

Decentring ELT: teacher associations as agents of change

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In 2018, the A.S. Hornby Educational Trust launched its 'Decentring ELT' initiative, with the aim of identifying, publicizing, and supporting ways in which English language educators in low- and middle-income countries work locally and collaboratively to develop activities that respond to their particular circumstances. This article aims to explore the notion of 'decentring' in ELT by means of a provisional characterization and by presenting examples of activities carried out by ELT teacher associations in Africa, Latin America, and South Asia which involve: localization/devolution; encouragement of success-sharing; support for teacher research; investigation of members' needs and/or capabilities; and/or attempts to bring about wider change. On the basis of feedback received so far on our provisional characterization of decentring, we end by highlighting some ways in which this notion, and outside support for it, may need to be not only extended but also problematized and critiqued.

Key words: decentring, teacher association, context-based approach, local agency, capacity-building

Introduction

An implicit overall goal of the A.S. Hornby Educational Trust (<https://www.hornby-trust.org.uk/>) has always been to enable capacity- and status-building among teachers of English, with a particular focus on needs in public education systems in low- and middle-income countries. Since 2018, the Trust's 'Decentring ELT' initiative has been making this goal more explicit, with a particular focus on mapping, publicizing, and further supporting what ELT teacher associations (TAs) currently do to value and develop local expertise. This focus on TAs arose largely due to the Hornby Trust's long-standing prior involvement in TA support (see <https://www.hornby-trust.org.uk/projects>).¹

In this article we describe how this initiative has evolved to date and offer a provisional characterization of 'Decentring ELT' before moving on to share some specific examples of TA activities in Africa, Latin America, and South Asia which seem consistent with this characterization. Aside from seeking to describe and publicize such activities, we also aim to provoke critical reflection, and we therefore end the article with a discussion— informed by our work over the last three years together with feedback

we have received—of ways in which we can now see that our original, provisional notion of decentring may need to be problematized.

A provisional characterization of ‘decentring ELT’

As members of the group that has been formulating and taking forward this initiative,² we organized a special two-day meeting (termed a ‘Hornby ELT Forum’) just before the April 2019 IATEFL conference to bring together representatives from several TAs known to us for their innovative projects. At this Forum, the concept of decentring was discussed on the basis of illustrative case studies presented by invited participants from Argentina, Cameroon, Chile, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kenya, India, and Nepal. Over the ensuing months, we worked with presenters to develop written versions of their case studies which we summarize below. In an attempt to capture the essence of discussions that had gone on at the Forum, we also formulated the following provisional rationale for and characterization of ‘Decentring ELT’, which we present here as a basis for further analysis, activity, and discussion:

The world of ELT has been characterized by a hegemony of ‘global’ or ‘centre’ ELT approaches and materials developed outside the teaching contexts in which they are expected to be used. However, these approaches and materials (‘frames for action’) are not necessarily appropriate to and do not [necessarily] recognize teachers’ and other insiders’ experience and expertise in those contexts.

Work needs to be put into empowering teachers to develop contextually appropriate thinking and action (on methodology, materials design, curriculum development, teacher education, etc.) in relation to the needs of their local contexts. Empowerment involves collaborating with teachers/encouraging teachers to collaborate with each other to articulate key features of their work, reasons for these, and ways they feel their practice can be improved.

This process can be termed ‘decentring ELT’, in contrast with English language teaching which is centred on ‘outsider’ agendas. Decentring ELT is not about proposing new teaching methods, or changes in education policy, but rather about recognizing contextually situated, ‘insider’ expertise and creativity in actual practice, and, through this, supporting teachers and groups of teachers in understanding and extending practices that are effective for them.

Decentring ELT in practice

We now illustrate how the above statement relates to, indeed is grounded in, actual TA practice rather than just being a programmatic statement. To do so, we describe below some of the TA initiatives identified in the course of Hornby ELT Forum discussions, which informed the above characterization. We have grouped these initiatives according to particular characteristics they seem to display which can be related in different ways to the above statement. These constitute concrete examples of TAs operating as agents of decentred change in their local (national or regional) contexts.

TAs engaging in localization/devolution activities

Since 2016, some members of APIBA, the Buenos Aires Association of Teachers of English (Argentina), have spent part of each academic year ‘on tour’, bringing workshops and support to members all over the wider Province of Buenos Aires. The TA asks local teacher training colleges and

teacher development centres to suggest workshop topics relevant to the needs of teachers in their area. Facilitation is provided by both Buenos Aires-based members and local teachers/trainers whose understanding of classrooms in their immediate contexts helps focus workshop content on the needs and experiences of participants. Since 2017, APIBA has maintained an open call to the public to suggest local speakers who do not usually feature in ELT events. By engaging both members and non-members, APIBA contributes to active participation in the promotion of local knowledge. In addition, it benefits from discovering cases of good practice worth sharing with a broader audience.

Experience establishing local ‘communities of practice’ (CoPs) in several African countries, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea-Bissau, and Rwanda, also shows how activity can be locally devolved. For example, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the national TA (CLASS) has encouraged teachers to develop local CoPs in three towns in the east of the country (CLASS 2019). The teachers in each CoP meet regularly in their schools or communities to discuss classroom experiences and share information and ELT expertise (teaching materials and classroom practices) they have found useful in their particular area. Experience of participation in these decentred forums raises teachers’ awareness of how much they can learn from each other, and helps them develop an autonomous professional networking routine, supported by WhatsApp groups which operate at every level of the TA.

These TA activities in Latin America and Africa have been encouraging local members to participate and share classroom experiences with colleagues working in similar contexts to their own. Participants in the ELT Forum reported that teachers’ sense of agency has been enhanced as they recognize their own expertise and develop confidence in their capacity to generate solutions to the professional issues that they face.

TAs encouraging members to share recent successes and/or engage in teacher research

Another example of a bottom-up initiative is the Success Story Conferences organized in Nepal (Shrestha 2019), with some members of the Nepal English Language Teachers’ Association (NELTA) taking a leading role. Teachers are invited to share what has gone well in their lessons, indicating the steps they followed and reporting on learners’ responses. Thus, the conferences highlight examples of teachers successfully coping with their challenges rather than offering ideal views of how teachers ‘should’ be teaching. Countering a deficit view of teaching, they strengthen the realization that context-sensitive strategies developed by teachers themselves can be effective and relevant to them and their students (Shrestha 2019). Thus, sharing local success stories can provide a sound basis for nurturing and disseminating good practice in dealing with local challenges, and TAs can offer a non-hierarchical environment in which this can happen.

In another example, AINET (India) organizes cycles of inquiry within its ongoing Teacher Research Initiative (TRI). Teachers are supported to carry out systematic exploratory action research in order to address their practical concerns, deepening their understanding of issues and working out practical ways of addressing them. In these TRI cycles, it is the

teachers themselves who take responsibility for understanding and solving their problems, as against the more widely prevalent practice of depending on ‘expert advice’ or ‘expert solutions’ (Padwad 2018). Similar teacher-research-based initiatives have arisen in several other settings, including APIBA’s Teacher Research Special Interest Group (Argentina), CAMELTA Research Group (Cameroon), Africa ELTA, and RICELT (an informal community of Chilean teachers constituted independently of existing educational structures which promotes research into locally important issues (RICELT 2019)).

TAs researching the needs and/or capabilities of their members

Research by TAs themselves has also been shown to play a constructive role in developing local expertise and contextually appropriate responses to language education challenges. Two examples from Cameroon highlight the value of TAs setting their own research agendas and working collaboratively to identify and explore problems and seek solutions. The CAMELTA Teacher Association Research project (Smith and Kuchah 2016) and CAMELTA Research Group activities (Ekembe and Fonjong 2018) show how a TA’s inquiry into the priorities of its members via open-ended questionnaires led to an inventory of research areas and questions. These were subsequently explored by a group of members interested in collaborative classroom research to address local classroom challenges and improve student learning. More recently, one of the ten regional chapters of CAMELTA, based in the north-west of Cameroon, has been working to address the needs of teachers and learners in this part of the country, where schools have either been closed or are operating in fear in the context of an armed conflict which has already lasted for four years (Focho and Ndikum 2020). This Hornby-funded project identified social, psychological, and academic challenges and needs from 500 students and 100 teachers by means of questionnaires. On this basis, training modules for teachers were developed which address various topics relating to education in an emergency, supporting the promotion of critical citizenship and social responsibility in a crisis situation.

TA-led decentring contributing to wider change

At a national level, decentring may be engaged in through developing teachers’ identities as speakers and writers. For example, in 2016, FAAPI (Argentinian Federation of Associations of Teachers of English) offered an online academic writing course which provided teachers (both FAAPI members and non-members) with tools and personalized tutoring so that they would feel sufficiently confident to submit an abstract for the annual national conference. The hope was also that some might then submit a related article for the conference proceedings or the *Argentinian Journal of Applied Linguistics*—an open-access journal established by FAAPI in 2013. This writer development project, funded by the Hornby Trust, contributed to an increase of presentation proposals from teachers and teacher educators based in cities usually not represented in the FAAPI conference programme. In addition, the conference proceedings and journal started to feature articles authored by educators based in relatively small teacher education institutions (see also Banegas 2019).

Decentring may also involve developing locally relevant responses to challenges posed by national curriculum policy. Odhiambo (2019)

provides an account of how the TA in Siaya County in Kenya supported teachers in practical ways to address Ministry of Education initiatives on the English literature syllabus and novel test formats. In the latter context, mock examinations for a group of schools, with marking by teachers working collaboratively, helped teachers cope with the new test format: this local TA initiative involved securing the agreement of schools, teachers, and students and their families, and led to effective implementation of a Ministry of Education innovation in ways the Ministry itself could not deliver.

In Guinea-Bissau, a new secondary English curriculum has been largely written by core members of the TA. Entailing the use of new materials and resources, it has posed challenges for teachers and learners which ELTA-GB has been helping to overcome via local CoP meetings. Discussions at these meetings and via a national WhatsApp group helps provide context-relevant support for the challenges that teachers face, and the experience of actively participating is reported to develop teachers' confidence in their own problem-solving capacities at the same time as informing further curriculum renewal.

'Decentring' problematized

As these cases show, TAs can play a leading role as agents of what might be termed 'decentred' change, and one aim of this article is to disseminate these cases as examples that leaders of other TAs might wish to follow. The examples—and the categories of decentring activity we have identified—could, equally, stimulate TA leaders and members to develop their own ways of: engaging in localization/devolution; encouraging members to share recent successes; supporting them to carry out teacher research; investigating the needs and/or capabilities of members; and/or attempting to bring about wider change—these being the main ways we have seen decentring ELT occurring in actual TA practice.

However, another aim of our overall activities to date has been to invite critical appraisal and to further develop the notion of 'decentring' in ELT. In other words, rather than simply ourselves asserting the value of decentring, we have continuously attempted to gather feedback on this notion from TA leaders and members, in parallel with describing what it might involve in practice.³ In this final section, we quote from and discuss some of the more thought-provoking feedback we have received, not in order to generalize about TA perceptions but to indicate some ways in which the notion of decentring might need to be problematized and further developed in the future.

Following formulation of the provisional characterization of decentring ELT which heads this article, we circulated the statement to those who had attended the ELT Forum and to some other TA leaders as well as former Hornby scholars, together with brief summaries of the cases presented above. While those who responded consistently reported that the statement we had circulated made sense and resonated with them, they also suggested some modifications and additions, raised questions, and highlighted complexities with regard to several notions. For example, some further examples of representatives of 'the centre' were suggested for addition to those implied in our own statement, including 'academia',

‘Ministries of Education’, ‘big publishing houses’, ‘the capital [city]’, and, quite frequently, ‘TA leadership’ and ‘male control’. In other words, according to these views, the centre needing to be decentred can be, sometimes, a local one.

Indeed, the nature of the insider/outsider distinction in our statement was questioned by some. It seems that local centres may be bolstered by buying into global ideas, or indigenous forms of centring may develop. The ‘outsider’ is not just the native speaker, nor the ‘insider’ necessarily the local expert: ‘Illustrations of centring can be found not just in “frames of action” borrowed from contexts outside the country, but from within home structures’ (TA leader, India). Various examples of dominating outsider frames for action were offered, generally pertaining to textbooks and materials; teacher training/education; native-speakerism; methodological approaches (e.g. CLT and new forms of assessment); policy decisions (e.g. curriculum reform); and the introduction of English medium instruction: ‘Projects initiated by the experts from the “centre” fail because they have not taken into consideration local realities’ (former Hornby scholar, Rwanda). However, outsider perspectives are not necessarily to be rejected. For example: ‘I have seen that a native speaker, considered as outsider, is more ready to listen to the voice of the real practitioners than an “insider” who ... does not know real classroom context’ (former Hornby scholar, India).

Clearly, then, the notion of ‘insider expertise’ in our initial statement may need to be considered further. While agreeing overall that this should be respected, ‘rescued’ (TA member, Argentina), or ‘rehabilitated’ (TA leader, India), some of the feedback we received highlighted that the expertise needs to be there in the first place and/or needs to be recognized by those who hold it. On the one hand, it perhaps cannot always be assumed that local expertise already exists and simply needs to be recognized/used, or that TAs or teachers are fully aware of what local expertise is available and how it could be utilized, or that all local expertise is essentially appropriate and adequate to address local concerns and needs. On the other hand, for some, the crux of the decentring issue is a change in mindset: ‘We need to change the mindset first (“everything foreign or imported is better than local!”), and then improve teacher capacity’ (TA leader, Pakistan). Changing mindsets can, then, over time and with repeated opportunities for awareness-raising via discussion, debate, and exemplification, lead teachers to develop confidence in their capacity to establish locally appropriate classroom practice: ‘These [case study] examples show that when voices from the margins or from non-powerful stakeholders are heard, they trigger a chain of reactions. ... The ripple effect allows such good practices to reach the unreached and the unheard, and open up the stage for more participation’ (TA leader, India). Decentring initiatives may therefore need to begin by making efforts to *map* the local expertise that actually does exist, and TAs can play an active, constructive part in further developing it.

Thus, early feedback, as reported above, indicates that ‘decentring’ may be considered a worthwhile goal and that TAs can be a key means for taking it forward, where this is considered appropriate. However, ‘the

centre' might need to be considered a multifaceted and shifting notion that reflects the prevailing politics of power, be this global or local. For example, promoting marginalized groups within TA leaderships themselves (with a particular focus on gender) emerged strongly as a desirable goal in some comments received: e.g. 'In TAs often leaders are the centre and other members feel marginalised, especially women in some cultures. They suffer the consequences of that double hegemony' (Africa ELTA webinar participant, Senegal). Thus, it may be useful for TAs to consider their own leadership structures from a decentring perspective. Along similar lines, one premise of this article—that an organization such as the Hornby Trust can 'do good' by highlighting the value of decentring and by funding local initiatives—is equally in need of self-critique. Perhaps, as one respondent put it, there is a need to 'demolish the very notion of "doing something" for decentring and take the ecological approach ... [since] the present discourse of decentring ... is again a part of centring process' (TA leader, India). In the light of this kind of comment, we acknowledge that our role in furthering the Decentring ELT initiative can be critiqued, and that we need to be constantly vigilant regarding control of related activity. From this perspective, the second paragraph of our provisional characterization above now seems to us problematic in that it overemphasizes outside agency ('Work needs to be put into ...'). and questionably tends to imply that empowerment is to be achieved more through outside influence than through teachers' own activity.

Indeed, there are further aspects of our initial statement that we would now wish to modify, including, perhaps, 'Decentring ELT is not about proposing ... changes in education policy.' In the light of the ELTA-GB experience reported above, it now seems to us more feasible than we had originally thought that TAs can contribute in a bottom-up manner to policy formulation. However, rather than presenting a revised characterization of decentring ELT, we have decided instead to acknowledge that definition and interpretation of this notion are open to continuing discussion and should not be our prerogative alone. Accordingly, we aim to support further attempts to interpret and exemplify the notion of decentring ELT in coming years, and offer this article as a stimulus for such work rather than as any kind of final word on the issue.

Conclusion

We have shown in this article how some TAs engage in forms of decentring activity, providing English language teachers with opportunities to identify good practices and/or confronting 'ideal' notions from elsewhere with the perceptions and realities of teachers working in local contexts. Through our involvement with the Decentring ELT initiative, we have developed a better appreciation of the practical value of recognizing and building on the existing work of teachers, who through collaboration can themselves identify ways to improve the learning experience of their students. TAs may be particularly well placed to lead on such collaborative projects; they can provide both listening and learning forums, and a lens through which local expertise and practice can be extended and made more widely visible. We hope that others will build on the notion of decentring ELT presented here and take this forward

in ways that seem locally appropriate to them (for one recent example, see [Lehjef 2020](#)). At the same time, we have become more aware of the need to be vigilant and self-critical regarding our own activities, bearing in mind the possibility that renewed centring can be carried out in the guise of decentring, even when the focus, as here, is on mapping existing practice rather than on instigating new activity. Along the same lines, we acknowledge that TAs and agencies such as the Hornby Trust can themselves be promoters of centred thinking, and this, too, highlights the importance of continuing internal critique and problematization of the kind emphasized in the final part of this article.

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Notes

- 1 For further background to the original intentions of the Hornby Trust's Decentring ELT initiative and explanation of its initial focus on TAs, see this blog post: accessed October 15, 2021, <https://richardsmithelt.wordpress.com/2018/08/28/decentring-elt/>
- 2 The authors together constitute the Hornby Trust's Decentring ELT committee (2018–20), three of them being former Hornby scholars (Banegas, Kuchah, and Padwad) and three of them Trustees (Kiely, Smith, and Wedell). Deborah Bullock also contributed during 2020 to the research and writing for this article. We acknowledge a need to further diversify representation within this group, and are working to achieve this.
- 3 For example, from 2018 Hornby ELT Forum participants, current and former Hornby scholars around the world, selected TA leaders we have been in contact with, some individual members of the FAAPI (Argentina) and AINET (India) TAs, and participants in a series of webinar discussions—the Africa ELTA Decentring ELT Webinar series (available on the Africa ELTA YouTube channel). No claim is being made here that this was systematic or generalizable research, simply that some of the opinions expressed provide useful pointers to further critical reflection on the notion of 'decentring ELT', as indicated in this section.

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