing structure of some ASOCOPI functions in the past.

Closing Remarks

The Caribbean region holds significant potential for the broader enhancement of English language teaching. Additional partnerships and strategic alliances are resolute tactics that dispersed communities and scholars in the Caribbean Region must pursue to bring their marginalization to the forefront. The contribution of ASOCOPI to the advancement of the ELT and its potential impact on this region can be strengthened if the association designates leading members in each *licenciatura* program around the country to promote the webinars, activities, and national congresses. Needless to say, the concentration of *licenciatura* programs and significant ASOCOPI members located in the center of the country have contributed to generating more encounters and collective actions for publications, leading events, and research, particularly in the Andean Region of the country, which is why representation needs to be shared and promoted to generate mutual enrichment between the center and the periphery.

ASOCOPI could intensify its initiatives to connect *licenciatura* programs for the Caribbean, organize regional events as subsidiaries of the national congress, and designate at least regional leaders who establish liaisons and cooperation. Hence, the diaspora of *costeños* working at the center needs to reconnect with their counterparts in the periphery to make visible what they are doing for the ELT field and the cultural touch they bring into it to show other ways of being an English language teacher. This might reduce our political, social, and educational ostracism. As part of self-criticism, we have noticed that teachers from the periphery prefer

to participate in local events and publish working papers and books with university publishing editorials with endogenous impact. The ELT community appears dispersed and fragmented. There is little recognition among regions of the scholarly work produced. Sadly, the majority of *costeños*, including ourselves, do research, publish, and participate in academic activities on behalf of universities or institutions based at the center, with scarce recognition of our origins and struggles for inclusion in elite community practices.

Although ASOCOPI has made enormous efforts to be present in the regions, the lack of funding makes this political commitment difficult. HOW, ASOCOPI's journal, could promote a special issue for regional scholars and teachers to elaborate on the senses of bilingualism that we experience in the Caribbean Region, where English is an option but not always the alternative for publishing. On the same token, there is a group of emergent scholars in the region advocating for interculturally situated experiences in which the role of teachers signifies local repertoire and bonding with communities. Perhaps the research topics and agendas are not aligned with those of the center, but a national sense of community and representation must be given its value.

We have also witnessed that advocacy groups for foreign languages often operate in isolation rather than uniting to form robust organizations that could coordinate language activities more effectively. This situation happens in many universities around the country, where events, although important, depict the absence of a well-rounded Latin American-based academic movement dedicated to advancing language learning pedagogies and linguistic studies. This will impact not only ASOCOPI but Latin American contexts in the global linguistic landscape.

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Annex 1.

Table of Colombian Caribbean Universities' Journals

University	Licenciatura Program	Master's or Doctoral Programs	Journals
Universidad del Atlántico	Licenciatura en Lenguas Extranjeras con Énfasis en Inglés y Francés	Doctorado en Educación	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Historia Caribe (1995) – Amauta (1984) – Investigación Acción (2021) – Cedotic (2017)
Universidad de Cartagena	Programa Profesional Universitario en Lenguas Extranjeras	Maestría en Lenguas Extranjeras Aplicadas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Palobra (2000) – Hodos (2012)
Universidad del Magdalena	Licenciatura en Lenguas Extranjeras con Énfasis en Inglés	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Maestría en Enseñanza de Segundas Lenguas (virtual) -Doctorado en Educación, Interculturalidad y Territorio 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Jangwa Pana (2001) – Praxis (2001)
Universidad del Norte	Lenguas Modernas y Cultura	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Maestría en la Enseñanza del Inglés -Doctorado en Educación 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Revista de Educación Superior en América Latina (2017) – Zona Próxima (2000) – Eidos (2003)
Universidad de Córdoba	Licenciatura en Lenguas Extranjeras con Énfasis en Inglés		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Avances en Educación y Humanidades (2015) – Assensus Revista de Investigación Educativa y Pedagogía (2016)
Universidad de Sucre	Licenciatura en Lenguas Extranjeras		
Universidad Popular del César	Licenciatura en Español e Inglés		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Humanismo y Ciencia (2014)

Universities with active programs created before 2000 (Source SNIES) with possibilities for language teachers' professional development.