



# Decolonising the languages curriculum

## linguistic justice for linguistic ecologies

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<b>Potential impact</b>	high
<b>Timescale</b>	long term
<b>Keywords</b>	decolonising, multilingualism, linguistic justice, indigenous, migration

### What is it?

Decolonising the languages curriculum is a radical requirement to critically re-examine the way in which the languages curriculum has been formed in any context. It requires the examination of the power dynamics which have led to the dominance of certain languages over others and which languages are and are not accorded resources in schools, universities, and colleges by the state, by the military, by community programmes, and in families. Decolonising the languages curriculum requires what is known as a phenomenological double break.

First, it identifies the languages taught within the curriculum. Second, it considers, critically, why these languages have come to hold these positions. Third, it brings an ethical position to bear by bringing non-dominant languages into view and re-framing language experience and language education to both take into account and enable the learning of languages which have suffered significant attrition due to the colonial actions of the curriculum in the past.

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**How to cite:** Phipps, A. (2021). Decolonising the languages curriculum: linguistic justice for linguistic ecologies. In T. Beaven & F. Rosell-Aguilar (Eds), *Innovative language pedagogy report* (pp. 5-10). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2021.50.1228>

In so doing, decolonising the languages curriculum also, of necessity, deconstructs the normative assumptions which formed and maintained the languages curriculum of each age. For example, in the late 20th century and early 21st century the language curriculum in the UK was formed out of the Entente Cordiale and historical assumptions of the language of the nearest, dominant power which led to French being the language which took a central position in the languages curriculum, with German – the language of peace-making and of economic power in Europe – following closely behind.

Language curricula are a site of hegemonic struggle with different language groups – Chinese, Polish, Gaelic, Urdu, Latin, and Greek – competing for space for their language to be taught in what is already an overcrowded curriculum. In addition, as use-based arguments for subjects, and especially for languages, have dominated the postmodern curriculum, the languages granted curriculum space have largely been those which have made a case for their usefulness in economic terms. Dominant world languages, or languages with the greatest number of speakers, have made numerical arguments for their inclusion. Chinese and Confucian classrooms have been part of this development and it underlies the global dominant of English as a foreign language.

When the language curriculum is decolonised none of this is automatically given as a good way to proceed. Not only are the powerful and often violent histories of linguistic colonisation and dominance brought to the fore, but action is taken to re-orientate the curriculum towards those languages which have suffered marginalisation and attrition, and towards nurturing speakers – be they heritage, native, or simply communities of interest – in languages which have not enjoyed the same levels of resourcing as dominant languages.

Whilst in the past the resourcing of the curriculum for ‘lesser spoken languages’ or ‘community languages’ has been problematic, the technological availability of access to speakers, and the open-source nature of much of the voluntary work by those working to keep languages alive, has allowed communities of speakers to record and curate their language and heritage. Together with attention to cultural and linguistic rights, the problematic question of ‘availability’ of textbooks or

access to speakers, is now merely a presenting issue, to the structural issue in decolonising the languages curriculum.

## Example

An example of this is the development of Te Reo Māori in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Māori language activists have campaigned to have Te Reo acknowledged to develop immersion schools and to increase the societal and cultural space for Te Reo alongside English to such an extent that there has been substantive growth in learner numbers (Nock, 2006; Nock & Winifred, 2009). This has also been undertaken by teaching and learning methods which in and of themselves decolonise the language curriculum, such as not adopting the traditional communicative language teaching methods or other approaches – structural, functional, or grammar translation methods and instead using the methods indigenous to Māori – ‘titiro’, ‘korero’, ‘whakarongo’ – to listen, look, and speak – a pedagogy of embodiment not of cognition. In this way the methods instantiate on what Santos has termed ‘The end of the cognitive empire’ (Santos, 2018) and usher in sensuous methodologies in a sensuous curriculum. This represents a further phenomenological double break with the idea of a curriculum in and of itself.

First, it ceases to understand learning as linear and based on script and literacy. Second, it fosters approaches which privilege social and cultural habits, rather than individual prowess. Third, it does not see the ‘curriculum’ as a ‘career or course’ as in its Oxford English Dictionary definition, but as an ecological way of being in balance with other beings, human and more-than-human. A further example is the work of the Researching Multilingually at Borders project, whereby a common task of making a production dance piece with young people required all the languages spoken by participants to be in play (Phipps, Tawona, & Tordzro, 2016; Tordzro, 2017). The final production – *Broken world, broken word* – was made in at least 17 languages and allowed for the opacity and patience that listening, watching, speaking, and gradually becoming comfortable with learning to ‘get the gist’ made possible in terms of community formation, trust development, and equity.

## Benefits

Decolonising the languages curriculum has the benefit of beginning in an ethical rather than a functional approach to language education. It does not value languages based on their economic potential, military usefulness, or political salience but rather from the perspective of any given community. It does not assume that the languages to be learned for such an ethical aim will be the same everywhere, but rather that these will be nuanced by history, society, migration, culture, and economics (Phipps & Fassetta, 2015). It allows for the experience of humility, which is necessary for all language learning, notably in those most used to wielding rhetorical power, and this fosters new habits of learning, development, and consciousness precisely in ways which can enable empathy and consensus building.

In an age of multiple crises, decolonising the languages curriculum, and re-framing our notion of what a curriculum is, allows for an expansion of horizons and new world views for all, not least those which have been marginalised for centuries. It enables a stance that shows how we are situated within complex language ecologies and bound together in relationships formed in myriad languages, and that learning these is a key function of linguistic justice.

## Potential issues

Any move to make curriculum change is subject to substantial resistance. To suggest, for instance, that Gaelic might be a medium for education in Scotland has led to considerable column inches of protest in the Scottish press.

The changes are steady, difficult, and for the long term. There is no quick fix to the programme of decolonising. Within the market models there is also no future, but what the work of decolonising is also showing is that it looks to a future beyond the relative newcomer, and already failing forms of global linguistic capital, by engaging philosophically with linguistic heritage, migration, and future questions of linguistic justice and human dignity of speech.

## Looking to the future

A decolonised languages curriculum is already present in what is often termed the hidden curriculum. It is present in the speech outside of education institutions and notably in artistic practice and rural contexts.

The manifesto for decolonising multilingualism, which contains principles for action and approaches, focuses on praxis, on the need to experiment and try out approaches, not least to devise and improvise (Phipps, 2019). It offers a prospect of enhanced creativity and a breadth of learning contexts outside traditional institutions in future, together with technological and community resourcing of languages.

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## Resources

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A short manifesto for decolonising multilingualism by Alison Phipps: <https://channelviewpublications.wordpress.com/2019/09/06/a-manifesto-for-decolonising-multilingualism/>

Find out about researching multilingually at Borders, a project directed by Alison Phipps: <https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=AH%2FL006936%2F1>



Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association  
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**Innovative language pedagogy report**  
**Edited by Tita Beaven and Fernando Rosell-Aguilar**

**Publication date:** 2021/03/22

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Cover layout by © 2021 Raphaël Savina ([raphael@savina.net](mailto:raphael@savina.net))  
Photo by Digital Buggu from [Pexels](https://www.pexels.com/) (CC0)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-86-3 (Ebook, PDF, colour)  
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-87-0 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)  
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-85-6 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)  
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.  
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

**Legal deposit, France:** Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: mars 2021.

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