

Review of *Decentring ELT: Practices and possibilities*, edited by Amol Padwad and Richard Smith (2023). AINET & A.S. Hornby Educational Trust, 88pp. ISBN 978-81-930684-4-1 (digital).

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The Decentring ELT (English language teaching) initiative was started by Hornby Trustees in 2018. It aims to “value and develop local expertise” (P. 4) by “identifying, publicizing, and supporting ways” (Banegas et al., 2022, p. 69) that English language teachers, educators, and teacher associations (TAs) in relatively low-resource contexts work for context-sensitive strategies. This book edited by Amol Padwad and Richard Smith shows a cycle of work on clarifying the notion of decentring ELT, serving as a launching platform for the continuous future work in this area. The important role of TAs in promoting the Decentring ELT initiative has been highlighted as case studies of such an endeavour in this book.

The book consists of an introduction and nine chapters. It opens with a brief introduction of the Decentring ELT initiative and clarifies its goal- “to deepen understanding and spread awareness of the potential of decentring ELT” (p. 1). The contents of each chapter indicate the significance of the book- “a launch-pad” (p. 2) to clarify the notion of decentring ELT. Following the introduction, this book presents a report of the Decentring ELT initiative in chronological order by illustrating the details of the initiative from 2018 to 2022. The major events of this timeline are illustrated in different chapters of the book as follows:

- 2018 The initiative was started by Hornby Trustees (Chapter 1).
- 2019 (April) The Hornby ELT forum brought together TA representatives to discuss the concept of decentring ELT based on illustrative case studies from different TAs (Chapter 1).
- 2019 A *provisional characterization of Decentring ELT* was formulated (Chapter 1).
- 2020 A limited consultation was held to seek feedback on the above provision by using brief, open-ended questionnaires (Chapter 2).
- 2020 (June) A series of four weekly seminars (also the Africa ELTA Decentring ELT Webinar Series) was held to unpack and illustrate the notion of decentring ELT among TA leaders of recent projects and initiatives (Chapter 2).
- 2020 (August) Data collected from 26 questionnaire answers and the webinar discussions were thematically analysed and summarized as feedback on the provisional characterization of decentring ELT (Chapter 2).
- 2021 A finalization of an article for publication in *ELT Journal: Decentring ELT: Teacher associations as agents of change* (Banegas et al., 2022), describing and publicizing some case studies by TAs (Chapter 3) and to provoke further critical reflection on decentring ELT (Chapter 3 & 4).
- 2021 (December) *The Decentring ELT: Challenges and opportunities* Conference was held to deepen understanding, spreading the awareness of the potential value of decentring ELT, and

developing new perspectives in this area (Chapter 4). A wider perspective (Chapter 5) and further consultation (Chapter 6) was sought during the conference.

- 2022 A revised characterization of Decentring ELT was agreed by the Hornby Trust's Decentring work group (Chapter 7).

The chronological timeline of this book enables readers to follow the history of conceptualizing decentring ELT in the easiest way possible, but also proves the best way to show the intricacies and significance of carrying out such an initiative. Chapter 8 lists some questions to prompt further reflection and discussion on the topic of Decentring ELT by emphasizing the notion of being “fluid and open to discussion and questioning” (p. 83). Chapter 9 reiterates this point by stating that the characterization of decentring ELT is “still, indeed continuously, open to modification” (p. 85) and thus the need for ongoing self-critique. The chapter also links the Decentring ELT initiative to some popular theoretical trends in current academic discussion. Additionally, this chapter emphasizes the roots of decentring ELT in “long-standing experience, practical work and critiques” (p. 84), its value in practice and thus the significance of making this as a goal to fulfil in ELT. The book concludes with some ideas on future directions for the Decentring ELT initiative, particularly in pre-service and in-service teacher education.

In Chapter 2, the initial consultation for the initiative highlighted several notions associated with the provisional characterization of decentring ELT. Among these, the notion of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ caught my attention. The data suggest that in decentring ELT, there is no clear-cut difference between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’, considering the global ideas, and it is not necessarily to reject all outsider perspectives, given that some outsiders may also contribute to the decentring agenda.

In the process of promoting the Decentring initiative, it is worth being vigilant regarding the potential danger of practicing the extreme notion of decentring, denying/rejecting all the outside expertise. In other words, the act of ‘throwing the baby out with the bathwater’ should be avoided. For example, on page 13, one of the respondents’ quotes to indicate the value or significance of TA initiatives goes like this: *do not come from outsiders; they are pure initiatives from local needs*. Indeed, successful local initiatives should be celebrated in the course of decentring ELT. However, the value of decentring does not lie in being purely local. Instead, the value should be emphasized as appropriate local solutions, being suitable for local situations and beneficial to the overall local ELT development, preferably being initiated by locals but outside/global expertise is always welcome whenever necessary and beneficial.

For those who consider the concept of Decentring ELT too abstract to understand, Chapter 3 offers the best first encounter of this notion. The provisional characterization of decentring ELT is elaborated by eight detailed cases from Tas across the world and manifested in context-specific and concrete examples. The examples clearly indicate that the work with decentring is “grounded in knowledge of actual practice rather than just being theoretical or programmatic” (p. 17). Most of the case studies are about enacting teacher agency and enhancing teacher capacity for teaching agendas, including developing a national curriculum, and/or context-relevant/contextually appropriate materials, solving local classroom challenges and sharing best practices. Nevertheless, the initiatives also help to build teachers’ own strengths and increase their professional engagement. One case study that comes as unexpected for me is from AINET, which describes a unique journey of ELT teachers transforming into social media managers for the growth of this TA. Although it is an applaudable effort to prove that teachers are more than just teachers and they are capable enough to venture beyond their teaching work, I have some reservations about the appropriateness of presenting this as an example of decentring ELT. Personally, this example seems more like an attempt to decentre social media management, employing ELT teachers’ expertise and talent in this field instead of relying on professional service providers. Arguably, as the example shows, the ELT teachers’ act contributed to the growth of the TA, attracting a wider audience in ELT. However, decentring does not necessarily result in a larger number of audiences, and this does not change the fact that the example may impress some readers, including me, as a case of decentring something else rather than ELT. Having said that, this is an undeniably interesting case to learn from, especially regarding how

local TAs could promote themselves on social media by employing their tech-savvy and media-savvy teacher members.

TAs, when characterized by voluntary participation, are believed to be a community-based site for sustainable decentring activities. Chapter 3 of the Decentring ELT book also includes case studies of how local communities of practice (CoPs) have been created and implemented by TAs to cope with local difficulties, (including the lack of resources, funding, and facilities) and to enable teachers to exchange best practices, to work out local solutions collegially and to ultimately develop themselves professionally. The TAS' efforts, though identified as case studies of decentring ELT, echo a relatively long-standing international trend for pursuing sustainable teacher development project. Endeavours in this regard like CoPs depicted in this book include Teacher Activity Groups (TAGs) implemented by the British Council in partnership with education authorities in local countries (Borg et al., 2020) as well as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in various parts of the world. Take China as an example, PLCs are thriving even in Gansu, one of its most resource-constrained provinces (Sargent & Hannum, 2009). Although the term PLC is not widely used in China, teachers have been practicing it for a long time (Paine & Ma, 1993; Qian & Walker, 2021). From this perspective, the ideas and practices of decentring ELT are not something new, just as the authors of this book point out, maybe it is just a new "label" (p. 84).

The value of this book lies in its efforts to conceptualize the notion of decentring ELT, making the invisible visible and the unspoken concrete. The book fills a lacuna in literature of acknowledging local expertise and highlighting the significance of local expertise in local ELT development. It achieves such an aim by summarizing the efforts as a concrete term- Decentring ELT, which has been fairly justified by an international initiative with global impact in this book. Therefore, I believe this book will prove useful for English teachers around the world, particularly in difficult working conditions. It would be helpful for these teachers to gain confidence of their local expertise and enact their agency in response to contextual needs. It will also support language teacher educators, teacher associations and educational authorities in various countries to gain insights into in a more sustainable and empowering way for teachers' professional development. The ideas and practices of decentring ELT are there and will be more with such a global initiative to raise the awareness of its benefits., I am looking forward to many more interesting discussions on the notion of decentring ELT as well as a variety of examples, perhaps not limited to the countries and areas mentioned in this book.

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About the author

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