

## **A Short Manifesto for Decolonising Language Education**

Alison Phipps, University of Glasgow

*With* Piki Diamond, Chaz Doherty, Sophie Nock, Tawona Sitholé<sup>1</sup>

### **A Short Manifesto for Decolonising Language Education**

#### **If we are going to do this.....**

*If we are going to do this, if we are going to decolonise foreign language pedagogy, let's do it and let's do it as an attempt at a way of doing it.*

The only way to decolonise is to do it. It needs some forethought but ultimately it needs actions which are redolent with decolonising attempts and which are able to embark on such a journey and return with tales to tell of what happens when decolonising is attempted in foreign language pedagogy.

*If we are going to do this, let's cite from the global south and try and give some multilingual scholars a bit more airtime than usually accorded.*

But let's not just do that (and in this piece I will only cite those from such contexts, fully aware that they too have often attained the exceptional canonical status that means, from the luxury of my own position I can read them too, and cite them). Let's also cite from Indigenous peoples who know all about the loss of land and language; and from the displaced peoples – the refugees, asylum seekers and diaspora who are now placed in the frontier spaces where transactions of bodies, words, beliefs are dissolving the known world. And where there is no hope of the *scholare* which affords material relief such that thinking, reading and writing might be achievable. Let's stop pretending our ways of knowing, our epistemologies, are the only valid ways of knowing something. Let's cite those who live and work in languages other than English, or than English first. The experts by experience, often carried through generations, have much that is stored in the scars and the skin and to know in these ways means taking a journey away from books, and firewall protected double blind peer reviewed articles in top ranked journals.

So, readers, this paper will not cite the usual suspects – I respect their work greatly and many are working as I am in elitist, top 100 universities, cycling the canonical white English language texts between students and conferences, masking the multilingual by the requirements of clarity, cohesion, transparency

and an academic publishing world of words which keeps on putting English first, and then putting those first who the counters find to have the most citations, in English.

*If we are going to do this, let's not only cite with references to publications.*

Words – black against a white page – are part of the flattened out hegemony of a text based literacy within which the spoken word, is so deprived of oxygen that it cannot live and there can be no pedagogy of the art of the vocal or what Freire (yes, I can cite Freire under my new self-imposed rules above) describes as 'pronunciar o mundo' – pronouncing the world (Freire 2006). There is a different power to the spoken word, a solidarity with the oral and performing arts which have long been the places where indigenous and precarious knowledge has been stored, memorised and shared. There is a protocol which is followed in the folk tradition whereby story-tellers, poets, musicians tell from whom they learned a thing, an ancestry which respects the fact that none of us ever create a single word without our mothers, grandmothers, our elders and teachers and the sounds all around us.

*If we are going to do this then we need to rethink our copyright and intellectual property claims.*

It remains a maxim that property is theft, not least in the eyes of Indigenous and colonised peoples. 'Accept theft or die' is N'gugi's (Ngugi wa 1986) call. We need models of a creative commons and of stewardship, of the return of land, language to common care from the sites of bureaucratic control, standardisation and curricularised codifications which serve those wishing to deploy human capital, not care for the persistent diversity of human life, and human languages and the myriad forms their sharing and learning may take. A language cannot be owned, nor can its teaching. It is the first sharing that occurs in human life between the child and parent, the whispered words of hospitality. These are the places where a serious decolonising attempt for foreign language pedagogy will need to explore to stand any chance of finding a way out of those insurmountable difficulties notions of property have caused within the western philosophical and epistemological traditions.

*If we are going to do this then let's improvise and devise. This is how we might learn the arts of decolonising.*

We aren't going to get it right first time. It's not something you can clean up theoretically or conceptually and have a correct methodological framework for developing. It's going to be messy, it's going to be like all creative human endeavour, it's going to need some real practice, rehearsal, the development

together of new scripts which we trace out from having made it up as we went along the journey with others.

*If we are going to do this then we need different companions.*

We might need to be allies, perhaps, but I'd prefer co-conspirers, in that wonderful sense buried in the etymology of the latin word "< French *conspire-r* (15th cent. in Littré) (= Provençal *conspirar*, Spanish *conspirar*, Italian *conspirare*), < Latin *conspīrāre* lit. 'to breathe together', whence, 'to accord, harmonize, agree, combine or unite in a purpose, plot mischief together secretly'." (Oxford English Dictionary). Here we have a sense of the collective endeavor, not of stepping out of the world in whose suffering, loss and oppression we are so implicated, nor by believing we have the answers and expertise to clean up that very mess. Autonomy is an important principle in this work, but the mess we have made, of peoples, land, languages, of rivers and of the air is no respecter of nationally drawn postcolonial boundaries and any decolonizing foreign language pedagogy worth its salt will need to remember the intimate connections between land, language and its need of the air for speech, any speech, anywhere, to find articulation.

*If we are going to do this we will need artists and poetic activists to break the hold of the discourse of the colonizing foreign language pedagogies and their performative assumptions.*

Struggles need their fools, the Lords of Misrule, the place of the carnevaleque, the people who start out on a crazy journey, looking and sounding very unlike the mainstream, weaving their words in daring ways which are poetic and different and without doubt often foolish enough to be dangerous to all that is normative and believing in its own parameters. Speaking words which change the dull echo-chambers of the soundscape; speaking words which are not a backing track but which will be heard. A colleague who won't mind me not citing her here, for all the reasons I have outlined, wrote a wonderful piece about goofiness in language teaching (google it if you must). It's part of the co-conspiring work. And poetry remains, according to the Welsh poet writing from within what he understood as colonial conditions, 'that which enters the intellect, by way of the heart.' (R.S. Thomas).

*If we are going to do this, let's do it in a way which is as local as it is global; which affirms the granulations of the way peoples name their worlds.*

In this paper I insist on my own local geographies, my kinships with places as their own genealogies of experience and decolonization. Colonialism is about a particular violent set of practices and knowledges which insert themselves into

and write over particular local contexts. So naming the small places, the little townships and abodes, the places where dwellings have been made and lives are lived out, often a long way from the centres of decision-making power, but where decisions are made to retain local naming practices – these matter to the decolonizing task. I speak in this paper of Camas, of Iona, of St Porchaire, of Wharanaki, Biberach an der Riss. These are places in which where a vernacular persists and with their own ways of pronouncing their place in the order of things which has a defiance and a resistance when spoken by visitors. They are often unassuming places but their retention of local names with their own meanings requires a respect of them with the decolonizing journey.

*Finally, if we are going to do this, let's do it multilingually, let's language it.*

For the last three years I've been holding the space in which a very large grant project: Researching multilingually at the borders of the body, language, law and the state has been attempting to decolonise various academic disciplines and methodologies. This is not the place to elaborate on the project. It is a complex project which has taken place with refugees and displaced or oppressed peoples world-wide and in a range of conflict zones, with researchers working, and mostly failing to work, multilingually in their academic practice – both individually and collectively, across a range of elite and grassroots multilingualism. From the devising of online siege-breaking Arabic curricula in the Gaza strip, to the refugee detention centres of Bulgaria, from the appeal courts for asylum claims in Europe, to the recovery attempts of child soldiers in Uganda, to the dance performances of Dangbe young people in Ghana researchers have worked with diaspora arts from former British colonies to make attempts at decolonising language methodologies and pedagogies.

This paper offers a glimpse into some of the learning which has come from the decolonising attempts and the many errors and learnings involved in trying to decolonise foreign language pedagogy. It does so taking at face value the many critical injunctions to write in such a way as to unsettle the arrogance of ignorance derived from institutional authority which can often lead to the fragmentation of bodies of knowledge, giving rise to a misguided elitism that, in turn, creates tensions and contradictions between theory and practice. Often theorists devalue practice while practitioners dismiss theory as unnecessary and cumbersome while not realising that there is always a theory that explains practice, acknowledged or not. It deliberately works in defamiliarising, hyper-local strategies which can throw the reader into a critical stance or puzzlement – what does that mean? Where is that? I've never been there? I've not heard of that? This is an attempt to unsettle and allow a world to be brought into view

which is not framed in the usual Englishes, or through recourse to the usual centres of power or canonical authors.

I have also chosen to adopt the set of principles outlined above to guide the work, attempting to enact a critical narrative but also to entice the reader into a decolonising foreign language pedagogy journey I have undergone myself as part of the larger project I outline above.

Whilst this journey has been undertaken in many different contexts – in my own home with refugees; in detention centres, in classrooms, on remote Scottish Islands, in the Gaza strip, the Arizona desert, the rainforest of the Dangbe people I specifically chose here to draw on the lessons I have learned from Sophie Nock (Nock 2005, Nock 2009) and through her teaching and my learning of te reo, the Māori language, and from Smith (Tuhawai Smith 2012) in the context of the bi-cultural decolonizing processes underway in Aotearoa, New Zealand.

Finally, I chose to embark on this decolonising story by also breaking into my own prose, with poetry, with the spoken word lessons of the elders, and, returning to my title, with gifts in the feet.

### **Gifts are in the Feet**

You say “the gifts are the feet.”

It is war time.

So shall I walk away

Shall I flee to the hills

Cross the seas

Ford the rivers

In spate?

If I wear out

My shoes

Will the ache fade

Will the longing

Recede

Will I stand at last  
Somewhere on the heart's  
Edge  
And sing  
Again.  
  
Of love.

I say the gifts are in the tears  
I say that salt and water  
Show what needs  
To flow.  
I say stay with the river  
On your face.  
feet on the battle ground  
Gifts come from the grieving earth  
Watered with the  
Longing in my eyes.  
(AP)

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<sup>1</sup> My acknowledgements go beyond the normal conventions in this piece and rather than using this footnote to thank those who have helped I instead chose to acknowledge those who co-authored this experience with me.