Decolonizing Language Education Research in Iranian Universities

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The fabric of research has been among the key strands applied to hold the grip of the colonized and colonizing conceptions of knowledge over the entire empire of academy that has now extended well beyond academia. In all academic disciplines at almost all levels, courses are presented under the rubric of ‘research methodology’. A normally dominant trend in such courses is to feed students of diverse academic disciplines with doses of positivist conceptions of the idea of research as systematic procedures of finding factually testable answers to questions (ideally based on experiments). Alternatively, there may be talks of qualitative or naturalistic studies that defy positivist notions of variables, hypotheses, experiments, and probability but have their own history, literally anchored in colonization and present their own structures of domesticating people into prefabricated frameworks and understandings. Students in their later academic life usually have to grapple with one or another framework or combination of frameworks structured by academic research methodology to produce a pile of writing titles a dissertation or thesis that has to be rigorous enough to survive the rounds of refereeing and evaluation and has to be defended.

Regardless of the divergences among the different approaches to research that may be very broadly categorized under the two camps of quantitative statistical and qualitative naturalistic trends, in contexts like Iran an underlying issue almost always remains unaddressed by teachers of courses of research methodology: the relevance of academic research to true learning and to real life. The norm is that research should be methodologically rigorous, should be carried out systematically, should be original, should be founded on sound theoretical bases, should be informed by previous research, should be based on objective accounts of subjects, and the product of research should be written in the impersonal academic language. More qualitatively viewed, research is supposed to be context sensitive, to avoid intrusion into natural life settings of research participants, to recognize subjectivities, and to be written in the personal language of the researcher as a participant in the research process.
However, what remains untouched and taken for granted is the source of legitimation and approbation that continues to be rooted in certain knowledge forms that continue to be attached to belief structures of strictly rationalist and humanist worldviews, assumptions, and ontological understandings. It is to be noted here that this belief structure is frequently attributed to the ‘West’ or the global ‘North’, or for the purpose of this conference to ‘colonization’. However, as the motto of anti-Westernism catches in many places, there is the danger that the West is reduced to certain geographical areas, countries, or political divisions. West, North, and Colonization are not concrete entities necessarily associated with specific geographical areas or political structures. Therefore, many of the so called Western understandings and assumptions are now well absorbed and reproduced in many Eastern, Southern, decolonized, and even anti-Western contexts. Therefore we tend to avoid such grand labels and to refer to the underlying worldviews that have come to shape the dominant academic trends.

Academic research, from fanatically experimental and statistical to radically naturalistic and interpretivist; from natural sciences and engineering to humanities and social sciences; and from undergraduate copycat library research to huge research projects running at the so called frontiers of human knowledge, are normally evaluated and approved by sources that continue to subtly perpetuate values of capitalism, individualism, and mere humanism. Movements of transformation and deviations from accepted norms will also have to be triggered by those based in prestigious research institutes. If so, the deviations are viewed as non-classical enterprises that initiate an alternative approach or start a new school of thought. But if the deviation is started in a situation where ontologically different assumptions (like views basically challenging individualist profiteering, capitalist notions, the so called democratic political principles, and perhaps most forbiddingly, views that embrace divine conceptions of life and being) are espoused, the initiation is labeled as naiveté, lack of rigor, and lack of knowledge.

Therefore, we argue that perhaps the most demanding challenge in ‘decolonizing our universities’ is problematizing the concept of research and the teaching of research methodology in universities. This, on the one hand, challenges a fundamental mechanism of shaping and disseminating knowledge in academia and moves beyond the surface level disputes over approaches and methodologies of research and shakes more fundamental and taken for granted assumptions of academic knowledge. On the other hand, a challenge of conceptions of research and research methodology courses permeates into almost all academic disciplines.
In the specific area of language education research, that we are concerned with, in addition to facing research, the challenge of questioning the dominant taken for granted assumptions has two other prongs of questioning the received notions of language as well as tackling the thorny issue of education. In this article we depict a general image of a course that has been presented (and has been going through constant evolution) during the past thirteen years under the title of either ‘research methodology’ or ‘qualitative research’ at undergraduate, Masters, and PhD levels at University of Mazandaran and Alzahra University in Iran. We first present an outline of a course that, in the spirit of this conference, may be called a decolonized research methodology syllabus, and then illustrate the actual realization of such an approach in the writings of a number of Masters students of English language education based on excerpts from their theses.

Overview of captive research

A typical course of research methodology in the so called discipline of Teaching English as Foreign Language in our universities almost totally revolves around statistics. In these courses research is put into a framework of steps: finding a research issue, narrowing it down, devising research questions, developing null hypotheses, providing operational definitions, framing a research design – ideally an experimental one –, developing a data collection instrument, objectively collecting the data, quantifying the data, and at the peak of the edifice, analyzing the data through meticulously thought over statistical techniques by feeding them into a cutting edge version of a software of statistical analysis, making n-dimensional comparisons and calculations, drawing complicated tables with perplexing sets of digits, and finally leaving a simple question out, that is, so what?

Research issues that are stated in the form of specific research questions normally come from the so called literature, that is, most importantly writings by people in advanced countries and in university departments that are pioneers in the ‘independent discipline’ of applied linguistics and English Language Teaching and published by international publication companies, an absolute majority of which happen to be in Britain, US, and Canada. More recently, of course, the geographical scope of the mass production of such publications has expanded so that ‘local literature’ in ELT education and research is considerably prolific now but the source of legitimacy continues to remain all the same. A research question is to be based on
an academic interest and interests are rooted in theoretical groundings defined by literature. The research and the questions need to be original and fashionable so that they contribute to the cumulative body of knowledge in the discipline, that is, the body of black ink on white paper piled and added to the same literature in a mass (re)production cycle.

Not surprisingly, research topics that emerge out of such a totally-detached-from-life process do continue to remain entrapped within the fragmentationist views of language as skills and components merely shaping a ‘means of communication’ and not more. Some awkward examples of titles of papers as the product of such a research trend follow (and, two points need to be taken into account: First, the selected titles are only ones that do not contain technical jargon and big acronyms. Otherwise, titles with technical terms would show the depth of the disaster even more than this. Second, these are some of the refereed high standard research output that has been presented at national conferences. Others not presented and left within the methodology classes and term papers or library archives of theses could be imagined):

- The effects of short-term memory and gender on cell-phone assisted vocabulary learning
- Teaching students how to write requestive emails to faculty members
- Automating multiple choice vocabulary test item preparation
- The acquisition of ‘wh’ questions by Iranian EFL learners
- Test taking strategies of high and low English achievers
- Good and poor male and female Iranian EFL majors’ vocabulary learning strategies
- The effect of educational level and gender on the choice of prestigious language forms
- Request Strategies: Cross-sectional study of EFL learners and Australian native speakers
- Accommodating politeness theory in personal email messages
- Crucial learner factors in ELT: Sleep patterns and brain
- Possible relations among teacher efficacy, burnout, and emotional intelligence
- A comparisons of the application of Blogs and Wikis in EFL writing classrooms
- An investigation of politeness in formal and informal emails
- North American and Iranian EFL learners’ use of discourse markers
- Relationship between language proficiency level, sex and learners’ beliefs
The effect of setting reading goals on the vocabulary retention of Iranian EFL learners

Iranian EFL learners’ compliment responses

Age constraints and native-like attainment in syntax and pronunciation by Iranian learners

To trigger an actual research process, ‘operational definitions’, that is, simplistic naïve definitions of complicated concepts into a few words, need to be provided and then comes the all important issue of statistics with all the bombastic tests sometimes forcing the poor student to forget all about the research problem and just to do gymnastics in digits and tables. Review of these statistical tests (that may be nothing compared to the scope of what statisticians deal with) shapes the major job of teachers and students in methodology courses even at the PhD level. From the undergraduate level upwards, all these tests are grappled with based on absolutely out of context examples and the difference between a third year undergraduate in terms of research methodology is the complicatedness of the statistical tests, and in terms of understandings of language and learning is almost nothing.

All the obfuscations about research designs, data collection, reliability, and validity, are also bubbled by the course participants throughout the term and the outcome is that students are acquainted with scientific, systematic, and rigorous ways of finding answers to research questions. As stated above, a simple question of ‘so what?’ is left out and research turns into a mere empty academic entertainment. Nonetheless, many big lies continue to be fed into people’s minds through justifications under the disguise of scientific research and objectivity, the most important functioning of which in reality is to blind, block, control, subdue, and enslave. This might seem too harsh but regardless of its palatability to devout servants of academia, it is the truth if we set relevance, meaningfulness, and ultimate human goals as the criteria.

Outline of decolonized re-searching

The searching and re-searching involvements of the courses discussed in this article have been constantly evolving and emerging during the past thirteen years with different levels of course participants (undergraduate students early on, and Masters and PhD students later) and with evolving learning, teaching, searching, and living experiences of the teacher herself. However, a broad outline of the course may be given mostly focusing on how the course emerged in the research methodology course of Masters students of Teaching English as a Foreign Language at
Alzahra University in Tehran. The examples given below are drawn from theses of some of these Masters students who participated in these courses and later worked with their research methodology teacher as their supervisor during the past eight years. The introduction to the course syllabus given to the students at the beginning of the term states:

An understanding of research as honest search for healing real pains, rather than going through a series of prescribed academic procedures, is our point of departure in this course for understanding… language education research in the educational context of our country. Revisiting epistemological foundations of positivistic assumptions and questioning mainstream variable-based statistical research in English language education,… we will be co-creating challenges, inquiries, and dialogues about the research problems emerging from our real educational contexts with the hope of informing and transforming our language education practices.

During the first few sessions of the semester the focus of what happens in class discussions is ‘who I am’. The teacher talks about the details of her learning, teaching, and re-searching background as centrally pertaining to her personally lived concerns with language in community life. This includes her childhood memories of her bilingual life with English and Farsi; her mother’s paintings and poetic adventures; her grappling with the academic language of English literature in an Iranian English language university as well as theoretical linguistics and second language education in North American academia; and more recent teaching experiences of unlearning English with students within the Iranian community life.

This ‘who I am’ stage also centrally revolves around exploring students personal backgrounds including the particular local area of the country they come from; the family and community experiences that is usually intertwined with issues of language in social life; their experiences of pleasure and plague with English learning during their school years; and their current understandings and expectations as well as future dreams regarding further learning and teaching of English. During this stage, students write about all these ‘who I am’ issues, share their writings with each other and with the teacher, and extensively comment on these writings. They are required to share their stories in their own handwritings and to watch the language of their writings. At some point during these writings an interesting challenge is to see if they know each other based on the language of the ‘who I am’ writings even if names are removed from the papers. The following excerpts from some of the theses by these students reflect how they carried this ‘who I am’ spirit into their actual re-search and writing:
Saeideh: English language learning was a big concern for me throughout my schooling as a learner and also when I started to live in the schools as a teacher... I can still hear my heart beating and see my red face when I was to speak in English and when I was afraid of being wrong without thinking of the message of my language... I started being a teacher in a private high school as my first experience while I could feel the same pains I had myself in my school. I chose teaching in order to be a healing for my own pain... As a teacher, I believe learners need a safe place like their home to make meaning of the words they see or read...

Behnaz: ...The teacher first asked us to open ‘the new words’ page where some words were listed in three columns. She asked us to repeat the words after her and taught us their meanings through their Farsi equivalents. The text reading continued in the same way as the teacher read aloud, translated line by line and followed through with comprehension questions about the text. I did not do well in the English class since I was not good at memorizing the words and grammar rules. Therefore, my parents decided to send me to an English class to help me improve my English... I was accepted in ‘The English Translation’ major, but the language learning in our university seemed to be the same as the schools...

Reyhaneh: I wonder where my story really begins. It might have started on my first day at an English institute. True, the teacher was nearly fluent, but what influenced me most was her accent... She talked different from all English teachers at school. It was in English class where for the first time, I felt this difference in accents and no doubt I was badly influenced... Afterwards I quit going to English class but when I started it again later, in the ILI with all its American and British teachers... I started to learn English with a new spirit and this time with the "accent". I paid particular attention to pronunciation and intonation aspects of English...

Fahimeh (P): When I was in my teens, my mother used to tell me that I would make a good teacher as apparently I was good at explaining things to others in an attractive way. For a girl whose constant companions were pens and papers, who sobbed frequently for getting a few points lower than her rival classmates, and whose biggest joy was topping the academic competitions becoming a teacher was one of the most immediate dreams... Those of us who are destined to a teaching life have our own stories of becoming and being a teacher. Among these memories of joy and sorrow, resentment and rapture what stands out is the way we perceive, project, and sustain our ‘I’s as teachers. This demands a shift from ‘doing teaching’ by simply enacting a series of routines to ‘being and becoming teachers’...

Roya: I took a peek into my childhood where a little girl is interested in drawing colorful pictures of her dreams on paper and on walls. She is explaining them to her parents, daydreaming about her lines, shapes, and colors for hours and hours. As time passes, her interest in drawing changes to writing words with imagination of
pictures in mind. I started converting those pictures into words and this is one of the most natural processes I was undertaking as a child... With my entrance into the EFL world (studying and teaching), my writing changed. Perhaps, the inspiration for writing took on a different direction. I sensed a huge rock blocking my writing river...

**Hannah:** A quick look at what I have been through during school years reminds me of the importance of those years in shaping my ways of thinking. As an EFL teacher... I had the chance to live both pans of the scale; that was the way I became impartial toward myself. In the role of student, I always had remote chance to see teacher as a counterpart of the same weight. I remembered me as a student who expected teacher to be unconquerable hero and I recalled the pain when my hero had no power to save me from the sense of uselessness. As a teacher, I saw the same familiar pain in the eye of the students at the same time, as I was the teacher.

What emerges out of ‘who I am’ is the second stage that we call ‘my pain’, in which each one of the students tries to focus on a specific language pain, that is, a boiling issue that the student personally feels like exploring and re-searching. A felt pain rather than an academic interest as the research issue is the crucial element of decolonizing research. In any research area the pain that is personally or socially felt would make all the difference to happen in the act of research. It is not the case that course activities do not include readings. Students are required to rather extensively read and reflect on the so called literature of language education that is of course dominated by the mainstream language education discourse. However, what makes for decolonization is critically reading and consciously reflecting upon readings and, more importantly, understanding them in light of their (ir)relevance to a personal re-search pain:

**Behnaz:** ...what I experienced in my school English class was the result of ‘banking model of education’... This model puts emphasis on memorization of information rather than on understanding and critical thinking... Therefore, reading is considered as a skill decomposed into components and sub-skills... Therefore, I decided to conduct a critical... research focusing on one of the emphasized aspects of problem posing education in foreign language learning context, i.e. liberatory autonomy...

**Fahimeh (P):** ...over the last few decades siren calls have been heard from here and there warning against the repercussions of the ever-raising power and penetration of English... Vexed by the ideas of alienation and identity crisis, we make attempts to lay the foundations of a self-seeking and self-returning language teaching pedagogy... Having been defined, designed, elaborated and practiced, this pedagogy may lead to re-assessment and re-definition of our English language teaching...
methods and/or re-educating language teachers with a focus on Islamic, Iranian ideologies, spirits, values, and identity which have apparently become invisible and voiceless in the midst of those of others...

Fahimeh (G):...I also remember my English class, which was confined to learning letters, words, and structures. In my reading classes teachers used prescribed materials and books that were in no way related to the students’ cultures and interests... The content of the printed text was taken for granted without challenging the underlying assumptions, the ideology, or the philosophy behind it... unfortunately, what I experienced in my own classes still exists in our educational system and policies... In my own teaching a conspicuous point that I have noticed is that students only listen to what is demanded from them on tests... To change the present condition for the benefit of all those whom we love and cherish, requires great effort. It is necessary to have in mind that the starting point is every one of us... thus I decided, on my own part to conduct a study on critical literacy practices...

Reyhaneh: ...They all had long stories to tell me about accent and I could easily sympathize because it was very easy to see ‘me’ inside them... With all my heart, I felt many others shared the same experience with me and wanted me to do something about this... My questions in regard with the necessity of a native-like accent in Iran or the possibility of an Iranian type of English proved to be absolutely challenging... I am now determined to find out why we have made a great fuss over accent. What is a language worth without the accent?

Hannah: I started thinking about the times that I had the feeling of uselessness; it happened whenever I and the teacher were not able to communicate successfully... In my country, Iran, the textbooks available in the market used in various language schools and institutes, are written by non-native authors. Sometimes, the occasions, events, and pictures depicted in these books, make no sense to Iranian learners with a different cultural background. Most learners were interested in knowing more and more about native English speakers’ way of life...

Roya: ...I started from the famous question asked by my advisor: “what is YOUR pain in EFL teaching?”... This seemingly easy question turned everything inside out... And my answer was: “my pain is writing and teaching writing in EFL”. Those days I suffered from the so-called disease called “not having professional language” diagnosed by one of the professors! Since then whatever I attempted to write as a course project, I was waiting and expecting the same comment from others and this fear hindered me a lot! I decided to write a thesis that could become an inspiration for rediscovering writing again at least for myself.

The third stage is ‘what I explore’. What in academic research normally takes the shape of data collection based on frameworks and research instruments, is reinterpreted as searching for
sense making evidence that illuminates dark corners of the particular language pain of the student. The *how to do* aspect of this is definitely not done based on research manuals written by great methodologists based in prestigious high ranking academic institutions and published by world class publishers. The reading requirement at this stage is sources illustrating non-mainstream people’s search for evidence in their own searching adventures, and therefore, the procedure of going about discovering and collecting the evidence emerges from the searching experiences and ideas reflected in those sources and becomes reinterpreted by the students in the context of their peculiar research pain within a particular cultural, temporal, and special context. What other people did outside strict methodological frameworks must have implications for what we are doing but the unique problem of ours in a unique context needs a unique approach to evidence and *data*, that closely links this to ‘*my pain*’ and ‘*who I am*’:

**Fatemeh:** ...as an English language teacher my role was to pose problems and allow the natural stream of learning and teaching to flow freely. This course of action encompassed all the literacy events during the language-learning get-togethers including reading, writing, webbing, dialogue, artistic reflections, and poster making... This study started in an ordinary high school in a small town in rural areas of Mazandaran province... For most of these students’ English classes only reminded them of numerous grammatical rules and vocabularies they were forced to translate and memorize...

**Fahimeh (P):** The participants of this... research are Iranian students of TEFL who are engaged with teaching activities as well. The evidence of how teaching identities are shaped and reshaped through introduction and enactment of this pedagogy will come from these participants... It is hoped that this study... can prove successful in shedding lights on aspects of our social and individual ‘Selves’ which have so far been sightless and site-less in our education and can ultimately offer a dynamic, locally originating framework for language teaching and learning.

**Mahtab:** We never focused our practices on short, factual, information-based articles, rather usually students were given some articles whose language was totally different in nature, usually in the form of medical story, some body’s medical pain and the manner in which people approach the disease... The major concentration in these readings was on challenging themes; making the author visible; unlearning;... words and worlds; establishing a dialogue with the author of the text, then with classmates and teachers; responding to the authors in weekly journals.

**Hannah:** I kept notes inside and outside of the classroom. During the class time, I sometimes made some notes, and then at home, I transferred them to my own journal and kept them in order. I did not follow a specific format; rather, I used to arrange
my notes by time. I used to draw on my journal, which helped me, a lot to remember the details. Some points that learners had told me during the class time or some ideas or even questions that suddenly came to my mind were all, included in my logs... In addition... learners used to write their own ideas individually... Despite the fact that this collection of materials was not as orderly and clean as materials brought to the class, they truly helped me and the learners in knowing each other...

**Roya:** In this study, the teacher created a space for learner-writers to have a chance to re/gain their own power of writing by paying attention to their own knowledge and interests... Also, respecting and valuing self/other, unlearning the concept of grading by not competing with each other, eliminating authority in authorship by integrating their thoughts and ideas into their academic literary papers are highly emphasized.

**Reyhaneh:** We are usually inclined to see the root of the problem, and in this case the cause of this fear, in the kind of illusion students have of what they refer to as Standard English. Standard English is generally put on a pedestal by language learners who almost always set themselves a goal of mastering it.

What comes next is ‘making sense’ of the data and generating meanings. The concern is not analysis, as such. Rather, the question is about what explorations and evidence that emerge out of ‘what I explore’ say about ‘my pain’. Rather than surrendering to statistical probability based measures of effects, correlations, and co-variances that confine understandings of super-complex phenomena like human language and learning to a few so called variables and factors within the lab experiment discourse and, therefore, surrender to the philosophy of positivism, ‘making sense’ is about understanding ‘what I explore’ in relation to ‘my pain’. The notions of validity and reliability based on some predefined notions may be good for making scientific looking writings and prestigious publications but not for healing a searching pain. Therefore, the criterion of robustness of the procedure and usefulness of findings does not stand on some numerical measure, index, or coefficient but the extent to which the discoveries and learning make sense in the context of ‘my pain’ and to others in their respective life situations and the extent to which they facilitate co-creation and generation of more profound understandings in our own life.

**Fahimeh (G):** The major assertion generated from the data analyses was that “reading” was defined and approached differently by the professors and the students in the critical and the traditional classrooms... the perspective towards reading in the reading classroom as seemed to influence student voice, their perception towards reconstructing their world/word, and their attitude towards learning.
Mehrnoosh: ...I could find the connections, relationships and underlying concepts between the themes... It was the time I realized that every single act the teacher had from the first moment of the class was like the bits of jigsaw puzzle which sat together at the end of the courses and made the whole picture which I could see in my preliminary analysis. Thus, I looked for the ways through which the teacher tried to prepare the learners for the course and to experience words through personal narratives of the teacher, the students and novels and short stories which were the personal narratives of the authors...

Mona: I had a list of themes which I assumed as a number of definitions for “the understanding of the act of reading”... I found these definitions for the concept of literacy in the eyes of the readers such as “be wise vs. be able to read and write”... It seems an enormous piece in the puzzle is missing. I believe (Quran) is the most complete book in the world in which Allah clarifies in detail the way people should live to reach salvation. Such a complete book never can be without a practical pedagogy unless I am neglecting it... This belief made me search and research throughout the (Quran) verses... The more I read the more I found what a perfect pedagogy Quran has, how neglectful I was and how related themes it has to the relation of the act of reading and literacy essence... So it can best show us how to read, what the best understanding of the act of reading is...

Hannah: ...I came to the point that without studying the context in which the materials are used and without defining the term context itself, I could not make any sense out of the whole story. Since I had to reflect on terms that I as a teacher frequently use in my teaching (e.g. institute, teacher and learner, culture, etc.), I started to reflect on myself (as the meaning maker) to see how I as the teacher see the materials and how and to what extent this vision is demonstrated in the materials...

Roya: I did not know where to start analyzing or better to say I did not want to because the term “analyzing” has somehow negative meanings for me. I cannot separate the gathered data, since for me they are similar to the rings inside a tree; one without the other is useless to talk about the tree as a living creature... So, first and foremost I want to call data analysis “Making Sense of Data”. The teacher invites the learner-writers to craft writing in which there is a respect for their “self” presence as well as others. Sharing and listening to “self/others” to find writing way/s in writing workshop community instead of competing for getting grades eliminate the authority of the texts in the context of L2 academic writing...

The final stage is the vital question of ‘so what?’, which simply takes the re-searcher back to ‘my pain’, ‘who I am’, and the concern for relevance. A challenge that starts to merge at this stage is ‘the act of writing’. Writing, sharing, and commenting continued to live on throughout
the challenges of the entire course but towards the end of it when the re-search has to be presented to people in a climate of academic research, writing and presenting becomes particularly important. Therefore, the challenge is to put the search in the decolonized language that has started to evolve out of the course involvements and to question the normal language of academic research, writing, presentation, and defense by the very act of telling the story of the entire re-search journey.

**Mahtab:** It was surprising how I felt free and how little by little I could talk about my own problems, challenges and even mistakes freely. Position-taking, respect, honesty, and dialogue were outstanding values of this community. I thought that all these values, in one way or another was reflected in the language of the group and how they saw themselves. I found that an urgent prerequisite of being a member here was that I should think about myself and my language teaching... I always suffered from listening to people whose languages lacked values and position and just saw language learning as memorizing some rules and words.

**Saeideh:** In speaking, the learners and the teacher found their “Presence” in forms of conversations, talks, dialogues through participation in the social network. The learners began to care about the classmate ties they had with each other and about the friendly ties they had with their teacher... The learners’ participation in class was one of the aspects of classroom interaction in which opportunities (community) were created for the learners to practice English language and to produce a homemade foreign language through having conversations... The learners became writers for their own communities for an audience of readers who were their classmates or parents at home... Instead of teaching the learners vague generalities which may or may not (most often not) correspond with anything in “their reality”, the lessons taught were specific and concrete, and easily applicable to the world around them.

**Behnaz:** ...I discovered that some of learners’ identities were transformed in the process of struggling for liberatory autonomy. These students during the term through the critical reading of English literature... understood that they could transform their beings, by gaining an awareness of their relationship with words/worlds...

**Parvaneh:** I was interested to understand why the young Kurdish learners of English language of Islam Abad are not willing to use and talk in Kurdish; and secondly why the young Kurdish learners of English language have a strong tendency toward using English words, phrases and expressions in their daily Persian language interactions... When I was taking my very first steps... I did not expect to experience such a journey... Inserting the cultural background and the identity of different ethnicities of Iran as the material of the English books in different parts of Iran can be helpful in giving the quality of meaningfulness to English learning in EFL context.
**Mahsa:** These inquiries informed our pedagogical wondering in the search for a new language-aware, reflective and critical writing... Apart from the routine conceptions of language... we embraced a different knowing of the concept 'writing pedagogy'... To treat back the writer block syndrome... we constructed our medical literacy practices on dialogic writing as rooted in medical narratives: a guiding and problem-posing discovery path which could inform the lifelong medical writing problem to stand against the worldwide automatic, monologic, injective and prescriptive... These transformations of the routine language practices entailed searching for the new curriculum which could demystify the current perspectives on language practices and inform our new understanding of written medical language (genre) in the well known methodology as the theory of language, the theory of learning, the nature of writing and to practice them beyond the positivistic and popular language vocabulary, reading and writing fragmentation...

Moreover, throughout the entire period of the course, guest speakers are invited to the classroom, students watch and discuss movie clips related to the discussions of the course, they attend thesis presentation and defense sessions by students at the final stage of their theses, and of course continue reading, reflecting, writing, sharing, and commenting on each other’s writings.

As a final illustration of a decolonized view of language learning (research), the following is what Hamid wrote to his students at the end of a course of English for students of medicine. During the term students had done a re-search on a medical issue of their own personal concerns and had attempted to bring meaning into their learning of English by putting it in the context of searching about this personally felt problem and tried to face and own the English language as well as the knowledge of academic medicine. Having been a participant of the decolonized re-search course both for his undergraduate and undergraduate studies and having done his thesis re-search in this spirit, his learning-teaching-searching journey with his students exemplifies a decolonized account of research and further illustrates a decolonized view of language as well as learning and teaching. Such a view of language can obviously be expanded into all areas of academic knowledge:

When I started my un/learning journey with you... I knew that language is more than WORDs, grammar rules, texts, and communication and I thought I understood what Munir Fasheh meant by "use words rather than be used by words". I thought SEARCH was the same as research, although I believed that academic research is to be questioned. And I had just heard and I was just beginning to explore what it meant to talk about research in terms of PAIN. But through the un/leaning journey we lived,
I started to realize what it means not to be used by WORDs; I started to see what it means to do research as part of my lifelong SEARCH; I started to feel what it means to start research based on my own PAIN. I started to feel that perhaps the major flaw in what has been known as prestigious research in almost all academic areas, including medicine, is that rarely research happens in SEARCH of a way to heal a real PAIN truly felt by the researcher. PAINS like the ones felt by many of you… go far beyond the so called interests that are the starting point of a lot of PAIN-less academic research.

I started to see that research could be more lifelike and real than going through a series of prescribed academic procedures heavily relying on textual knowledge. Perhaps only a few of you can present your SEARCH as methodical academic research but I un/learnt a lot from the SEARCH you lived… I un/learnt that WORDs and text might be meaningful and helpful in my SEARCH only if I know who they are talking about. I started to realize what it means to free myself from "the tyranny of words", as Munir calls it. Perhaps this is my most wonderful discovery about my own deep PAIN, that is, language: I un/learnt that I could SEARCH my PAIN without having a WORD as its name, as Hassanmirzaei did; I un/learnt that I could SEARCH my PAIN with a wrong WORD (that I may be used and misled by) as the name of my PAIN and I can come up with my own WORD that I use to name the PAIN, as Hadi did; I un/learnt that I could SEARCH my PAIN as I am caught by big WORDs just to understand later that big WORDs are created by people and could be empty, as Hamidipour did…

Concluding challenges

We conclude with two quick but critical questions. First, where is the decolonized agenda in the course illustrated above? The answer is that decolonization is in people. Throughout the process of shaping and living the course, research questions, texts, data, and the rest are there, but the unique decolonizing feature lies in the fact that people, their lives, and their concerns are the essential components of all the stages of the course and basically of such a view of re-search. ‘Who I am’, ‘my pain’, ‘what I explore’, ‘making sense’, and ‘so what?’ are all fundamentally based on people’s involvement with re-search and this is the vital issue true adherence to which prevents colonization to occur at levels of research problems, procedures, findings, and most importantly, interpretations.

This takes us to a critical second question: perhaps all de-colonizing attempts truly emerging from our own beings resulting in a decolonized university may ideally bring us to a state similar to the independence of countries that fought for independence from colonial powers.
Ideally, the realm of knowledge will be in our own hands but are we good enough to live a better life than the one colonizers imposed on us? Where to from decolonization? When worldviews of materialism, capitalism, individualism, liberal democracy deceits, and media grip over lives are dismantled, it is hardly acceptable to say that a vacuum of such values or a wild life of traditionally shaped traditional community values is necessarily the optimum ontological vocation of human beings. Therefore, we may need to start questioning ourselves about the values that need to be brought in, argued and even fought for, and lived so that the true transcendental nature of human life is necessarily considered. Beyond decolonization we may begin to hear the lament by Hafez: You are called upon from the heavens; I don’t know why you continue to be entrapped here.

1. Sue-san Ghahremani Ghajar gained her concern with issues of language, learning, and community life during her childhood in the southern Iranian city of Abadan. These very concerns moved her to places as diverse as Shiraz, California, Tehran, Mazandaran in northern Iran, and Ottawa to search, learn, teach, experience, and explore literature, linguistics, and language education. In the past 25 years she has been teaching and re-searching as a faculty member (currently at Alzahra University, Tehran). Although working within the academia, the main concentration of her involvements has been questioning the dominant academic trends, especially in the global industry of English language teaching. In all her teaching, re-searching, research advising, developing learning materials, and writing in different venues, she has continued to fight for bringing life, personal meaning, and awareness into the acts of learning, teaching, and languaging. Most recently, she has co-edited (with S. A. Mirhosseini) Confronting Academic Knowledge which explores various aspects of the dominance of mainstream perceptions and practices in shaping knowledge in academia and beyond.

2. Seyyed-Abdolhamid Mirhosseini was born (1978) in a rural area in the northern Iranian province of Mazandaran. His life in a mixed environment of local farming culture; an institutional education minded extended family; later, the language of the great Persian poet Hafez; and English as a foreign language learning and teaching, created a peculiar searching view for him regarding performances of language and knowledge, especially with regard to taken for granted underlying assumptions. In the past 15 years mainly inspired by his teacher and mentor Sue-san Ghahremani Ghajar, he has been unlearning and re-searching his academic studies of language and education in his language teaching experiences with various age groups; his research (including current PhD study on ideologies of English teaching, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran); and his diverse writing practices. Most recently, he has co-edited (with S. Ghahremani Ghajar) Confronting Academic Knowledge which explores various aspects of the dominance of mainstream perceptions and practices in shaping knowledge in academia and beyond.