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Fostering Inclusion through Decolonization of Language Teaching – The Contribution of Plurilingualism to Competence, Communication and Community

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Abstract

This paper investigates limitations of traditional language instruction related to often unclear objectives and priorities of national curriculums regarding the accepted national language standard. These impact directly upon non-standard populations (migrants, refugees, ethnic minorities) and may hide other assumptions regarding assimilation and hierarchies of importance. Not only teaching methods, but also assessment techniques, teaching inputs and practice environments may reflect an academic scope which fails to foster fluency and expressive comprehension because of hidden assumptions of the worth of other languages, vernacular or foreign.

Linguistic oppression is a structural process rather than solely an interpersonal communication issue. It operates at several levels simultaneously. It marshals legal, bureaucratic, policy and educational dimensions to recognise official language(s) and to diminish or degrade indigenous languages, historically often described as primitive, inferior or mere dialects. This reflects a profound and sustained process which combines formal legal sanctions for using marginalised languages to more subtle socio-cultural pressures designed to create feelings of subservience, inferiority or shame in users of indigenous or non-standard languages. While this has happened throughout histories of conquest and domination, the particular forms of control here apply to the processes of European outreach and colonialism from the 16th century on. Colonial expansion was not a uniform process. Significant national variations in contact, conquest and assimilation can be identified.

Such oppression can be described by a number of common dimensions:

1. ***Linguistic hierarchy** - some languages classified as "global," "standard," or "official," while others are marginalized.*
2. ***Standard-language ideology** - one variety is treated as grammatically correct or intellectually superior*
3. ***Epistemic exclusion** - knowledge expressed in minoritized languages is ignored, untranslated, or excluded from academic systems.*
4. ***Linguistic profiling** - speakers may experience discrimination because of their accent, dialect, name, or language choice.*

These dimesnions are reflected profoundly in the history of European explorations, conquest and colonization over centuries. We consider processes of decolonization regarding languiages and language teaching. Decolonization is not presented simply as a process of adding more languages to existing systems. It involves a deeper process of questioning who defines valid knowledge, correct language, literacy, intelligence and associated technological progress. The role of anthropology and cultural investigation has played a noted role in providing a benign curiosity regarding native cultures, Plurilingualism can counter trajectories of exclusion by promoting more diverse and mutally rewarding community learning environemnts that develop competence by enhancing learning from difference. The paper will reference three specific examples that reflect the issues at stake: Ireland, Algeria and Palestine. From this analytical framework several conclusions will be advanced that demonstrate alternatives to provide benefits for all language learners.

Keywords: *Decolonization; linguistic oppression; linguistic justice; multilingualism; translanguaging; Indigenous languages; language revitalization; epistemic justice; linguistic equity; community inclusion and recognition*

1. Decolonizing Language and Knowledge

Decolonizing language teaching means a number of things born out of the experiences of history and, in particular, the histories of European exploration, conquest, colonialism and control from the 15th century on. It therefore means also a process of examining how these colonial histories and subsequent power relations shaped the way in which languages, varieties, accents, vocabularies, knowledge, and

teaching methods are treated as legitimate. It understands that the processes of language dominance and linguistic control involved complex dimensions of denigration of vernacular languages encountered, systematic diminishment of indigenous languages and a profound set of processes that inculcated shame or embarrasment about the inherent worth or value of these languages. These processes of linguistic exclusion and disregard meant that the literature, wisdom, poetry and expressive richness was cenied or reduced to a barely tolerated patois. In turn this was connected to the processes and methods of colonialism itself, a sophisticated and complex system designed to msaintain control.

In his insightful work on peace and conflict studies, the great Norwegian scholar Johan Galtung (1) developed a strong paradigm that framed colonialism and imperialism as a system of interconnected structural dominance. In this system a pattern could be discerned where powerful external actors established, maintained, and protected exploitative relationships. Instead of relying solely on direct military force, this system enforces control through a tightly knit network of structural mechanisms that assert dominant control.

The process of interaction between colonisers and the colonised was summed up by Galtung as a triple process.

This commenced with penetration: complex processes of contact, ‘exploration’, marketing, investigations and communication with aboriginal communities.

The second phase was fragmentation: control, disruption of exisiting structures, assimillation, control over administration, ‘modernisation’.

The final phase is domination: the aboriginal community is now subservient, depnendent, lacking control or autonomy, controllled by external/alien forces, values and ideologies.

Galtung’s model of domination and colonialism rested on a concept around Centre–Periphery relationships. This model systematised understanding of power and how it dfferentiated between objects and subjects of the exercise of power.

- Centre: The politically and economically dominant group, institution, or country. It controls resources, decision-making and standards treated as legitimate.
- Periphery: Groups and regions with less power, whose resources and decisions are often shaped by the centre.
- Centre–periphery relations: Dependence and unequal exchange connect the two. Galtung also describes *centre-periphery structures within* countries and institutions: privileged groups may form a “centre” while marginalised groups remain peripheral.

In this complex process language itself becomes a form of power. At its most basic, the langauge of the coloniser becomes the language of government and administration but also of law, schooling, commerce and social advancement. Speakers of the coloniser’s language are positioned closer to the centre because they share in the control of access to education, credentials, and employment. In this process of exclusion and replacement, existing indigenous and local languages are pushed to the periphery, even when they are the main languages of the vast majority of the population.

The process of colonisation and language teaching was designed to reproduce the structure of the overall process. In the developed curriculum, lessons privileged the coloniser’s history, culture and worldview. Language hierarchy emerged strongly over time where the coloniser language was presented as modern, sphisticated, educated or useful in contrast to local languages which were treated as inferior or a patois. Access and selection was influenced by fluency in the colonial language as it determined who would succeed in school or enter administration and elite professions. Knowledge production itself was impacted since imported textbooks, examinations and teaching methods made the colony dependent on the centre for educational standards and materials. Small, colonial-language-educated groups often became intermediary elites, gaining access to the centre while remaining socially separated from much of the local population.



The cumulative effects of all this can be viewed as a complex change that sees socail and economic replacement of existing structures along the lines described by Galtung. This process is evidenved by factors which include:

- Unequal access to education and opportunity.
- Loss of status or use for local languages and pressure toward language shift.
- A significant divide between the educated elite and the wider community.
- Continued cultural and institutional dependence after formal colonial rule ends.

Teaching a colonial language did not automatically reproduce colonial relations by itself. The process also provided communication, mobility, advanced industrailisation or access to wider networks subsumed in the process of modernisation.. The key questions remained around who controls the teaching, which languages and knowledge are valued, who gains access and whether learners can use the language without abandoning their own.

The processes of colonial domination went deep. In the very education systems imposed they aimed to change traditions, processes and hierarchies in curriculum, classroom practice, assessment and teacher training. In the process of decolonisation the starting point is giving learners and communities more authority over what and how they learn.

This does not necessarily mean rejecting English, French or other European languages which characterised colonial pasts. It means teaching them without treating them as neutral, culturally superior, or detached from other languages and local knowledge. The idea is contested, and what it looks like depends on the community, history and context.

Key theoretical inputs are outlined here.

- *Decolonial thought and coloniality.* Work associated with Aníbal Quijano (2) and others distinguishes the end of formal colonial rule from *coloniality*: power structures and hierarchies that persist in institutions and ideas. In language teaching, this focus is on whose language and knowledge are centered, and whose are marginalized.
- *Postcolonial theory and linguistic imperialism.* These traditions examine how colonial and global power shape the spread and status of languages - especially English - and the authority given to particular standards, accents, and “native speaker” norms. They help teachers see language instruction as socially and politically situated. (3)
- *Critical pedagogy.* Associated especially with Paulo Freire, this approach treats learners as participants who can question and reshape their conditions, rather than as passive recipients of knowledge. In language classrooms, it supports discussing power, representation, and lived experience alongside language learning.
- *Plurilingualism and translanguaging.* These approaches recognize that learners draw on interconnected linguistic resources, rather than keeping languages in separate mental or classroom boxes. They can challenge English-only norms and make learners’ existing repertoires resources for learning. Their decolonial potential depends partly on whether they also question the status hierarchies between languages. (4)
- *Epistemic justice and Indigenous and Southern epistemologies.* This perspective asks who is recognized as a knower and whose knowledge counts. A decolonizing classroom can treat learners, teachers, families and local communities as contributors to knowledge, not only as sources of examples for a curriculum designed elsewhere. (5)
- Critical language awareness and raciolinguistic perspectives. These examine how judgments about “good” or “proper” language can reproduce racial and social hierarchies. They encourage teachers to question accent bias, deficit views of multilingual learners, and whose speech is labeled correct or intelligent.

Together, these perspectives point to practical questions: Which languages and varieties are permitted? Whose knowledge appears in materials? Who sets the goals and standards? Can learners use their full repertoires? Who benefits from the language policies in place? Decolonizing practice means addressing those questions in the specific setting, not applying one universal method.

Decolonizing language teaching means rethinking language education so it no longer treats colonial, "native-speaker," Western or standardized norms as naturally, inherently superior.

- It questions whose languages, accents, literacies, histories, and knowledges are valued in the classroom
- It shifts from "correcting" learners toward recognizing multilingual repertoires, local identities, and unequal

Decolonization should not be presented simply as a process of adding more languages to existing systems. It involves a deeper process of questioning who defines valid knowledge, correct language, literacy, intelligence, and technological progress. The role of anthropology and cultural investigation plays a part here in providing an allegedly benign curiosity in regarding native cultures, absent of any contexts of control, domination and discrimination.

This approach emphasizes several principles:

- recognizing Indigenous and minoritized languages as knowledge systems
- valuing oral, visual, embodied and community-based literacies
- challenging the assumption that English or other dominant languages are neutral
- redistributing authority over linguistic data and technological design
- supporting community ownership and governance
- treating multilingualism as an asset rather than a deficit.

A useful distinction is offered between inclusion:
Inclusion asks whether marginalized languages are present.
Representation asks whether communities have meaningful visibility and voice.
Equity asks whether they have power, resources, and decision-making authority.

2. Case Study 1: Algeria

Decolonising language teaching in Algeria is a particularly interesting case. Language education is closely connected to the country's history of French colonialism, national identity, the struggle for autonomy, racism, cultural independence and the politics of multilingualism. The central question is how can Algeria decolonise its language teaching and education system while recognising the multilingual realities of Algerian society. It is important to understand that decolonisation does not simply mean removing French from schools. It means critically examining the power relations, cultural assumptions, teaching materials and language hierarchies inherited from the colonial era. France invaded and colonised Algeria in 1830, and colonial rule lasted until independence in 1962. Deliberate and systemic policies were adopted to encourage inward migration of Eiropean settlers and in time this privileged sector produced a true apartheid society. At various times Algeria was a colony or even incorporated into metropolitan France itself in a process where even geographic reality was suspended (a rallying call of the colonisers was "it is France from Le Havre to Tammanrasset").

During this period:

- French became the dominant and prioritised language of administration, government and formal education.
- French-language education was associated with political and economic power.
- Arabic and Amazigh (Berber) languages were marginalised in colonial institutions and administration.
- French education frequently promoted French cultural values and representations of history.
- Access to French education was unequal, and the colonial education system privileged the European settler population.

Language therefore became more than a means of communication: it was also an instrument of colonial power, domination, exclusion and cultural influence. This played powerfully into socio-economic operations but also in terms of poliical power and representation. The denial of even basic recognition fuelled the intensity of the War of Independence from 1954 to 1962. Echoes of the repression echo to this day and find interesting echoes in the debates around European migration policy. After independence in 1962, the new Algerian government sought to recover its cultural and linguistic identity (although that in itself was a contested space).

Three important developments shaped its language policy:

Arabisation
The government introduced Arabisation policies to strengthen Modern Standard Arabic as the language of education, administration and national identity. The objectives included:

- Restoring Arabic after decades of colonial marginalisation.
- Reducing the institutional dominance of French.
- Developing a national education system rooted in Arab-Islamic cultural traditions.

Recognition of Amazigh
Amazigh languages, spoken by significant communities in Algeria, also became increasingly recognised. Tamazight was recognised as a national language in 2002 and an official language in 2016.

Continuing role of French
Despite Arabisation, French remainsed influential, particularly in higher education, scientific research, medicine, business and professional communication. The presence of a substantial Algerian community in France advance dthis significantly with the persistence of social, family, media and cutural links.

This has created a complex linguistic situation involving:

- Modern Standard Arabic.
- Algerian Arabic (Darija).
- Tamazight and its varieties.
- French.
- Increasingly, English.

This situation illustrates an important issue: political independence does not automatically produce linguistic decolonisation. This is where the Algerian example becomes particularly useful for language teachers, teacher educators and curriculum designers. Decolonising language teaching involves changing not only which languages are taught but also how they are taught and whose knowledge and experiences are represented.

Here are five practical approaches from the Algerian experience.

Recognising students' multilingual identities
Teachers increasingly accept and recognise that students may move naturally between Algerian Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, French and Amazigh. Rather than treating these languages as competing systems, teachers can use students' existing linguistic knowledge as a resource for learning.
For example:

- Allowing comparisons between French and Algerian Arabic.
- Exploring similarities and differences between Arabic, French and Tamazight.
- Encouraging multilingual discussion and collaborative activities.
- Recognising translanguaging as a legitimate learning resource.

Decolonising teaching materials
Traditional language textbooks often privilege the culture, history and everyday experiences of the countries where the target language is spoken. For example, a French textbook might focus predominantly on Paris, French traditions, French literature and European lifestyles.
A decolonised curriculum could also include:

- Algerian writers and intellectuals.
- Algerian history and independence.
- North African literature and cultural traditions.
- Algerian music, cinema and everyday life.
- Local experiences of migration, identity and multilingualism.

The objective is not to exclude French culture but to ensure that Algerian culture is equally visible and valued.

Challenging the idea of linguistic superiority
Language teaching sometimes reproduces the assumption that certain languages or accents are more sophisticated, prestigious or academically valuable than others. In Algeria, this might mean questioning why French has historically been associated with social status and professional opportunity, while local varieties of Arabic and Amazigh have sometimes been treated as less academically valuable.
Teachers can explore questions such as:

- Why is French considered prestigious in certain professional contexts?
- Why is Algerian Arabic not normally used as the principal language of formal education?
- Whose accents are considered acceptable in language classrooms?
- Why are some languages described as international and others as local?

Including local knowledge and perspectives
Students should be able to discuss their own communities and experiences through the languages they are learning. For example, an English lesson could explore:

- Algerian independence and national identity.
- The cultural heritage of the Kabyle region.
- Algerian contributions to literature, science and the arts.
- The relationship between language, migration and identity.

This allows English or French to become tools for expressing Algerian experiences rather than simply reproducing external cultural perspectives.

Developing critical language awareness
Students are encouraged to understand the political and historical dimensions of language by investigating:

- How colonial governments used language in education.
- How language policies changed after independence.
- Why some languages became institutionalised.
- How language influences access to employment and higher education.

Language learning then becomes an opportunity to develop critical thinking, historical awareness and intercultural understanding.

3. Case Study 2: Ireland

Ireland provides an important example of decolonising language teaching because its linguistic history is closely connected to British colonialism, national identity, cultural repression, political resistance, ethnic cleansing and genocide and the planned revival of an indigenous language. The Irish experience demonstrates how language education can be used both as an instrument of colonial domination and as a means of cultural recovery and resistance. Before English colonial rule became dominant, Irish (Gaeilge) was the principal language of much of Ireland. Irish has a rich and varied literature with a living heritage stretching back over 2000 years. Its huge importance in Irish life held together religion, bardic poetry, chronicles and sagas.

The first laws against use of the Irish language were promulgated in the 15th centrury.The overwhelming majority of thecountry remained Irish speaking until the 19th century. The first element in its slow demise was the exile of the native aristocracy from the 17th century and its replacement by settler colonialists.

Centuries of warfare and resistance saw the following developoments in the imposed colony:

- English increasingly became the language of administration, law, commerce and education.
- Irish-speaking communities experienced severe economic, political and social pressure to adopt English.

- The development of the National School System after 1837 imposed English-medium education.
- The Great Famine (1845–1850) was a genocidal assault on irish society and the resulting mass emigration and social changes accelerated the decline of Irish. (*Friel, Translations*)

English became associated with social mobility, access to power and economic opportunity, while Irish was increasingly denigrated and marginalised.

A key decolonial process issue is about how the education system contributed to making the coloniser's language appear more valuable, prestigious and useful than the indigenous language. In Ireland, this process was profound and noted by many writers (Joyce, Beckett). Following independence in 1922, the Irish state sought to reverse some of the linguistic and cultural effects of colonialism. Irish was introduced as a compulsory subject in schools and became an important part of national identity. Ireland was also partitioned in 1922 and the attitude of the Northern Irish State towards irish was deeply discrimnatory.

Important developments included:

- Language revival to promote Irish as a living language rather than simply a historical or cultural symbol.
- Compulsory Education policy to make Irish a mandatory part of the school curriculum.
- Gaeltacht communities received support to maintain areas where Irish was still spoken.
- Gaelscoileanna: Irish-medium schools in which Irish is the language of instruction.
- Cultural recognition linking the language with Irish literature, history, music and knowledge.

These initiatives sought to restore the status of a language historically marginalised by colonial rule.

A critical issue remains about whether Ireland has successfully decolonised language teaching. The Irish example is particularly interesting from an academic perspective. Although the Irish State made considerable efforts to revive Irish, the process has not been entirely successful nor systematic An English-speaking bureaucracy from the times of British rule was tepid about the issue. The State lacked a coherentlanguage policy beyond platitudes. Interestingy, no attention was paid to the recognition and promotion of Hiberno-English, the variant of English actually used in ireland.

As a result, the dominance of English has continued. English remains the dominant language of everyday communication, business, higher education and much of public life. Compulsory Irish has had mixed results. While making Irish compulsory helped establish its place in the education system, for many students it became associated with examinations, memorisation and negative school experiences rather than meaningful communication.

The difference between learning a language and using a language has been graphically illustrated by the example of Irish. Many people study Irish at school, but this does not necessarily mean they use it regularly in everyday life. The absence of any radio or television in Irish until the 1980s was a serious impediment. Language revival requires more than curriculum reform. It also requires opportunities to speak the language in families, communities, workplaces and cultural institutions. In many cases the use of Irish was often not accepted nor recognised.

Language teachers can learn many issues from the Irish experience. These suggest five important principles for decolonising language teaching:

1. Recognise linguistic inequality: understand how historical power relations have privileged some languages over others.
2. Restore linguistic dignity: present indigenous languages as valuable forms of knowledge, culture and identity.
3. Diversify teaching materials: include indigenous literature, histories, traditions and perspectives.
4. Promote multilingualism: avoid presenting the indigenous language and the international language as necessarily competing.

5. Connect classroom learning with real life: give learners opportunities to use the language beyond examinations and formal lessons.

4. Case Study 3: Palestine/Israel

Palestine (and the State of Israel) provides a particularly complex and politically sensitive example of decolonising language teaching. All the languages involved demonstrtate their close to questions of power, ownership, national identity, colonial history, indigenous rights, migration, religion and political autonomy Unlike Ireland, where the revival of Irish provides a relatively clear example of indigenous language revitalisation, the Palestinian/Israeli context involves several competing linguistic and historical perspectives, particularly regarding Hebrew, Arabic and English. The central question revolves wround how language teaching in Palestine/Israel can address historical inequalities and linguistic power relations while recognising the identities, rights and experiences of different communities?

The Levant region historically was predominantly Arabic speaking, with significant minorities speaking Aramaic or Turkish. From the 19th century on inward migration frsaw the rise of colonial presence with English and French. The acclerating growth of the Jewish community with the impact of Zionism saw the need to revitalise Hebrew as a spoken language.

Hebrew was successfully revived as a modern spoken language bt rhe early twentieth century and has established itself as the principal language of the Israeli state. Arabic has deep historical roots in the region and the mother tongue of Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel and Palestine It has experienced challenges regarding its official legal status and its position in public education. A recent element has been the arrival of Englsh, associated with higher education, global communication, business and international cultural influence.

The linguistic situation reflects different historical experiences and unequal relationships of power. Decolonial approaches examine how language policies can privilege particular identities, histories and forms of knowledge. (6)

In Israel and Palestine, these discussions are particularly contested:

- Some scholars analyse Zionism, Hebrew language revival and Israeli state-building through settler-colonial frameworks.
- Other perspectives emphasise the historical and cultural connections of Jewish communities to the land and the significance of Hebrew as a language of national and cultural revival.
- Palestinian scholars and educators frequently examine the marginalisation of Arabic and Palestinian identity within educational institutions.

It is important to recognise these different interpretations rather than assume that there is one universally accepted understanding of the conflict.

5. Plurilingualism and Conclusions

Plurilingualism is the ability of an individual to use and draw upon several languages and linguistic varieties, often with different levels of competence, for different purposes and in different situations.

It is important to distinguish two concepts:

- Multilingualism: The presence of several languages within a society, institution or geographical area.
- Plurilingualism: The integrated linguistic repertoire of an individual, who draws on different languages and resources to communicate and make meaning.

For example, a student might:

- Speak Arabic at home.
- Use Hebrew at school.
- Study English as an international language.
- Draw on elements of all three languages when learning a new subject.



A plurilingual approach recognises the student's entire linguistic repertoire as an educational resource. This understanding is strongly associated with the Council of Europe and its *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), which emphasises plurilingual and pluricultural competence.

Traditional language teaching has often been influenced by colonial hierarchies in which European languages, particularly English and French, were positioned as languages of education, knowledge, prestige and economic opportunity. Indigenous and minority languages were frequently marginalised or treated as less academically valuable. Decolonising language teaching questions these assumptions. The relationship can be understood through five principles:

Plurilingual principle	**Decolonising implication**
All languages are resources	Challenges linguistic hierarchies
Learners have integrated linguistic repertoires	Recognises learners' identities and experiences
Languages interact	Challenges languages set in rigid categories
Cultural knowledge matters	Challenges Eurocentric curricula
Language learning involves social participation	Promotes linguistic inclusion and equality

The central argument: revolves around the fact that a plurilingual classroom can become a space in which learners' languages and cultural experiences are recognised rather than suppressed.In itself this is a significant advance and enables language teaching and learning to be integrated with practivcal engagement with diversity and approaches based on enhanced inclusion.This has been the basis for our involvement with the European Union funded project TAPPEO.

However, in no way does plurilingualism alone guarantee decolonisation of language learning. Rather it sets a framework within which historical inequalities can be addressed and unequal access to educational resources and authority remedied.

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