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Research Paper

Decolonising Digital Language Learning in Palestine

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Abstract

There is currently considerable interest in every aspect of decolonisation in education. There is for example much interest in the curriculum and some interest in educational technology but little interest as yet in these in their role in language learning. The paper grows out of projects and friendships in Palestine and looks at the very special case of Palestinians using digital technologies to learn English. This paper makes the case that colonialization is present in most aspects of using digital technology to learn language, but especially so for the Palestinian learners of English. Decolonisation can grow out of scrutiny, awareness and criticality but must recognise the influence of culture and in the case of Palestine, of the impact of trauma, occupation and displacement. The need of Palestinians, politically, economically and educationally, to engage globally does however make decolonisation problematic.

Keywords: Language Learning; Palestine; Decolonisation; Digital Learning.

1. Background

This paper looks at the experiences in Palestine of language learning, specifically the learning of English through the lens of decolonisation, in relation to the decolonising of education and technology. Ongoing European support for the teaching of English in Palestine means it is a significant issue. The Palestinian context highlights the issues of decolonisation in a dramatic form.

The paper draws technology supported language into discourses that might be considered ‘political’. One response might be that any discussion of education is ‘political’ since any such discussion raises issues of resources, access, opportunity, privilege, power, criticality and understanding. In this case however, discussions of education in Palestine and the ambivalent opportunities offered by mastery of English and the use of digital technology make this case powerful but complex. Learning English using digital technology is ‘political’ and should be discussed.

The paper argues that whilst it is commonly agreed that coloniality is pervasive and ubiquitous¹, the paper attempts to draw attention to its more specific and concrete and perhaps extreme manifestation when considering firstly learning English, secondly using digital technology and thirdly doing both these in the context of the occupied Palestinian Territories.

As a potential research paper, the paper outlines a perspective that confounds other perspectives that might argue that language learning is benign, and that technology is neutral and that there is a research agenda that existing experiences must be systematically and critically examined, and that such an examination must empower those most affected.

There is however perhaps a research agenda in the making but hopefully the paper would catalyse the discussions of such an agenda amongst the people most affected.

The paper starts by discussing the nature of this colonisation in the context of the learning of English by Palestinian students.



2. Introduction

Colonialism is defined variously as, "... a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another" (Kohn & Reddy, 2008). And so, according to an English university, Keele, "Decolonization involves identifying colonial systems, structures and relationships, and working to challenge those systems. It is not "integration" or simply the token inclusion of the intellectual achievements of non-white cultures. Rather, it involves a paradigm shift from a culture of exclusion and denial to the making of space for other political philosophies and knowledge systems. It's a culture shift to think more widely about why common knowledge is what it is, and in so doing adjusting cultural perceptions and power relations in real and significant ways." And this is exactly the situation in Palestine and amongst Palestinians in so many different respects.

We could argue that current Palestinian culture is a consequence of the conquest of what is now Palestine by the Arabs in the seventh century CE and then by the Seljuk and Ottoman Turks several hundred years later. When compared to the contributory or colonising cultures of neighbouring Turkey and Arabia, both of these historical influences are still present but distinct in a uniquely Palestinian and broadly Levantine mixture. There were also of course the incursions of the Latins and Franks in the Middle Ages, and the later French and British mandates from the League of Nations contributing to European influences. The putative cosmopolitan culture of the Levant may just be projected by Europeans onto conquered and colonised communities, just an aspect the 'orientalism' of Europeans (Said, 1978).

More directly and more recently however we see the ongoing occupation of Palestine by the Israeli armed forces, the forced migration of Palestinians to Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Persian Gulf and beyond, and the digital colonization by global corporations headquartered in the USA, often in Silicon Valley. We also see the presence of European countries, for example in the activities of EU aid and capacity-building programmes and the impact and prestige of European ideas and practices, where incidentally many of the various parties involved seem to conflate 'modernising' education with 'westernising' it. We also see the impact of (apparently) global agencies such as UNRWA, UNESCO and UNHCR, where their principles, for example, of gender equality can be at odds with local values. These are the hegemonic powers at work in Palestinian society, institutions and education today.

Some of these remarks are generic, they are about using technology to learn languages, but some are specific to learning English in Palestine; many are relevant everywhere but in different ways in different places. Our point is that for students in Palestine learning English, Palestine is not just another and average place where people learn a language and English is not just another and average national language to be learnt online! Every aspect of the process is permeated by manifestations of coloniality and colonialism.

3. The Digital Technologies

We have to engage on a day-to-day basis with digital technologies, specifically mobile phones and personal computers, to realise the extent to which 'the devil is in the detail', the extent to which the minutiae of digital interfaces, interactions and images are permeated by the ideas, metaphors and idioms of dominant (global) (American) English.

This is true of both mobile phones and of computers, every sort in every way, which embody Anglophone American global culture, language and values, several of which have been covered in an earlier paper (Traxler, 2017) that looked at mobile technologies, languages and learning.

Take simple messaging. Arab colleagues choose to text in English rather than their mother tongue because the ASCII base for English texts is cheaper than the Unicode base for Arabic; they were skewed away from their native preferences and towards American English. The earlier dominance of American English in digital technologies has led to the emergence of Arabish (Bianchi, 2012), a set of widely understood conventions whereby Arabic-speaking users frequently transliterate Arabic text into Latin script when using these technologies to communicate, also known as the Arabic chat alphabet, composed the Romanized alphabets for informal Arabic dialects in which Arabic script is transcribed or encoded into a combination of Latin script and Arabic numerals. It has been widely adopted for commercial advertising and is recognised by Google Translate and Microsoft Translator. There is a Levantine version of Arabish for Palestine, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. It is however viewed as eroding students' capacity to use Modern Standard Arabic, which is considered eloquent, formal, and polite.

Similar examples abound in speech recognition, such as Dragon, Alexa or Siri, where most languages, except English and other global ‘power languages’, Arabic sometimes, and most dialects, except the standard metropolitan dialect, are not supported (Shih & Rivero, 2020).

Haptic interfaces favour European or American gestures (Srinivasan, 1995; Billé, 2018) and do not favour cultures with a different gestural vocabulary, in this case those of Palestine or the Middle East (Jung 2020; Barakat, 1973; Safadi & Valentine 1990; Thawabteh, 2011). It is likely that automatic language translation, such as Google Translate, has a similar impact on Arabic and its many dialects in relation to English, especially as these are often incorrect (Al Mahasees, 2020).

As Pegrum (2019) discusses, autocorrect is often another form of bias as is predictive text, skewing users towards a particular standard American lexicon - it will for example often capitalise ‘james’ but not ‘john’ – though this seems currently under-researched across the variants and dialects of Arabic.

Icons and graphic interfaces are usually derived from a European or American cultural context and most applications and operating systems are American in origin and culture, with those for most African languages only gradually gaining popularity through Linux distributions. Perhaps the textual dominance of American English is being replaced by graphical dominance of American images and icons (Stark & Crawford, 2015). The massive popularity of emoticons and emojis in mobile phones assumes there is some common global consensus about their meaning, the ‘thumbs up’ for example. This cannot be assumed and might just be another way in which globalised forms override local ones (Gawne & McCulloch, 2019). Is green universally understood as ‘good’ or ‘go’? (Aslam, 2006; De Bortoli & Maroto, 2001)

For younger students in Palestine, there is also the problem of European skeuomorphy (Page, 2014), giving European learners an implicit scaffold not available to learners from a different or younger culture (Oswald & Kolb, 2014). These are the kinds of barriers and challenges facing English language learners in Palestine. They inhibit a critical appreciation on the pervasive influence of an external and hegemonic culture.

4. The Digital Technologies of Education

The literature has already begun to document concerns about the bias built into search engines such as Google and Google Scholar (Segev, 2010), into self-archiving repositories such as Academia (www.academia.edu) and ResearchGate (www.researchgate.net), and into the algorithms and into the artificial intelligence (AI) built behind so many of these educational and commercial applications. Similar concerns have also been raised about some of the mapping technologies; “On Google Maps, Palestine Is Nowhere To Be Found” said one author (Alkishawi, 2021), whilst other spotted, “A Glitch in Google Maps” (Carraro, 2021).

These technologies are used daily by students, scholars, lecturers and researchers. There are also legitimate concerns about the dominance of many of the digital tools, for example YouTube and Wikipedia, used frequently by students and scholars but based on Anglocentric language, values and culture. Whilst Wikipedia is available in many languages, the volume of content in the English version as opposed to the Arabic version is in a ratio of about ten-to-one. Indicative figures are 5,625,365 articles and 145,892 editors for the English version against 633,291 articles and 10,178 editors for the Arabic version, roughly 10-to-1 (Roy, Bhatia & Jain, 2022).

Open learning is often advocated as breaking down barriers but there are arguments that this is simplistic. In fact, open learning, and open systems, open praxis, open educational resources, often represents and reproduces only one perspective, one world view, one culture and one language. Open learning is the movement and systems based on the notion that there should be no barriers to learning, and that organisations – for example authors, publishers, universities and ministries – should make learning freely available and should make its resources freely available with no restrictions on copying, adaptation and distribution. Open Educational Resources (OER) (Butcher, 2015; Atkins, Brown, & Hammond, 2007), often housed in freely-accessible repositories, are the most mature aspect of open learning. Other aspects include open textbooks (Pitt et al., 2019), open teaching or open praxis (Cronin, 2017; Cronin & MacLaren, 2018) though obviously the origins of much of ‘open’ thinking is the global North and Western Europe (Laurillard, 2008). Unfortunately, the concepts and ideals of ‘open learning’ have sometimes shrunk in practice to meant OER and open textbooks, but more significantly critics of OER have referred to it as ‘information imperialism (Mulder, 2008, p18) and

‘digital neocolonialism’ (Adam, 2019). There are also concerns that the metadata schema implicitly express European ideas rather than Palestinian or Arabic ideas about pedagogy and learning (Traxler, 2018). Does ‘open’ only privilege learners with the appropriate cultural and linguistic capital?

In the current context, we should not forget to critically review open-source operating systems and software tools, free to download, install and modify (O’Reilly, 1999; Von Hippel, 2001) and other aspects of ‘open’ including open innovation (Gassmann et al., 2010; Huizingh, 2011), open data (Molloy, 2011; Johnson, 2014), copyleft (Heffan, 1997) and ‘open development’ (Reilly & Smith, 2013; Chib et al., 2021), the application of the open movement to international development. Each of these raises concerns about the extent to which they transform but still reproduce coloniality, in whatever form, and the extent to which they privilege the already privileged, where for example that privilege comes from colonial hegemony and now comes with the prestige and momentum of a benign international ideology.

There should however be a particular concern about the technology front and centre of institutional digital learning, namely the virtual learning environment (VLE) otherwise known as the learning management system (LMS) (Weller, 2007) because the theorising and the theorists that underpin such systems are culturally specific, coming from much older and pre-digital European contexts, and certainly not derived from Palestinian thinking or Palestinian thinkers. It is widely accepted that no technology is neutral, a *tabula rasa* devoid of any ideology or culture, or indeed free in the case of education technology of a pedagogy, one designed into it. This is not to say that users, either lecturers or students, may not appropriate the technology, replacing the intended pedagogy by their usage with one of their own (Selwyn, 2013). And there is of course always a difference between the ideology espoused by individuals and organisations and the ideology actually enacted by them. Whatever the details and whichever the alternatives, these technologies are coming out of North America and Western Europe with all of the prestige and resources of these continents. “Moreover, the production of VLEs in affluent countries can lead to colonial pedagogy whereby the design features of VLEs prompt culturally specific forms of learning”. (Flavin & Bhandam, 2021) and that “... the dominance of Western companies in the provision of VLEs and, consequently, the application of Western pedagogic models globally, comprising digital colonialism. “(op cit). Ferreira et al. (2020) argue, for example, that technological solutionism has supported marketization of the education system in Brazil, comprising a form of digital colonialism. And underpinning these is the educational theorising of Western Europe and North America (Elliott & Grigorenko, 2007).

We could bring these remarks up-to-date by looking at MOOCs. The pattern does however merely repeat our previous remarks (Adam, 2019). We now see the cMOOC, based on a North American pedagogy, and the xMOOC, based on North American platforms and business models (Smith & Eng, 2013) but the argument is unchanged, and we see very little coming out of the Arab world except Western approaches translated into Arabic (Sallam, 2017; Al-Zou’bi & Al-Rousan, 2018) and certainly nothing representing alternative modes of learning and teaching. MOOCs do seem to merely continue a trend of digital pedagogies reproducing coloniality.

The ‘pivot’ to digital learning, caused by the global pandemic, was the term used for a massive transition to digital learning in institutions across the world’s education sectors. It was driven by the need to maintain some continuity for learners and understandably used existing and established systems, albeit of repurposed from some specialist role to a systemic one. The ‘pivot’ was largely conservative rather than transformative because of the need to avoid expense, risk or resistance (Smith & Traxler, 2020). In the current context, the ‘pivot’ may have entrenched and expanded the established global technologies and pedagogies rather than encouraging local innovations and initiatives around ‘decolonisation’.

The ‘pivot’ to digital learning, means additionally that conferencing technologies such as Teams and Zoom are suddenly more widely used, and so they should be more prominent in our discussion of decolonisation, especially where auto-captioning is available and in which languages. Does auto-captioning reinforce the pre-eminence of American English and disadvantage Arabic? This aspect of the ‘pivot’ to digital learning is currently under-researched.

5. Colonisation in Academia

It is however impossible to ignore the various ways in which colonisation has permeated the larger context of teaching, learning and research, of the life of academia. In the case of Palestine, as with other countries in the region, universities aspire to climb global and regional rankings, such as QS (<https://www.qs.com>). Unsurprisingly these rankings are based on institutional metrics that represent and reproduce the values and behaviour of the prestigious universities

based in Europe and North America and clearly distort the behaviour and ambitions of universities lower down the various league tables and ranking systems, whatever their mission or location. It is incidentally the case that at least one of these ranking systems and league tables overlook or underplay the significance of digital learning in the recent and current learner experience and may favour, very slightly, the more conservative pedagogies familiar in Palestinian universities.

And the architecture of universities, in Palestine for example, can sometimes embody and represent in a tangible form, the organisational structure, institutional pedagogy and the relationship to the community of the globalised university rather than reflecting local practices and philosophy. The digital learning technologies of institutions usually have a 'pay wall' controlling access to the digital campus but this merely reproduces the turnstiles and identity checks that control access to the physical campus.

It could be argued that the Western European liberal intellectual tradition embodied however crudely in 'capacity building' and in 'research training' does in fact value originality and novelty and hence value disagreement and dissent, so carrying, alongside voices saying, 'do it like us', gives permission and precedent for those voices saying, 'don't do it like us. This might however be a self-serving argument with its implied superiority and condescension. These few remarks reflect the tensions, not often articulated in Palestine between global standards and local ones.

6. The Colonisation of Pedagogy

Despite progress, in Southern Africa, Western Europe and North America, to decolonize the curriculum, the documentation and analysis of the problem outstrips attempts to devise solutions. It may however be impossible to decolonize the curriculum, for example of language learning in Palestine, without decolonising the institution. This may be because the problem is pervasive and tackling it with institutional targets, benchmarks, proportions, percentages and base-lines will fail to address the ethos and culture, the hearts and minds, of a university or college, in Palestine or anywhere else. It may however also be impossible to decolonise the hearts and minds of the institution without decolonising the host society and culture. This is clearly a challenge especially given that the ways in which Palestine is currently colonised, occupied in fact, differ dramatically from colonialism as experienced and expressed elsewhere.

In terms of language learning, the facile response might be policies, strategies and tactics that root out external and alien influences within Palestinian universities and their teaching of (American) English, but Palestinians desperately need access to global 'power' languages not only in order to access global resources and networks but also to understand global politics, disseminate Palestinian positions, promote Palestinian identity and to influence global opinions and to do so in the appropriate formats, registers and media.

As we said, the curriculum, digital, face-to-face or hybrid, is underpinned globally by imported ideas of pedagogy based on the theorising of European or American academics and research methods that are pre-digital and European. So in this respect too, we see colonisation and coloniality.

7. The Languages of Colonisation

The teaching and learning of (American) English are problematic and paradoxical. On the one hand (American) English is the dominant language of digital education, digital discourse, digital media and digital systems, and of course, of global commerce, entertainment, politics and infrastructure, but however by the same token it is threatening, transforming, replacing and overwhelming even powerful European language as well as marginal and fragile African ones. Arabic, the language of Palestine, is only one of the many variants of a language in everyday use from coasts of Morocco to the deserts of Jordan and Syria; it is robust and stable but still undermined and replaced by elements of (American) English mediated by popular digital technologies, by desktop and laptop computers but more especially by tablets and mobiles. American English is the mechanism, the Trojan horse, by which global values seep into Palestinian society. Perhaps, awareness and criticality are the key companions of language competence, not just knowing the grammar, vocabulary and syntax, or even the social and relational context of a language being learnt but an awareness of the balance of threats and opportunities presented by that language.

We should of course ask why Palestinians are learning English. They may want to do business globally online, to consume global English entertainment, to access the resources of higher (global) learning, information and knowledge,

to facilitate foreign travel and possibly emigration, to work in Palestine in tourism and hospitality or numerous other reasons. A clearer understanding of learner motivation might enable a more nuanced and appropriate critique.

Palestinian colleagues have pointed out that in Palestine, another language is already imposed on Palestinians, which is Hebrew, which many Palestinians need to learn it for economic reasons, or for Palestinians in Jerusalem to get acceptance at Israeli universities. Also, language practices are imposed by Israeli occupation system (education, economics, state procedures). For example, teaching Hebrew is obligatory at Palestinian schools in Jerusalem. This applies to Jerusalem and other cities under Israeli control, and also affects the daily life in the Westbank - less so in Gaza, which is besieged rather than occupied. Palestinians learn English to avoid having to converse with the occupiers in Hebrew. Furthermore, Hebrew words, in construction and technology, are entering Palestinian Arabic due to the enforced use of Israeli systems and services in occupied Palestine.

8. Culture and Colonisation

Clearly aspects of culture make both colonization and decolonisation a faster or a slower process for any given community. These aspects of culture at work in the current context might include innate conservatism and resistance to change, communalism and collectivism as opposed to individualism, long-termism as opposed to short-termism, and risk-taking as opposed to risk-avoidance. These are the kinds of factors documented as the cultural dimension of Palestine and the Levant (Hamdoun Al-Soufi, 2005; Alkailani et al., 2012; Al-Amleh, 2014; Mustafa, 2011; Weishut, 2012). Perhaps cultural identity, cultural cohesion and cultural resilience are also factors, especially when a society lives closely alongside a more powerful neighbour, though perhaps in a digital and connected world every society lives alongside the pervasive global digital culture.

In the case of Palestine and of other Palestinian communities scattered across the refugee camps of the Middle East, there is the strong likelihood of some ongoing collective trauma, of subjugation, occupation, exile and bereavement (Baker & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 1999; Atallah 2017; Mahamid 2020). The work of Rami Muhtaseb (2022) throws considerable light on these complex issues in the Palestinian cultural context. He explores the work of Hofstede and others.

We must recognise how other forms of culture, and their languages, for example youth culture, football culture and music culture cut across simplistic depictions of language colonisation and decolonisation, and represent diverse strong and competing affiliations.

9. The Complexity

It is the case that colonisation in English language learning in Palestine is manifest in many overlapping forms. Decolonisation should not however increase digital, cultural or educational disadvantage, it should not be a retreat or a withdrawal from the English language or from digital technology.

Whilst digital media, especially social media, play an important part of preserving Palestinian culture and identity, it is also true that this can represent a shift of activity towards that part of the community that is more technically savvy and may be exiled from the Palestinian homeland, the diaspora across the Persian Gulf, North America and Western Europe, becoming more competent in American English and confident in global culture. There are instances from marginal cultures where the 'ownership' of language and culture has shifted elders in the traditional homeland to younger exiles with greater digital media skills, itself perhaps undermining traditions. Ongoing conflict in the occupied Palestinian Territories will only serve to sustain the exodus from the Palestinian homelands² and thus further fragment and diversify the communities of English language learners from Palestine and increase the different experiences of coloniality.

This paper has outlined some of the ways in which the learning of language using digital technology and in particular, the learning of English by students in Palestine, is an example of ongoing neo-colonialism; it enables Palestinian learners to learn English but in doing so perpetuates and reconfigures their cultural, digital and linguistic marginality.

This paper is a preliminary attempt to analyse and explore the manifestations and complexities of coloniality in the learning of English by Palestinians using digital technology. This should lead to the research questions that constitute a research agenda. These should be obvious next steps. Researchers taking these steps must however be aware of wider

concerns about coloniality suffusing research tools, research funding, research ethics and research governance (Datta 2018; Held, 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2019), concerns that apply to language learning research and to educational technology research and to their intersection. (Marandi, 2023).

Notes

¹There is an enormous volume of literature at a variety of different levels and granularity but the Edtech Hub repository might be a good place to start: <https://edtechhub.org/2022/02/25/decolonising-edtech-a-resource-list-for-tackling-coloniality-and-digital-neocolonialism-in-edtech>

²This is personal conjecture but based on working with UNRWA's trainee teachers and with Palestinian language academics.

Conflict of Interest

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