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Language and Integration of Refugee Children: Reflections on Delinking and Decoloniality

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In this contribution we illustrate and discuss the decolonial approach adopted in a research project exploring the potential of including in education a language spoken by children and families from refugee backgrounds. The international project team from Palestine and the UK collaboratively designed a bespoke Levantine Arabic language course for beginners tailored to the needs identified by primary school staff, Arabic speaking pupils from refugee backgrounds, and their parents/carers. The course was offered to primary school staff in Scotland, enabling them to offer “linguistic hospitality” (Phipps, 2012) to Arabic speaking pupils and families. By delinking common assumptions and norms about language teaching/learning, the project strived to change the terms and the content of the conversation, unlocking possibilities for thinking and doing otherwise (Mignolo, 2007, 2018). In particular, the study questioned: who should be learning a language in an educational context; the teaching of the standard version of a language; expectations of expertise in educational settings; and the knowledge flow in international research with partners in Global South countries.

INTRODUCTION

Delinking is a crucial element in the decolonial agenda (Mignolo, 2007, 2018) and one that requires “[...] chang[ing] the terms in addition to the content of the conversation” (Mignolo, 2007, p. 459). Decolonial undertakings in educational contexts usually concentrate on changing the content, since this is easier to achieve without substantial alterations to established practices. However, changes in the content - while important - are not sufficient, and delinking needs to also address the ways in which we approach and we *do* knowledge, that is, it requires a rethinking of the expectations that underpin the whole conversation, to “[...] reorient our human communal praxis of living” (Mignolo, 2018, p. 106). In other words, in order to decolonise, we need to make room for content that includes non-Western thinking but – crucially – we also need to unmoor the ways in which we *do* knowledge from the assumptions and practices to which they have, so far, remained tied and which have been shaped, historically, to reproduce hierarchies and inequalities.

This article discusses the Welcoming Languages (WLs) project, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (Funding ref n. AH/W006030/1) between January 2022 and January 2023. It focuses specifically on the delinking that was embedded in the project’s design, including aims, objectives and process. The main aim of the project was to explore the potential for inclusion in Scottish education of a language spoken by children and families from refugee backgrounds (who we call here New Scots) to enact the principle of integration as a two-way process that is at the heart of the *New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy* (Scottish Government, 2018; henceforth the *Strategy*). The WLs project did this by offering a tailored online Arabic

language course to education staff in Scottish primary schools. We chose Arabic as the language to be taught as part of the project for two reasons: (1) it is the language spoken by over 6,000 pupils who attend Scottish schools (Scottish Government, 2023) and by their families, including many who arrived through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (UK Government, 2021); (2) Arabic was the language for which the international project team has a long history of collaboration, having previously designed collaboratively an online Arabic course for beginners (see Fassetta et al., 2017; Fassetta et al., 2020) on which the WLs project could build.

The WLs project was designed and carried out by an international team based at the School of Education of the University of Glasgow (Scotland) and at the Arabic Center of the Islamic University of Gaza (Palestine). It started from the premise that, by learning language specific to a primary school setting, education staff can make Arabic speaking children and their parents/carers feel welcome, help them to see that their language is valued and that staff in their school are willing to make the effort of moving towards them linguistically. We thus hoped to delink the languages spoken by New Scots from a “deficit perspective” (Cummins, 1984) that still informs policies and practices for this group of learners, and instead recognise and valorise their “language plenty” (Frimberger, 2016).

Throughout, the project strived to move towards a decolonial horizon through a process of delinking, which it pursued in several ways. Firstly, it challenged the expectation that it is the sole duty and responsibility of New Scots to learn a language (i.e., English). This meant delinking the role of languages in Scottish education from the unquestioned teaching of the national/majority language(s) with the addition of a few, standardised named languages, mostly European. Secondly, by grounding the course content on the language ecologies of Scottish primary schools, the project delinked language learning as accumulation of a pre-packaged object/system to be “had” to one that focuses on the “analyses of local language practices and assemblages” (Pennycook, 2019, p.180). Thirdly, the team made the deliberate (and deliberated) choice of teaching the Levantine Arabic dialect spoken by many New Scots, rather than opting for the standard variety of the language. This meant delinking the target language from the colonial assumption that official, standardised varieties of a language have higher status, and thus are more worthy of being taught/learnt (Macedo, 2019). It also delinked from existing practices and assumptions within the field of teaching Arabic as a foreign language, where usually the standard variety is the one that foreign people should learn. Fourthly, the project engaged with adults in a relative position of power (as staff in a crucial public service) and adopted a whole school approach, rather than offer language to children, thus delinking language learning in a school setting as something that children and young people do. Finally, by drawing on the crucial expertise of the Palestinian members of the team, who took leadership in developing and delivering the Arabic course, the WLs project delinked international research with Low- or Middle-Income Countries (LMIC) from common assumptions around who has needs and who provides solutions (Fassetta & Imperiale, 2021).

In this article, we discuss the delinking that was at the heart of the WLs project without claiming that this constitutes decolonizing work, nor that it was a decolonial undertaking, but rather offering it as a contribution that *moves in the direction of* a decolonial horizon. We offer this in the spirit of collective thinking and doing which Haraway (1994) likens to the children’s game of Cat’s Cradle. This involves the looping of string around fingers to make complex shapes, which get passed between players, for each to make their own configuration. We wish here to

take on the “thinking shapes” others made before us and to assemble our own formation, which we intend to pass on to others to take forward.

Before we start, however, we must acknowledge that we are writing this article from the perspective of white, European academics who have been thinking, discussing and writing on decoloniality for several years, as part of joint research projects and shared teaching. Articles on the project co-authored with IUG partners have already been published (see Imperiale et al., 2023; Fassetta et al., 2023). Two further articles, led by IUG partners, on designing a Levantine Arabic course and online language teaching from a context of protracted crisis are forthcoming.

Decolonizing, Decoloniality and Delinking

As noted above, the task of delinking requires changing the rules of the game by disrupting assumptions of how things are done, but also the assumptions that lie behind these assumptions. The challenge is that of “thinking and doing otherwise” (Mignolo, 2018, p. 13) and this implies letting go of the safety of the known and of the tried-and-tested, to embrace possibility, but also its counterpart: uncertainty. As Haraway (2019) contends, “it matters what thoughts think thoughts, what stories tell stories, what knowledges know knowledges” (p. 570) and the WLs project was an attempt to reflect on languages in education through different thoughts and to change some of the consolidated narratives about language teaching/learning. We are mindful of the importance of treating terms like “decolonial” and “decolonising” with due care and respect, in particular as white scholars from a rich country who benefit from the advantages that this entails.

Already in 2012, Tuck and Yang noted that “[...] the language of decolonization has been superficially adopted into education and other social sciences” (p. 2) and warned that decolonizing “is not a metaphor” but, rather, a crucial matter of resistance, reparation, and restoration for Indigenous people and communities. While, as we illustrate below, ‘decolonizing’ and ‘decolonial’ are separate concepts/practices, they are nevertheless connected, and the risk of subsuming calls for decoloniality into those of social justice in academic discourse is increasingly present, as decolonial approaches “[...] have become a valuable currency within the intellectual, affective, relational, and material economies of mainstream Western educational institutions” (Stein et al., 2020, p. 44). Facile, instrumental claims can end up eclipsing the role and responsibilities of the decolonial project and ensure that colonial business can continue as usual (Stein et al., 2020.).

As Maldonado-Torres (2007) points out, colonialism and coloniality are connected but different concepts. While colonialism refers to the political and economic apparatus of subjugation through which peoples and resources were exploited by colonial powers, coloniality refers to the effects of this apparatus on elements like culture, relations and knowledge production, effects that endure long after colonialism has ended. Coloniality thus is maintained through education, books, criteria for academic performance, and many other day-to-day aspects of experience (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). These (re)produce the idea that what is outside the Eurocentric sphere of knowledge is inferior or insignificant, if not even dangerous (Santos, 2021). Decoloniality, consequently, requires not just decolonization – i.e., the undoing of structures of dominance and of social and political influence – but also the dismantling of the subjugation of local knowledges, what Quijano (cited in Mignolo, 2012) called

“epistemological decolonization” (p. 24).

The decolonial work, argues Mignolo (2007, 2012, 2018), requires delinking, that is, the deliberate uncoupling of knowledge and knowledge-making from the narratives of Western modernity that are grounded, among other assumptions, on a pursuit of endless progress; the idea of linear time; secularisation and the primacy of scientific thought. This act of delinking and deliberate unmooring can unlock possibilities for new configurations of understandings that move away from the claim to universality of western scientific thought and, rather, embrace “pluriversality” (Mignolo, 2007), opening the doors to “[...] all forms and principles of knowledge that have been colonized, silenced, repressed, and denigrated by the totalitarian march of the genocidal dimension of modernity” (p. 494).

Decoloniality and Delinking in Education

Building on the work of Mignolo, Andreotti (2016) discusses the decolonial project with specific reference to the context of education, highlighting the crucial importance this has in helping students to see and acknowledge the dark side of modernity. The shadow cast by the “shiny” promise of modernity that education needs to confront is the fact that violence, inequality and exploitation are built into (and integral to) the promise of constant progress and growth that is the heart of Western modernity (Andreotti, 2016.). This shadow is misrecognised by most of those who benefit from modernity’s shiny side, so that they can continue believing in its “enchantments” and to feel good about themselves (Mignolo, 2002). However, since inequalities and disadvantage cannot be completely ignored:

the disadvantage of the Other is rationalized as a deficit of knowledge, reason, work ethic, education, civilization, and trustworthiness. While the (universal) self has knowledge and technology, the (local) other has culture, tradition, and beliefs. While the self is represented as superior, developed, civilized, future oriented, global knowledge producers and rights and aid dispensers, the Other is represented as inferior, underdeveloped, uncivilized, traditional, living in the past, and dependent on aid, knowledge, rights, and education handouts. (Andreotti, 2016, p. 313)

The decolonising project requires disrupting these assumptions and giving space to a range of different epistemological and ontological perspectives (Zembylas, 2017) which include those who have been so far dismissed, ignored, marginalised or even violently eradicated (Santos, 2017). Decolonial education can take on different forms on a sliding scale that goes from refusal of all change away from the current, colonial model to “considering possibilities beyond what is currently imaginable and viable within existing institutions” (Stein et al., 2021, p. 15). Many of the in-between options largely keep the education system as it is, with only minor adjustments to ensure greater inclusivity (Andreotti, 2016). However, while inclusion is important, decoloniality is not the same as inclusion since this implies retaining the unequal and unsustainable *status quo* even if making it more accessible to marginalised individuals or groups (Zembylas, 2017). At the same time, as Zembylas (2017) notes, it is also important to move away from a view of decolonial and social justice projects as separate to recognise that, while not always commensurable, many of these projects are very much co-implicated and can

thus work in synergy. All interventions need to be inscribed in the wider context of what is possible and expected and even small steps can represent a move towards challenging coloniality (Stein et al., 2021).

Decoloniality and Delinking in Language Education

In thinking about decoloniality and delinking in the WLs project we engaged with and through the recent work done by our colleagues in Glasgow and other parts of the UK, in particular that of Phipps (2019) on decolonising multilingualism; of Cox et al. (2022) on language learning with refugee women; and of Welply (2023) on decolonising the provision of English as an Additional Language (EAL). As these authors note, with few exceptions (e.g., Welsh or Gaelic), schools in the UK expect children to speak/write in standardised English or to learn to speak/write in it, if this is not the (variety of) language they speak outside of school. This “ideological monolingualism” (Reagan and Osborn, 2019) sees one variety of one language as the norm and everything else as an exception if not as a problem to be fixed, and it belies the messiness and hybridity that characterise the linguistic practices of most learners (but also of many educators). Ideological monolingualism expects that “unruly” linguistic practices will be left at the school gate (Macedo, 2019) or confined to temporary spaces, such as the EAL classroom, where the messiness is allowed for the time takes for it to be eradicated. While multilingualism is officially recognised and celebrated, the one that makes its way into education is a particular type of multilingualism, and not all multilingualism are the same (Blackledge, 2019, p. 434). Both the monolingualism and the multilingualism that are given a place in formal education in the UK assume as normative the learning of the languages (and language varieties) that are spoken by dominant elites. These include the languages that are taught as modern foreign languages, which almost invariably are the ones at the top of a hierarchy of “named,” national languages (Heller, 2007) that are socially or socio-politically shaped, perpetrated and controlled (Otheguy et al., 2015). In the UK, they are usually the languages of western European formal colonial powers, which entered education as the languages of elite “high culture” but also as part of a peace building project at the end of World War One, with the addition of a few other named languages (e.g. Mandarin).

Despite a bias in favour of named languages, an increasing attention to multilingualism “[...] has led to current efforts in [Foreign Language] education to validate the languages the students bring with them to the language classroom by allowing them to switch from one code to another” (Kramsch, 2019, p. 55) that is, to engage in what Garcia (2009) terms “translanguaging.” This represents a step forward towards recognising that children do not learn languages in isolated silos, but constantly move back and forth between the languages they speak, in a messy and organic way (Hornberger & Wang, 2008). Nevertheless, the current situation in UK schools still does not recognise the importance of nurturing pupils’ languages in the school curriculum (Quehl, 2022) and many of the languages that pupils speak are still excluded from education, including those of the New Scots.

New Scots and Scottish Education

Since the year 2000, Scotland has welcomed a large percentage of people seeking refuge in the UK from a range of countries around the world (Wren, 2004). At the end of December 2022, Glasgow was the local authority with the largest number of dispersed asylum seekers (i.e., 4,698

or 70 per 10,000 residents), as it is one of the cities to which people seeking asylum in the UK are dispersed on a no-choice basis. Currently, all Local Authorities in Scotland house people who arrived through the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement (VPR) scheme for Syrian refugees and, more recently, people fleeing war and persecution in other parts of the world, such as the Ukraine and Afghanistan (Migration Scotland, nd). While these are important statistics and figures, we want to add a reminder here that they are a fraction of the statistics and figures for people seeking asylum that countries in the Global South¹ experience, and that most people seeking refuge move south-to-south and settle in countries that neighbour those they left (Nasser-Eddin & Abu-Assab, 2020).

Every year in Scotland schools collect a *Pupil Census* which, while a blunt tool, can help give a general idea of the number of pupils who speak languages other than English at home. According to the Pupil Census, in 2022 a total of 154 different languages were spoken by over 70,000 pupils in Scottish schools (Scottish Government, 2023). The most common home languages - other than English - spoken by pupils were: Polish, Urdu, Scots, Arabic and Punjabi. According to the same Census, Arab was the top ethnicity indicated for pupils with asylum seeking or refugee backgrounds.

Education in Scotland is devolved, meaning that all education matters are regulated by the Scottish parliament. This contrasts with migration, which is a reserved matter, meaning that all legally binding decisions in this area are made by the UK's government. As in the rest of the UK, compulsory education in Scotland is free for all children irrespective of their status, although challenges such as delays in registering children at school and lack of sufficient support for specific needs (including EAL) are not uncommon (Gladwell & Chetwynd, 2018). The *Strategy* (Scottish Government, 2018) is an official document which aims to coordinate the work of organisations and community groups working with people from refugee backgrounds across Scotland. The *Strategy*, which is currently being revised for the third iteration, explicitly states that it is the right of every child of school age, including refugees and asylum seekers, to enter education. Moreover, it stresses that the integration of New Scots starts from day one and requires a two-way process involving “positive change in refugees and host communities, which leads to cohesive, diverse communities” (Scottish Government, 2018, p. 10).

The *Strategy* has been critiqued on several fronts. For example, the distinction between “old” and “new” Scots still replicates a binary us/them division (Phipps et al., 2022). The use of the word “integration” has also been challenged, as this term is too often used as a synonym of “assimilation” (Bowskill et al., 2007). Nevertheless, the *Strategy* clearly and firmly moves in the direction of a more welcoming and positive attitude towards New Scots, one that stands in clear contrast to much of the public discourse in the UK (Phipps et al., 2022). This includes the idea that integration is something that requires change and adaptation not just on the part of the New Scots but also on the part of the receiving communities. This was a crucial point for the WLs project, as we considered to what extent languages are included as part of this two-way process.

As well as on the *Strategy*, the project also drew on the opportunities provided by Scottish language policies for the introduction of a greater number of languages in education and for the recognition of home languages. In 2012, the Scottish Government adopted the *Language Learning in Scotland: A 1+2 Approach*, which sets out the aim to ensure the opportunity to learn a foreign language for all pupils from the start of primary school until the end of compulsory education, as well as the introduction of a second foreign language from the 5th year of primary school onwards. Moreover, Education Scotland (2020) also provides the

Learning in 2+ Languages Resource, which aims to help practitioners working with bilingual learners to support pupils whose first language is not English to access the curriculum. This resource explicitly invites educators to value and promote the many languages “spoken increasingly in communities throughout Scotland” by offering “schools and learners the chance to learn more about their own and other cultures” (Education Scotland, 2020, no page).

THE WLs PROJECT

The main aims of the WLs project were to include Arabic in Scottish education as one of the languages spoken by children and families from refugee backgrounds in order to enact integration as a two-way process; and to provide proof of concept for language diversification in education. To achieve these aims, the WLs pursued the following objectives: (a) develop a course tailor made for primary school staff in Scotland; (b) teach Arabic online to education staff in Scotland; (c) draft policy guidelines on the potential of, and approaches to, the introduction of a language spoken by children and families from refugee backgrounds in Scottish education.

Project Design

To meet the project’s objectives, the WLs project was articulated in four phases. Phase (i) was the language needs analysis, during which staff in partner schools and Arabic speaking parents/carers and children were asked what language they thought we needed to prioritise for the course. The needs analysis identified three main themes around which the course was developed: (a) language for hospitality, which included simple expressions to make Arabic-speaking pupils and families feel welcome; (b) language for wellbeing, which included language to express basic needs, feelings and emotions and to be able to respond to pupils’ needs, especially at times of distress; and (c) language for school, which included instructions, school routine, and simple subject-specific language (for more details see: Imperiale et al., 2023). Phase (ii) was the Arabic language course design, during which the IUG team developed a beginner, 20-hour Arabic course tailored specifically to the needs that had emerged from the language needs analysis. Phase (iii) was the Arabic language teaching, during which staff in four Glasgow primary schools took the course designed during phase (ii) which was taught online by the Arabic Center (IUG) team to individual members of staff or, more often, to pairs. The participating schools were identified by the head of EAL services for Glasgow City Council, who was one of the advisors on the project, on the basis of their high intake of Arabic speaking pupils. Phase (iv) was the project evaluation, during which we collected feedback from primary staff, children, and Arabic course designers/language teachers on the extent to which the project had managed to achieve its aims.

The WLs project adopted a whole school approach, and the opportunity of learning Arabic was made available to all staff in the four participating schools, not just to teachers. While class teachers comprised the largest group of Arabic learners, EAL teachers, management, clerical and support staff also took up the opportunity to learn Arabic. In total, 24 staff started the Arabic course, and 19 staff completed all the 10 units of the course (i.e., 20 hours). The timing of the funding allocation resulted in the project spanning across two school years, and a few staff moved school or experienced timetable clashes after the summer holidays, which meant that they were only able to take the first five units.

METHODOLOGY

The feedback on the project which informs this article was collected through individual/pair interviews (depending on whether they had taken the course individually or in pairs) with 13 participating primary staff; through a focus group with 8 Arabic speaking children; and through individual interviews with the 5 Arabic course designers and teachers.

Semi-structured interviews with staff and Arabic teachers were carried out online, at the end of the last Arabic lesson. The staff were asked to talk about: the positive aspects of being part of the WLS project; the impact this had on them, on Arabic speaking pupils and families and on the wider school community; the challenges experienced; any recommendations they had in relation to the desirability/feasibility of teaching school staff languages spoken by pupils from refugee backgrounds. The focus group with Arabic speaking children was carried out in one of the participating schools with the support of the EAL teacher and with the linguistic mediation of the project's Research Associate, whose first language is Arabic. The children were asked to discuss their feelings in knowing that adults in their school were learning Arabic, and their experiences of helping staff learn. We decided to do this in a group to allow children to build on each other's points and to collectively recount their reflections on the project. The Arabic course designers/teachers were asked to talk about the benefits and challenges of designing a (Levantine) Arabic course tailored to the needs of school staff and about the experience of teaching Arabic online to primary school staff in Scotland. The planned focus group with Arabic speaking parents was not carried out because it coincided with the end of the school year, which meant that school staff – who mediated between the project team and the families – did not have time to organise this at what was a particularly hectic time. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed and analysed thematically.

The project was approved by the College of Social Sciences ethics committee. As required by ethics approval, all participants (staff, children, parents/carers, Arabic course designers/teachers) were fully informed in writing of the aims of the project and what this would entail for them, and all had to sign a consent form which included consent to being audio-recorded. All documents were in plain language and available in English and Arabic. Children were given a child-friendly form (available in English and Arabic) explaining the project. Written consent was obtained from the children's parents/carers and oral assent to taking part and being audio-recorded was also asked from the children prior to starting our conversations. The project resulted in a full project report (in English); a short, child friendly report (available in English and Arabic) which was sent to all participating schools; and a summary report for parents/carers (in Arabic) which was sent to the families via the schools.

DELINKING IN THE WLS PROJECT

As discussed at the start of this article, delinking refers to the process of “de-naturaliz[ing] concepts and conceptual fields that totalize A reality” (Mignolo, 2007, p. 459, upper case in the original) as the only possible one. Delinking requires an epistemic shift that unlocks a range of different concepts and conceptual fields, a shift that can lead to pluri-versality as a universal project (Mignolo, 2007). The WLS attempted to de-naturalise language in education and

research on languages by: A) questioning roles, and who should be learning a language in a context of migration; B) questioning the teaching of a standard language; C) questioning expectations of expertise; and D) questioning the knowledge flow, and who holds needs and expertise in international research with partners in LMIC countries. Below we illustrate and discuss in greater detail each of these instances of delinking in the WLs project.

A. Questioning Roles

We talked earlier about the emphasis put by the *Strategy* on integration as a two-way process. However, when it comes to languages, the process looks very much one-way, and New Scot children and families are expected to adapt to what Reagan and Osborn (2019) call “ideological monolingualism.” Ideological (normative) monolingualism does not reflect the reality of most people’s linguistic practices (García, 2019) but even less so those of children and families who move to seek refuge to the UK. Regardless, monolingual education still cultivates a “subtractive bilingualism” as it works to facilitate a switch to a dominant named language other than the learner’s ‘first’ language (García, 2019). Education is, thus, a crucial space for taming linguistic messiness and training all children to use a country’s named language, in particular children who, for whatever reason, speak a different language (or language variety) at home. Other languages are taught (by adults) and learnt (by children) at school, but these are, by and large, confined to a small number of European named, standardised languages.

The WLs project delinked the expectation that language learning in primary education is what children need to do by teaching the language spoken by pupils to staff in primary schools, rather than to children. As one of the main services that New Scot parents/carers access, moreover, schools and educators are a point of reference for both children and families, part of a public service and, thus, in a relative position of power within the receiving society (Sime et al., 2018) which meant that teaching staff had a deep symbolic dimension. Thus, the WLs project delinked the expectation that learning is (solely) something New Scot pupils (and their families) need to do, while education staff hold the keys to knowledge and expertise. This helped us to explore ways to create welcome through language that better reflect the two-way process of integration the *Strategy* promotes, something that was recognised by some of the primary staff such as S. (a class teacher), who talked about the importance of sharing in the responsibility of ensuring communication:

If we are going to keep including Arabic children in the school, we are going to have to be able to speak to them. It’s not just up to them to learn English, but if we can learn... just what we’ve learnt, just to show that we are making an effort as well, I think it’s really important.

This comment is in sharp contrast to public narratives about the need for migrants to learn English to demonstrate their willingness to integrate – narratives which often disguise prejudice towards specific groups of migrants (Cameron, 2012) – and rather acknowledges that communication requires effort by all involved, and that the symbolic dimensions of the hospitality and welcoming that this effort demonstrates holds huge value. Similarly, G. (a headteacher) stressed the importance of showing reciprocity in language learning, recognising that even though the course would not allow staff to become proficient in Arabic, this did not diminish the crucial importance of making ‘the same effort’:

I think again it's not a sense of 'Well, I can speak Arabic fluently', cause 100% I can't, but it's... it's more just kind of building a bond with parents, to know that actually we're making an effort. They're making an effort to learn English, but also we're making it the same effort to make them feel part of the school community so yeah that's good. Really helpful.

The considerations made by these two primary staff echo those made by some linguists when discussing decoloniality in foreign language education (e.g., Kramersch, 2019; Reagan & Osborn, 2019) as they delink language learning from proficiency as the main goal. While proficiency can be achieved, and language programmes can focus on proficiency in a specific language, language programmes can also focus on the “education of the person” (Reagan & Osborn, 2019). Language education, in this case, aims to achieve “[...] a broad understanding of the linguistic, social, political and historical aspects of human language and language diversity rather than actual fluency in a second language” (Reagan & Osborn, 2019, p. 95), allowing learners to challenge monolingual ideologies and also to question linguistic hierarchies and the power dynamics they rely on.

While reflecting on who should make the effort to learn a language was an outcome of the WLS for staff in Scottish primary schools, learning Arabic also facilitated moments where the staff used Arabic with all children through mini-Arabic lessons or by practicing their learning in front of the whole class. This meant making space for a home language in the classroom, and the importance of this did not escape the Arabic speaking children, as S. (Arabic speaking pupil) notes:

[My teacher has been learning] like, the numbers, in Arabic... then everyone... then the teacher said everyone, all the class, say the numbers in Arabic, up to ten!

A further, and unplanned, outcome of delinking the role of the learner from the expectation that children learn and adults teach was how educators were able to model “failure” as a crucial step in the (language) learning process. This was articulated by C. (subject lead) when they noted that:

It's all about building confidence in [pupils] to have a go and make mistakes and that that it's not the end of the world if they don't pronounce a word right, because it happens all the time. [...] That was really interesting as well, actually to kind of show them my perspective of learning a new language and how everyone just kind of have a go, not only with Arabic, with all the things that we learned in this school.

Several other primary staff discussed the importance of practicing Arabic without hiding their struggle with the language and recognised the pedagogical value of allowing the children to see them making mistakes. This echoes hooks's (1994) point that:

[A] holistic model of learning will also be a place where teachers grow, and are empowered by the process. That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks... In my classrooms, I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I

would not share (p. 21)

Questioning who should be a language learner by offering primary school staff the opportunity to learn Arabic thus allowed teachers to reflect on the role that making mistakes was playing in their learning process; to realise the importance of engaging with their own vulnerability as a way to understand the challenges New Scots experience; and as a pedagogical strategy to help all pupils recognise that making mistakes is a necessary aspect of (language) learning, allowing themselves to share some of the risks their pupils are expected to take. This was a crucial educational point for all pupils, regardless of their linguistic background, which the staff were keen to stress, together with the realisation that their learning Arabic had actually meant an increased curiosity on the part of all pupils towards Arabic and towards other languages spoken in the schools (see Fassetta et al., 2023).

B. Questioning the Teaching of a Standard Language

As discussed in the section on decoloniality and delinking in language teaching/learning, education privileges the teaching of standardised, named languages. However, Arabic consists of a range of standard, classical, and colloquial varieties (Badawī, 1973; Ramezanzadeh, 2021) which can be quite different according to the geographical contexts of the speakers but that also change within contexts (e.g. in relation to specific location, social class, education, profession, age, etc.) resulting in different dialects (Elnagar et al., 2021). While classical Arabic is the language of the Quran and is therefore usually taught in faith schools, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) does not have any true native speakers, and is generally used only in public and official spaces such as the news, Higher Education, official websites, etc (van Putten, 2020). Many teachers of Arabic now recognise the importance of colloquial varieties, and a greater number of recent textbooks tries to break down the hierarchy which sees MSA as more desirable than colloquial varieties of Arabic (Columbu, 2021). However, MSA is still the variety usually taught in schools in the Arabic speaking world as it is seen as more prestigious (Soliman and Khalil, 2022) and as a ‘lingua franca’ that can allow communication across varieties for official purposes (Elnagar et al., 2021).

At the first stages of the WLs project, we decided to delink the language of the course from the assumption that we would design a course in MSA and, instead, we collected feedback from the Arabic speaking parents/carers about which variety of Arabic we should teach to Scottish staff. The parents/carers did not reach consensus and, although several indicated that MSA should be taught, the most common point was precisely the need for awareness about the difference between colloquial varieties of Arabic, and concern that this would confuse Scottish educators. Further discussion followed among the project team in Glasgow and Palestine, to decide which variety of Arabic to teach. We settled on Levantine Arabic for the course, with a few caveats. The first one was that the Palestinian team would select Levantine Arabic words that are more closely related to the MSA variety and also, wherever possible, more similar across different varieties of colloquial Arabic. The second was to build awareness about the different varieties of Arabic at the very start of the course, and to teach staff language that would help them expand their vocabulary with the children’s help (see next sub-section for more on this point).

While a very small number of primary staff were already aware of the complex landscape of the Arabic language, many assumed it to be a singular and (relatively) homogeneous

language, in line with the invented idea of language purity we discussed earlier. Learning about difference between and within different varieties of Arabic helped staff to move beyond the generic “Arabic speaker” label to see New Scots children and families in a more nuanced way. Several of the primary staff recognised that being part of the project had helped them to redress some of their assumptions in relation to Arabic. For example, K. (a class teacher) reflected on the discovery that Arabic is not one language, but that communication is still possible:

We sit with the children and go through the stuff... sometimes they laugh. They kept correcting me, I've got it wrong... and there's lots of dialects as well, so we may say something, and we can see that they are a bit puzzled and maybe then make the connection.

For several staff, learning Arabic meant a process of reflection on pupils' home languages, on the diversity of the languages they speak, the difficulties they may experience when learning English, and other considerations beyond the linguistic items they were learning for practical, communicative purposes. This was picked up also by N., one of the Arabic speaking children:

I was happy because I want the teacher to, like, learn another language... Not just her language. To, like, learn about the Arabic language.

The fact that her teacher was also learning about Arabic arguably is, for N., as important as learning the language itself, as it demonstrated curiosity about the language on the staff's part, and a willingness to know more about it. As all the children told us, helping staff in their school practice Arabic was a source of great pleasure and pride for them, and putting the primary staff in the position of learning a language spoken by some of their pupils (and families) was a further way to delink expectations about who holds expertise, as we discuss next.

C. Questioning Expectations of Expertise

From the very start, the WLs project set out to engage primary staff in Scottish schools as learners, and Arabic speaking children and families as the experts on the language they were going to learn/hear. We did not want to make any assumptions about the language needs of the adults and children involved in the project, and thus asked them what we should teach in the Arabic course. This recognised that languages are not pre-packaged objects to be had but rather a set of practices, something we do (García; 2019; Pennycook, 2019), and ensured that the practices and activities the staff and pupils anticipated themselves doing with/in Arabic were the ones to guide the design of the course. As noted in the section on the project design, the language needs identified by staff, pupils and parents/carers were grouped into three main themes, around which the course was designed. These were: (a) language for hospitality; (b) language for wellbeing; (c) language for school (see: Imperiale et al., 2023). The Levantine Arabic course included also, from the very start, the language needed for primary staff to independently ‘unlock’ further learning (e.g., What is this? How do you say x in Arabic?) by engaging with Arabic speaking pupils and parents/carers.

Practice with pupils and parents/carers was built into the course's activities as a way to facilitate an understanding of the difference between the different colloquial forms of Arabic

the pupils spoke (while the majority were from Syria and spoke Levantine Arabic, there were also children from countries with rather different varieties, such as Yemen, Algeria, Sudan). It was also, crucially, a way to valorise the linguistic competence the children have, delinking the view of children who do not speak English (proficiently) from the deficit perspective that still largely informs language provision for New Scots, both children and adults (Frimberger, 2016; Cox et al., 2022). Putting the children in the position of the language expert was something that, as noted earlier, the Arabic speaking children enjoyed very much, but it was also a new perspective for the staff learning Arabic, as M. (a class teacher) noted:

They are very excited about it, they love to be asked. Before this I would never have said to children in my class ‘How do you say this in Arabic’, I just wouldn’t, and now I do. Even just out of interest, and they’ll tell me. And they like to be asked and to feel important, in a way. They tell me “It’s easy, it’s easy, Arabic is easy. English is difficult”

As language learners, the Arabic speaking children could empathise with the demands that learning Arabic was putting on staff in their school. They were therefore able to subvert the usual language expert/learner dynamic and let their teacher know that Arabic is “easy” and that the “difficult” language is actually English.

B., one of the Arabic speaking children, had also quite clear ideas about the steps staff in their school would need to take to progress their learning further, after finishing the beginner Arabic course:

They should learn the letters, after the numbers. First reading them, and then writing words [...] and then reading words. So, it gets: easy to hard, to harder, and then... more harder.

At the end of this focus group conversation, which included as well as the eight children and two researchers, also a class teacher and an EAL teacher, the EAL teacher can be heard commenting: “they’re getting their own back here!”. While this was a light-hearted observation to her colleague, this also suggests that the EAL teacher was recognising that the Arabic speaking children are aware of the substantial demands that are put on them, and were able to translate their own experiences into similar demands for staff in their school.

D. Questioning the Knowledge Flow

A final delinking comes from the international collaborative nature of the WLs project, which required the team based at the UofG (School of Education) to work in close partnership with IUG’s Arabic Center team. Too often the focus of collaborative research with LMIC countries is on addressing needs identified in the Global South through tools and strategies that are known to work in the Global North (Fassetta & Imperiale, 2018, 2021). In the WLs project, however, the course design expertise was held largely by the Palestinian team and, while the UofG team identified the primary staff’s language needs at the needs analysis stage, it was up to the IUG team to decide how to address these needs by developing and then delivering a bespoke Arabic language course.

However, inequities and inequalities still remained prominent. Based in the Gaza Strip, our IUG colleagues struggled, at least in part, to understand the context of the project, as several of the Palestinian course developers and teachers had no experience of travelling outside the Gaza Strip. As J., one of the Arabic course designers/teachers noted:

As a team in Gaza, we were asking ourselves “what is the school like?” Or “What should we do? What are the conversations? The daily conversation that could happen?” So, imagining is good, but it’s not enough.

While J. managed to design and successfully teach the course to several Arabic learning staff, their comment highlights the limitations of online collaborations in situations in which opportunities for travel are few and, moreover, subject to unexplained restrictions and refusals. We had funding available for our Palestinian colleagues to come to visit the schools in Glasgow, but not all were able to take up this opportunity to meet their learners in person as some visas were refused by the UK government, creating some justified frustration. For those who managed to obtain a UK visas, the visit to the schools involved in the WLs project was hugely rewarding, allowing them to see first-hand the outcomes of their hard work and to experience pride in what they had achieved, as Y. (course designer and Arabic teacher) highlighted:

we've done beyond the... the welcoming language. We told them how to... to talk about different things, and I think we told them how to move on.

Y.’s words indicate that the teachers were able to see how the Arabic course they had developed and taught had gone beyond simply teaching a few, practically useful words and sentences in Arabic, to also ensure sustainability by enabling learners to add to their language knowledge through engaging with children and families.

The satisfaction our colleagues gained from being involved in the project moved also beyond the language itself, to being able to take people on a (virtual) journey around the Gaza Strip with them, teaching primary Scottish staff about Palestinian customs and traditions, which are similar in other countries of the Levant. G. (a headteacher) registered his surprise in learning about aspects of the Gaza Strip that he had not come across before and which his Arabic teacher enjoyed sharing through the WhatsApp group they had set up. When asked whether anything had been surprising in their experience, G. said:

Learning about Gaza. Usually what we hear is about violence, but L. showed pictures that showed Gaza as a different place, a Mediterranean country with lovely food...

Designing the Arabic language course and doing the teaching allowed teachers living in a very challenging situation to delink the usual narrative of people in the Gaza Strip as either victims or aggressors, to instead show that even in desperate situations – such as the ones many New Scots have also experienced - people cultivate hope, beauty and pleasure in the small but important things of everyday life (see also: Fassetta et al., 2020; Imperiale et al, 2017).

CONCLUSION

The communicative turn in language education has meant an increasingly “[...] pragmatic view of language expressed in economic terms” (Kramsch, 2019, p. 53) resulting in a subordination of language teaching/learning in relation to their status and to the practical returns they can offer. As a consequence, the languages that are given a space in education are often those that are spoken in countries with greater economic and military power, countries (and languages) that owe their higher status also to their colonial past (Macedo, 2019).

Making space for a greater variety of languages in education requires a substantial change in attitude towards language teaching/learning to include the languages spoken by people seeking asylum and/or with refugee status (Phipps & Fassetta, 2015), as well as changes in policy and practice to include languages (and language varieties) spoken by New Scots that do not currently receive official accreditation in Scotland, as is the case for Arabic (British Council, 2017). Expanding the number of languages that have a place in education also requires recognising that languages are not learnt nor used in silos but rather that people live in and through a continuum of the languages they speak, moving between them organically and through constant interaction, inside an ecological system that is made up by the dynamic interface of social, educational, cultural, economic and political institutions (Hornberger & Wang, 2008). It also requires disrupting “monolingual views of multilingualism” (Piller, 2016) which rest on ideas of imagined communities of people speaking one standard language, views which posit multilingualism and language varieties as a problem for education rather than as resources (Phyak, 2021).

The WLs project set out to challenge several of the assumptions that feed the language ideologies that still inform language policies in Scotland, to experiment with ways of doing things differently and, in the process, promoting the idea that integration as a two-way process needs to include giving a space in education also to the language spoken by New Scots. To facilitate linguistic hospitality (Phipps, 2012) and the welcoming of children and parents/carers from refugee backgrounds in their own language, the WLs project strived to delink approaches to language teaching/learning in Scottish primary school by: A) questioning roles and who should be learning a language in a context of migration, delinking language learning from the expectation that it is (only) up to migrants to acquire the dominant language to instead teach Arabic as one of the languages spoken by children and families from refugee backgrounds to English speaking primary staff. B) Questioning the teaching of a standard language, delinking language teaching from the expectation that there is one ‘higher’ and more desirable variety of language, and that vernacular and dialects have no place in education, to instead teach an Arabic dialect (Levantine) and raising awareness of the diversity of Arabic. C) Questioning expectations of expertise, delinking the expectation that children/foreigners learn and adults/locals teach, and rather put young people from refugee backgrounds, as well as their parents/carers, in the position of the experts. And D) questioning knowledge flow and who holds needs and expertise in international research that involves LMIC countries, delinking the expectation that academics from western universities hold the solution to poor countries’ problems, and instead draw from the expertise of LMIC partners to help address the needs of people in a high income country. As already highlighted in the introduction section, while this specific article was born as the result of an ongoing conversation between white Western academics that dates back several years, the academic knowledge that results from the WLs project includes crucial contributions from IUG’s academics and early career researchers which

builds on and expands a long history of co-authoring and of joint knowledge dissemination.

The delinking we attempted through the WLs project is a first step in a long path that (language) education needs to take in order to disrupt the taken-for-granted nature of the present (Levitas, 2013) and to experiment with ways of thinking and doing otherwise (Andreotti, 2016; Mignolo, 2018;). We hope that the project's approach and the important lessons it holds for both policy and practice (Fassetta et al., 2023) can help to support similar projects in other contexts and other languages. We do not claim that the WLs succeeded in decolonising language education, and we acknowledge that this is an ongoing project which requires continuity, collaboration and creativity. However, we do think that the WLs provided concrete examples of how established narratives, approaches and practices can be challenged and subverted, examples which we hope can be of use to others who set out to achieve “a radical language pedagogy that respects and celebrates the language practices that students bring to school and makes concrete such values as solidarity, social responsibility, and creativity” (Macedo, 2019, p. 12).

Notes

¹ We acknowledge that the term Global South - and its counterpart, Global North - is problematic since it homogenises what are very diverse social, cultural, economic and political contexts. We use this term here not to refer to a geographical designation, but rather to territories and peoples who experienced colonialism and its ongoing repercussions, both as the origins of disadvantage (Global South) and as an advantage (Global North).

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