



# Rethinking English Language Teaching for the More-Than-Human World

*Jessica Fundalinski, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, USA*

## **Abstract**

This essay examines a grammar lesson conducted within an English language teaching (ELT) classroom, in which a student teacher urged the class to refer to a pet bird using the pronoun "it" rather than "she." This seemingly minor event reveals deeper implications about how language shapes our relationships with the more-than-human world, reinforcing settler-colonial ideologies. Reducing non-human beings to "it" perpetuates human exceptionalism and enables environmental exploitation. This essay advocates for reimagining ELT through decolonial and critical pedagogies, like translanguaging and ecolinguistics-informed awareness, to recognize the agency of the more-than-human world. It suggests that altering our linguistic practices in the classroom language can transform our values and relationships with nature, fostering ecocentrism and sustainable ecological consciousness.

## **Keywords**

English Language Teaching, settler-colonialism, ecolinguistics, translanguaging, ecocentrism

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“Remember when Zohal told us about her pet bird?” Olivia excitedly asked her small English Language Teaching (ELT) class. A picture of a blue bird appeared on the SmartBoard. A few students nodded their heads. I looked over at Zohal, who looked down and cracked a slight smile. Olivia continued. “Here is our next question for review: Zohal has a pet bird. \_\_\_\_ is blue. What is the correct pronoun for Zohal’s bird?” Four answer choices appeared after the question: she, he, they, and it. The students in the class, including Zohal, emphatically shouted “She!” in unison, apparently knowing the bird was female. After the students had quieted down, Olivia gently told them their answer was incorrect. “No, the bird is an *it*. *It* is blue.” The next review question appeared.

I looked over at Zohal, who seemed confused. I looked at Olivia, an undergraduate student teacher, and I imagined my own pet, just as much a family member as my human kinfolk, being reduced to an *it*: *I need to buy food for it. It needs water.* It felt so impersonal to think about my pet this way. Unsurprisingly, this observation and lesson on grammar has since lingered with me. What does it mean to teach English about the more-than-human world in a way that reduces anything other than humans to an *it*? What values do we impose through language when we describe Zohal’s pet bird as an object, in the same category as a pencil or a piece of trash? This seemingly simple grammar lesson was not just about language; it demonstrated how deeper anthropocentric entanglements embedded within language shape how we discuss and engage with the more-than-human world. Further, it reveals what we might need to rethink English in English Language Teaching (ELT). In the following sections, I explore how ELT is entangled in colonial ideologies that shape anthropocentric ways of using language, and end by offering ecocentric possibilities for reimagining the teaching of English to account for our relationships with the natural world.

## English and Its Colonial Entanglements

I first read *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) during the COVID-19 pandemic. This beautiful text, which combines lenses from traditional science and Indigenous ways of knowing, offers ways to rethink humanity’s relationship to the more-than-human world. Perhaps it was due to spending more time outdoors during

that period, or because both Kimmerer and I reside on ancestral homelands of the Onondaga Nation—references that become evident in the text—but I felt a deep connection with this read. As an ELT professional, I found her chapter on the animacy grammar to be profoundly impactful. Specifically, I began to consider what language we use to describe the more-than-human world—the rocks, the pines, the water, the land, and, yes, Zohal’s bird. This engaged reading, which first helped me consider the *iting* of non-human life forms, stayed with me as I sat in the back of Olivia’s classroom and imagined something different. It has also been an important text in my doctoral studies, helping me to link critical decolonial theories to teacher preparation, specifically for the field of ELT.

ELT, through a colonial apparatus of erasure, continues to reify and shape anthropocentric ways of using language, at the expense of the more-than-human world. Arvin et al. (2013) assert that anyone living in the United States has a relationship with settler-colonialism, or the “persistent social and political formation in which newcomers/colonizers/settlers come to a place, claim it as their own, and do whatever it takes to disappear the Indigenous peoples that are there” (p. 12). The disappearing is partly rooted in formal education *and* the language policies that have reinforced the hegemony of English, a form of linguistic imperialism that “has always been a tool of colonization, meant to obliterate history and the visibility of the people who were displaced along with their languages” (Kimmerer, 2017). In addition to Indigenous communities in the United States, linguistic erasure has often affected anyone perceived as “other” within educational systems. Language policies and teaching programs in the United States uphold English monolingualism and monoculturalism while constructing linguistically diverse students as “other,” “inferior,” and “deficient” (Motha, 2006). Ultimately, these policies erase and replace the languages of minority and immigrant students with the norms and perspectives of white English speakers (*ibid*).

In replacing home languages with English-speaking norms, ELT may also replace ecocentric ways of thinking about the world with dominant anthropocentric Western values, perspectives, and epistemological orientations. As Wa Thiong’o (1986) writes, “Language is... inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world” (p.

15). In other words, language is deeply connected to culture and community, shaping and reflecting relationships to the world. Kimmerer (2017) illustrates how the grammar of all living beings, in her ancestral language, Potawatomi, is extended subject status and personhood—reflecting the deep kinship ties and reverence to land. As Kimmerer describes, Potawatomi challenges human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism embedded in Western ideologies and conveyed through English. Indeed, the legacy of colonialism through language indirectly reinforces the anthropocentric notion that humans are separate from and superior to nature (Meighan, 2023). Kimmerer (2017) writes, “Because we speak and live with [English] every day, our minds have also been colonized by this notion that the nonhuman living world and the world of inanimate objects have equal status” (n.p.). Thus, in teaching language, ELT may reinscribe dominant cultural values and perspectives embedded within English—including our values and perspectives towards the land and the more-than-human world. Rather than operating from the belief that language is neutral, practitioners in ELT should consider how language is “a lens through which people view themselves and their relations with other people and the more-than-human world” (McCarty et al., 2021, p. 345).

More simply teaching English, the values embedded in English manifest as tangible actions. Words matter: they both shape how we perceive and act upon the more-than-human world. Although not specific to pronouns, an excellent example is described by Meighan (2021), who highlights and challenges readers to consider the ideas behind uncountable nouns in the English language, like oil and water. In the colonial mind, these “limitless” nouns become limitless for exploitation and extraction. This insight into how we use language provides us reasons to “search for new stories to live by and decolonize our thought processes” (Meighan, 2021, p. 4). If we move from speaking of water as tasteless and odorless to life-giving and sustaining, we begin to unravel and unlearn anthropocentric and colonial extractivist worldviews. Indeed, what would it mean to teach about Zohal’s bird not just as an *it* but as part of the world deserving respect? If, instead, we use the pronoun “she,” what might we be willing to learn from her as a subject? Thus, in rethinking how we teach language about the more-than-human world, we begin to resist the ecologically destructive values embedded within Western knowledge systems while simultaneously opening windows

to decolonize (McCarty et al., 2021). As Kimmerer (2017) asks us to consider: “Can we unlearn the language of objectification and throw off colonized thought?” (n.p.).

## Ways Forward

In rethinking ELT for the more-than-human world, I have found both decolonial and critical frameworks helpful for imagining what our pedagogy and practice could look like in the classroom—a practice of unlearning colonial thinking. These frameworks seek to decenter and disrupt dominant values and perspectives, making room for alternative ways of knowing and thinking and ultimately transforming dominant ways of engaging with and thinking about the natural world.

Hsu (2017) suggests translanguaging as a space for acceptance of language beyond monolingual terms. Translanguaging presents a holistic view of language use, where “users of a language select and deploy particular features from a unitary linguistic repertoire to make meaning and to negotiate particular communicative contexts” (Vogel & García, 2017, p. 1). In other words, students utilize all available language resources—whether in a named language like English or Spanish, or through multimodal means—to make meaning of their learning. Translanguaging postures students as agentic as they produce and use language that supports their meaning making and may push back against hierarchical language arrangements (de los Ríos & Seltzer, 2017; Vogel & García, 2017). By offering students the chance to use their entire linguistic repertoire, translanguaging “foster[s] a new way of listening in the classroom” (Hsu, 2017, p. 122). As teachers support students in writing, journaling, or discussing with peers using their full linguistic repertoire, translanguaging legitimizes students’ language, values, and perspectives, including how they perceive the more-than-human world. As we saw in the narrative, Zohal and the other students insisted on using “she” for the bird, a small affront to the objectification of this bird as an it. Allowing students to trans language their world in their own terms opens up new perspectives and values about how to engage with the more-than-human world.

Other possibilities in ELT to resist “*colonialingual* processes” include teaching from earth-centered perspectives, decolonizing our mental models in English (i.e., metaphors describing water), and collectively shifting instruction to embrace more sustaining and holistic worldviews (Meighan, 2023). This approach aligns with Micalay-

Hurtado and Poole (2022), who offer an ecolinguistics-informed critical language awareness approach (eco-CLA) in English language classrooms. Specifically, the authors describe the goals of eco-CLA in “identifying and promoting language use which contributes to ecological sustainability, justice, and wellbeing” (p. 374). Eco-CLA also aims to help learners identify language that, like the *it-ing* of animals, may perpetuate environmental harm. Using these earth-centered, critical approaches, Zohal’s bird would not be the *object* of a lesson in pronouns within an ELT classroom. Rather, Zohal’s bird might be the *subject*. An ELT teacher might design lessons that center the importance of birds in our local ecosystems—helping students develop the language skills to read, discuss, and write about how they support community ecology, including their roles in pollination or managing insect populations. Students might spend one afternoon mindfully watching birds outside of the school, making observations and considering how and where birds assert agency in the local environment. The unit might end with a critical discussion and debate around using pronouns such as “it” to describe the bird and highlight ecocentric alternatives that may be more suitable.

Finally, I want to end considerations for teaching for the more-than-human world by connecting back to where this all began with Kimmerer’s (2013, 2017) grammar of animacy. The grammar of animacy describes the ways in which we use language to describe the more-than-human world, including the particular pronouns, like “it” for nouns like birds. Kimmerer (2017) suggests that we use a “new language to help us honor and be open to the beings who will teach us... and that invite us into an inclusive worldview of personhood for all beings” (n.p). For this, she draws on Potawatomi to offer emergent pronouns that describe singular beings, *ki*, and plural beings, *kin*. In this lesson on pronouns, Olivia might teach standardized forms—like she, he, they, and it—while also teaching a grammar of animacy embedded in respect and empathy for the more-than-human world. Perhaps, we might see “ki” as an additional choice for Zohal to describe her blue bird.

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