

Student Researchers Being Reflective on the ECS/ KLC Project on Decolonising the Curriculum

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'On a personal level, I saw myself as part of a culture which is reluctant to question some present and past uncomfortable power dynamics. Possibly reluctant myself, as a middle class, and white Italian, I thought that I could not be part of a conversation about white privilege, patriarchy, and gender bias. But I wanted to be part of it despite my feeling of not being in a position to understand what it means to be marginalised, because allegedly I was never marginalised. In a global society, marginalisation is rather frequent in my view. This is not a competition among whom has suffered exclusion, but as a southern Italian, at a personal, community, ancestral level, I cannot say that I haven't experienced marginalisation'.

Student researcher

Introduction

The student researcher participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of the project. They said that they had enjoyed the project and the opportunity to reflect. They also enjoyed the task of writing these reflections down. The reflective writing task proved to be highly emotional and dug deep into personal lived experiences and heritages (as can be witnessed in the above), many of them uncomfortable, an emotion that seems to be a hallmark of personal reflection on colonialism generally and a driver of the subsequent practical decolonizing of the curriculum project in professional lives.

The student researchers were supplied with some suggested but not compulsory prompts. This summative document shares some of their key reflections. Although we feel that reflections cannot be analysed as such for they are too personal and contextualized, the following key themes frame the narratives to provide a sense of narrative: *Identity, Positioning, Skills Learnt, Deepening of Understanding, Sense of Agency- what next?*

Student researchers have been anonymised by replacing their names with a letter identifier.

Identity

A: Through my interactions with Hindi and Punjabi teachers, I have gained a deeper understanding of the impact of colonialism on language and how it has led to the marginalisation and erasure of colonised languages. The project highlighted that language is not just a means of communication but also an important tool for cultural expression and identity. Through my interactions with teachers, I gained a deeper appreciation for the importance of language in preserving cultural heritage and promoting identity. My lived experience of the project has been one of growth and learning.

B: From a young age, I have been interested in systems of power and can recall many moments when someone behaved in a way that didn't feel right or fair, but I did not have the words or understanding to express why it was wrong. As I grew up and became a lot more

interested in feminism, these systems of power, especially those regarding racism, were elucidated to me through the exclusionary practices that were enacted within feminism discourse and spaces and which ended up reinforcing racism, whether this was intentional or not. I started to learn to not take things for granted. I have felt validated in my understandings of best practices for decolonization of MFL education, and it has been fruitful and restorative for a me as a teacher, researcher, and person of color.

C: Being a second-generation immigrant can be hard to navigate, especially when you are young and made to feel a certain level of uncomfortably to express and embrace other parts of your identity that sit outside the norm within a specific dominant group that isn't your family. All in all, these parts often experience apartness, disconnectedness, alienation, and separation due to community structures that often discredit aspects of your inherited culture. I unconsciously craved for that of a more European or Americanized culture in my life. Overall, I spent my early teens in a supposedly passive, dream-like state, towards my culture and lived experiences. However, through one teacher who really promoted pupil's sense of self-worth and place within the world through reflective activities that made space for students to explore their identities. I was encouraged to engage and participate in Somali dialogue through politics, history, art, music, and literature; thereupon developing a stronger sense comfortability, stability and proficiency in both my heritage culture and the culture of the country in which my family had settled in. Also, I was buoyed to produce a specific document on a person that represents something important in my culture, and I happened upon a picture of my grandmother who represented a shift in patriarchal Somali culture to me.

D: My personal identity is largely influenced by my Palestinian heritage. I grew up in the UAE where people from many different nationalities also built lives there. Coming from such a diverse country, it was hard to preserve practicing traditions, customs, and keep the culture alive in my home. This was a natural consequence of living in an international atmosphere where, ironically, uniformity was sought by people to blend in.

E: Decolonising the Curriculum has many faces and can be approached by many angles. As one of the interviewees said, it is about awareness and making space for unrepresented voices as it addresses assumptions and misconceptions on race, but also gender and disabilities. In my view, the starting point for all reflections on this seems to be our European colonial past "*Il faut régarder son propre passé colonial en face*" (from a Youtube film by Guillaume Erner, 2021) and I have definitely had a glimpse of this story through the experience of Ribka as described in the film. Her life is not so different from mine. We have migrated, we speak several languages, we love different cities. We carry nostalgia. We have lots in common and we can now look at that past together recognising that "nous (as humans) on n'est pas que fait d'amour".

Positioning

E: Decolonising the Curriculum is also very emotional as it deals a lot with migration. There is a sense of nostalgia in a documentary that is very important to me that made me think about the hidden and profound layers of meanings of some words which came out in the interviews for the project. Words such as eye-opener to some present or past *ailleurs*, a place inside and outside people which stays invisible if we do not make it visible. Words such as awareness of the otherness in us, reflected in the other and in the universality of some human needs, rights, feelings, connections.

A: My involvement in the project has encouraged me to adopt a more critical and decolonial approach to teaching and learning, which involves challenging the colonial legacies that continue to impact language education and promoting more inclusive education systems.

B: The decolonization learning journey is very much that – a journey, and not a destination. It requires constant introspection about the implications of what we do and say in a social context that is built against certain demographics, and we have to constantly work to undermine this to empower all students. Similarly, it requires the humility to make sure that we, as teachers, are empowering our students to share their opinions and ideas.

D: I am a penultimate-year law student. I am passionately Palestinian. My interest in decolonisation arose from my own lived experiences as someone from a country facing historical and cultural erasure. Decolonisation to me is a process where shameful history is acknowledged, then positive actions are taken to restore the identity and culture of colonized people.

C: More external support is needed from grassroots organizations, to support educators in providing representative content and pedagogy that is reflective of the modern foreign languages studied in class. Nevertheless, it shouldn't only be the responsibility of others to solely inform on the decolonization process, but to give teachers the time and availability to take their own initiative and do their own research. There is a lack of representation within the workplace, which can cause barriers to achieving diversity and inclusion in the pedagogy as a *diverse teaching* team permits departments to reconceptualize how they want to better involve students within MFL.

Skills Learnt

A: As part of the project, I had the opportunity to speak with Hindi and Punjabi teachers to gain a better understanding of the challenges they face in teaching and promoting languages that suffered due to colonisation. My role in the project involved conducting interviews with teachers, analysing the information collected, and contributing to the project's overall goals of promoting language revitalization and decolonization. I have developed a range of skills as a teacher-researcher thanks to this project. I have honed my skills in qualitative research methods such as data collection and analysis, as well as in conducting interviews and synthesizing information.

B: It has been interesting to share ideas with my fellow student researchers, university academics, and school teachers and it has allowed me to draw on my theoretical knowledge and lived experiences of racism. I have learnt a lot about what is actually happening at a practical level in schools and how this is very different to what I saw when I was in school, only a decade ago. I think I have developed as a researcher in the sense that this has been the first time, I have formally taken part in a group research project, following the instructions and deadlines and presenting my work to the rest of the group.

C: Overall, I think that this project, as well as my past experiences, have had a massive impact on my teaching, lesson preparation, resources, and ways of engaging with pupils in school. I want to encourage pupils to participate in dialogue through medias that are worldly and help them develop a stronger sense of comfortability, stability, and proficiency within themselves.

D: I have learnt to look at details in an analytical lens. I also realized the true extent of how different people's experiences can be based on their geographical and cultural positioning.

E: Decolonising the CV is not just about the west colonial past, it is about the colonising mindset which precedes colonisation itself and manifests at many levels and in countless contexts. It might seem an idealistic adventure, but it can be done starting at the individual level as I have learnt. Firstly, trusting knowledge as the ultimate form of self-empowering tool, resistance and revolt. Secondly reframing, rethinking the knowledge we pass on the future generation so that it stays updated and truth to the ever-changing human civilisation. In practical terms, this means moving away from the one single perspective of the western framework.

Deepening of Understanding

B: The decolonization learning journey is very much a journey, and not a destination. It requires constant introspection about the implications of what we do and say in a social context that is built against certain demographics, and we have to constantly work to undermine this to empower all students. Similarly, it requires the humility to make sure that we, as teachers, are empowering our students to share their opinions and ideas and that we validate and act on what they share, so that students do not feel that they are sharing their opinions in vain.

D: This experience has helped me acquire a deeper perspective of inter-cultural approaches of decolonisation.

A: Overall, my conversations with the Punjabi teacher provided valuable insights into the impact of colonialism on language and the ongoing efforts to promote language revitalization and decolonization. These findings have highlighted the importance of recognizing and valuing the diversity of languages and cultures, and working towards creating more inclusive and equitable education systems that prioritize indigenous languages.

E: I did not dare to share my thoughts in the decolonising seminars because I did not think that my dilemmas were worth mentioning. But I was listening and studying and I discovered some facts about Italian colonial past. Facts that for some reason, I had not studied at school. Learning is POWER and although while digging into some inconvenient past, (Italians occupied African land to exploit resources, and human labour. They took advantage of their progress to disadvantage communities that needed time and support to get there) I did not find what I wanted to find I could not stop researching. A fundamental fact for me to realise that Italians became colonisers once Italy became one united country at the end of the 19th century. So, was there a sort of agreement between “European powers” that African countries (part of the then so-called underdeveloped countries) were there to be shared among them? Bonds with former colonies always remain and this is the most complex, intense, human aspect of the story; that bond represents the main possibility we have now to work cooperatively for a better future.

C: My key findings so far underline a general understanding of and acceptance that decolonization is a necessary practice in education through the use of resources, school displays, cultural concepts and vocabulary taught (in language lessons). However, the ability to always implement this in a successful and holistic way is not as common due to curriculum and examination pressures. I came to understand that teachers play a vital role in supporting students through representative classroom environments that are diverse and inclusive to help advance their sense of self-worth and place within the world through the provisions of nuanced experiences that cultivate links across communities. I also realised that although staff want to provide widened spaces for students to explore their identities, due to various pressures, decolonising within the curriculum sometimes become tokenistic and reductive because of the various compressions.

Sense of Agency - What Action Now?

A: My next steps in the learning journey involve further exploration and engagement with decolonial approaches to teaching and learning. Moreover, I aim to continue engaging with and learning from individuals and communities who have been impacted by colonialism and who are leading efforts towards language revitalization and decolonization.

B: When preparing lessons and resources, teaching, and engaging with students in the school, I am very conscious of which students can see themselves reflected in my resources, going out of my way to depict a variety of body sizes, ethnicities, and genders and I like to play with language and representations to make sure I am not reinforcing negative stereotypes that reinforce racism, ableism, (trans)misogyny, and fatphobia.

C: My grandmother was a Somali farmer during the 1970's and late 2000's who inspired and encouraged many people to start their own enterprises. She challenged stereotypes and attitudes against women and inhabits the resilience that is often associated to Somaliland culture. Through her, I wanted to advance my understanding and practise of Somaliland culture and language and help drive the next steps in the decolonization prerogative. I want to join a progressive world in education, that mirrors the progression of our society and research more how MFL education could develop the learning journey to better reflect the multiculturalism of today's society.

D: In my field of study, law, the conversation about decolonisation hasn't been widely started. I plan to start the discourse surrounding what could be done in the legal field regarding decolonisation.

E: The decolonising the curriculum project left me with a sense of excitement for a new subject: decolonising. It also left me with a desire to know more about western imperialism, to question more, to research more and to transmit- in my role as educator, the urge to ask question and never accept passively, not even the school curriculum.

Key Words and Themes Emerging

Identity: Language and words as tools for cultural expression; preservation of one's heritage; issues of power; feminism; assertiveness against lived racism; disconnectedness and connectedness; idealized cultures; nostalgia; self-worth; family and ancestors; inheritance; (dis)comfortability; sense of belonging; agency; participation; restoration and value; fitting in; self-identification; present and past; otherness; universality and conformity.

Positioning: Awareness; facing up to and challenging colonial legacies; inclusive education; many faces... many angles; visibility; misconceptions; representing voices; a journey not a destination; social context; empowerment; humility; need for time and support; representation in the workforce; diversity; re-conceptualising decolonization in MFL.

Skills Learnt: research skills; interviews as shared understanding; qualitative research; data collection; collaboration and teamwork in research; interpretation; theoretical knowledge; school practices; reflecting critically on the past; developing a sense of purpose; mindset change; knowledge as power; reframing knowledge; gaining confidence to speak out.

Deepening of Knowledge: deeper perception of intercultural; enduring impact of colonialism; understanding the full colonial narrative in different contexts; bonding between

countries within colonial contexts; nuanced experiences; value of diverse and equitable education; need to tackle curriculum decolonization and widen spaces for representation.

Sense of Agency: further exploration and research; engaging with different communities; develop curriculum in all its aspects and resources; ensure representation of diversity; move the project purpose forward; engage in societal change; question and never passively accept; start the discourse of decolonizing in my subject (Law) where it has hardly started.

And the final word from a student researcher:

'I aim to continue to expose myself to different opinions and ideas to inform my practice all the while making sure to hold space for my own mental health, as a person of colour, and pace myself so as to not suffer from burnout.'