Dialogue within and among Transnational Communities of Refugee Learners and Teachers: Covid-19, Dialogic Pedagogy and Dialogue Across Research Teams

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Abstract: As the threat of the Covid-19 pandemic intensified, displaced learners faced increasing challenges to accessing the learning online that they were attending offline before the start of the pandemic. It is these learners' and their teachers' dialogic relations which are at the core of the Covid-19, *migration* and *multilingualism* (CV19MM) project, run in partnership with stakeholders offering language lessons in Jordan. In our paper, we respond to the question 'Did the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns result in new types of community connections as refugee learners and teachers came together online?' We examine NGOs' shift to working online and the shift in data collection procedures when recording refugees' ability to navigate online spaces through the lens of New Literacy Studies which foregrounds the analysis of culture and identity in the literacy practices of migrants (Barton and Hamilton 2000). Darvin and Norton (2015) recognise that the spaces in which language socialisation takes place have become increasingly deterritorialised. We focus on the dialogic engagements which emerged from increased online interactions, the dialogic pedagogies which one NGO draws on in its work with displaced learners and teachers and the challenges faced when carrying out research with refugee communities during Covid-related restrictions. We end with discussion of how our findings shed light on working with stakeholders across borders and how this approach enhances research on language, dialogue and migration when carrying out impactful research which is of use to NGO stakeholders.

Keywords: Displacement, Dialogic teaching, Transnational refugee communities, Literacy practices

Introduction

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As the threat of the Covid-19 pandemic intensified and language learning for classes of displaced learners moved online, opportunities for dialogue within transnational communities of refugee learners and teachers arose as displaced learners met increasingly in online settings. This paper provides insights from an on-going research project which seeks to enable refugee teachers to carry out their own research in their own communities during these shifts to digital platforms and the opportunities for dialogue this affords and constrains. In the paper, the shift to researching language online is explored with attention paid to three areas: dialogue and language use, dialogic pedagogy, and dialogue in research methods. The reason for this approach is that there is an increasing acknowledgement of the need to 'decolonise' Dialogue Studies and a tendency to focus on dominant language varieties in research in this area. Mignolo (2002) has spoken of the 'geopolitics of knowledge', in which he suggests that the problem is not only a linguistic one, given his interest in the linguistic hegemony of Castilian Spanish, but also a cultural and epistemological one that goes beyond the immediate context of grammar and vocabulary. To be published in English-language journals, scholars from across the world must draw on theories and concepts originating in the Anglosphere (Ricento 2000). Mignolo and others see this as a further example of how language is always the companion of Empire; knowing as he did that "the power of a unified language, via its grammar, lay in its teaching it to the barbarians, as well as controlling barbarian languages by writing their grammars" (1995, 39). Mignolo's critiques are also epistemological as they confront the assumption that Anglosphere knowledge is humanity's only valid way of knowing. His decolonial critique posits that modernity and coloniality should be understood as mutually constitutive concepts. The coloniality of scholarly debates and outputs are manifested in hierarchical sociocultural and linguistic relationships between dominant and marginalized populations (Mignolo 2002, 2011; Tuhiwai Smith 1999). Pennycook suggests that in attempts to counter the coloniality of modern forms of higher education, academic outputs apply decolonial, postcolonial and indigenous theories to unequal power hierarchies of knowledge production, cultural, institutional and policy relations, curriculum and pedagogy (2019).

This paper explores attempts from within the field of Applied Linguistics to account for these modern forms of coloniality relating to language research, analysis and teaching by exploring the hierarchical linguistic and intellectual relationships between dominant and marginalised populations. It draws on the recent growth in studies of translanguaging which have created several important avenues for research and pedagogy, many of which relate to Dialogue Studies. The reason for this is that foundational studies such as Canagarajah (2013) and Garcia and Wei (2014) see translanguaging in political terms and very much as part of the challenge to the restrictive labels and practices of language education that Mignolo addresses above. Garcia and Wei (ibid.) argue that the concept of translanguaging be taken up in

Mignolo's (2011) decolonial terms as a challenge to the structures of the modern colonial world system while Pennycook sets out how the politics that motivate work on translanguaging are not reinscribed into the ortholinguistic labels and practices of educational normativity (Pennycook 2016; 2019). Pennycook goes further by advocating for an activist dimension to critical education projects, what he has termed 'translingual activism' (2008). This work is firmly within an agenda for the decolonisation of education and includes transformational practices which are of interest to those working in Dialogue Studies in that a core aim of this approach to language education is the development of critical language users who are able to select from a variety of linguistic resources. These linguistic resources are drawn from a repertoire that includes styles, discourses, registers and genres, and whose developing language practices aim not just at personal but also social change (Pennycook 2019). In the following section I make explicit the links between dialogue and language practices and in the conclusion draw together some of our emerging findings from taking this approach to research with refugee teachers.

Dialogue, language, and migration

To say that dialogue is always dialogic is to assert that all utterances are not only situated but are connected to previous utterances (Bakhtin 1981). This has far-reaching implications for the study of dialogue as it points to the fact that every utterance is in some way enabled and constrained by the utterance preceding. Moreover, all utterances are connected to other utterances in a complex web of discourse; that is, they respond to utterances in their immediate proximity but also utterances and conversations that may be far removed from the time and place of the speaking and writing (Jones 2012). The real source of dialogue is not the fact that language allows us to say new things in new ways, but that we must always do so in collaboration with others as all utterances are co-created. Perhaps the most important aspect of dialogism is that it helps us to see not only how speakers and listeners in particular conversations are connected to each other, but also how conversations are connected to other conversations. We inevitably construct our utterances by appropriating and mixing these voices from the past (Bakhtin 1981). All utterances are not only dialogic, but also heteroglossic, containing the traces of other people's words and the contexts in, and purposes for which, those words were used. All texts and conversations involve 'remixing' (Knobel and Lankshear 2008). We do not only remix words, we also appropriate styles and genres associated with different social practices and institutions, and when we do so, we invoke and position ourselves in relation not only to specific conversations in the past, but also to larger societal debates – what Gee (2014) calls 'capital C Conversations'.

What this means is that dialogue is less about saying something 'new' and more about being able to appropriate and assemble the voices of others, to mix them in strategic ways, and to adapt them to particular circumstances and particular goals. Dialogue is a matter of 'populating the words of others with our own intentions – of speaking the words of others with our own accents' (Bakhtin 1981, 293). Mixing voices in this way is central to the lives of all migrants, whether the forced migrants (refugees) that are taking part in this study, or voluntary migrants seeking a new life, studies, or employment: strategically deploying a range of voices to help them fit in, stay in touch with their friends and families and developing new varieties for new employment and education opportunities. However, across the world, monolingual integration policies simultaneously link proficiency in dominant languages such as English in the UK or US with social cohesion and undervalue the importance of heterogeneous minority languages in forging cohesion (Blackledge 2005). Rather than endorse this opposition between monolingualism and multilingualism, the term 'linguistic repertoire' is used here as it is not limited to the competence of multilinguals or distinct 'languages' but rather relates to the repertoires of styles, dialects, and registers of users (Kachru 1982), in our case, refugees who have been forced to migrate.

Migration takes different forms and occurs for various reasons. To migrate is to move from one place to another – whether this movement is internal, within the country's political boundaries, or international, whereby people move across a country's borders. As they move, refugees and migrants take their language practices and cultural resources with them (Capstick 2020). In international migration, the result of such mobility is that displacement of people's own cultural and social practices, in which language is central, appears in the spaces of the host community. This phenomenon is often rejected, as governments of host communities fear that the displaced people's social practices do not conform to those of the normative practices in the destination country – that different cultural and linguistic practices may jeopardise the 'homogeneity' of the nation. This rejection is based on governments' long-held ideology that for a nation to be united, its individuals must speak the same language (Anderson 2006). Over time, the one-nation one-language ideology has been embedded in the political systems of global nation-states, which have legitimised various policies that have sought to minimise and limit the use of all linguistic varieties other than the standard varieties (Hornberger 2002). Hence, the status of different linguistic varieties varies dramatically in different social contexts. That is, the varieties spoken in dominant settings are encouraged and privileged in most domains over all other varieties. As well as the dominant varieties being privileged, the speakers of these varieties are also privileged. By contrast, minorities and minority languages are neglected (Blackledge & Creese, 2010). This situation can be explained in light of Bourdieu's (1997) theory of linguistic capital. Bourdieu highlights that language

ideologies are reflected in language use when communicating, interlocutors weigh up the value of their linguistic resources while considering the field (i.e., the social context they are in at the time), and they deploy those linguistic resources that they believe carry most prestige in that setting, or alternatively, have a very good reason for not flouting these conventions. It is implicit that dominant varieties hold the most capital in most domains and are expected to be used. A salient practical example of the hierarchy of linguistic capital is that the language of instruction in mainstream education is often the official language of the country. Students, regardless of their home language varieties, will be required to use that language variety in school. In other words, learning the language of instruction gains them access to their classroom subjects, curricula and assessment which in turn leads to academic success. Such an education policy concerning language often does not benefit non-standard speakers or writers of minority languages. In the case of Jordan where Arabic is the medium of instruction in schools and English the medium of instruction in most universities, English becomes a gate-keeping device for access to a university-level qualification. The non-governmental organisation (NGO) at the centre of the study provides English-language classes to refugees from Syria and North Africa who have been displaced to Jordan and wish to continue or start their higher education studies. To do so, they need to acquire the academic genres and appropriate the academic discourse practices of these universities perpetuated by what Mignolo would describe as the geopolitics of knowledge.

In 2021, nearly 26 million displaced people are under the age of 18, and 3.8 million of these youths are Syrian migrants and refugees living in camps. The war in Syria has forced millions of Syrians to seek refuge in other countries. Though they have survived the war, the migrants and refugees still face many challenges: they are traumatised; they live in camps; and the younger ones need to continue their education and find employment afterwards (Capstick 2020). One of the challenges school-age and university-age migrants and refugees face is learning the language of the host communities' educational institutions to pursue their education. Currently, with the Covid-19 pandemic, many governments have insisted that schools shift from face-to-face to online classes to limit the spread of the virus. Thus, an additional challenge that migrants and refugees face is to teach and learn using unfamiliar online modes and methods. Nevertheless, language lessons are still being delivered to refugees and the *Covid-19, migration and multilingualism* (CV19MM) project works with NGOs to help better understand the learning that is occurring online during social restrictions. The project and research design are introduced in the following section.

Researching the language practices of displaced people in Jordan: a case study

The *CV19MM* project brings together refugee and migrant researchers and enables them to carry out research in their own communities about Covid-19. The research focuses on how migrants and refugees draw on their current networks to read, write, and share information about the Covid-19 coronavirus. The aim of the project is to identify how people use their existing language resources to do this and how they go about extending these resources by using translation, mediators and brokers when trying to understand information about the virus. An essential aspect of this mediation is the dialogue that occurs between refugees of different cultural and linguistic heritage. The research project has two aims. The first aim is to equip refugees and migrants with the skills to carry out their own research in their own communities. Through guided research training in ethnographic fieldwork online, the community researchers develop research skills in data collection and data analysis. The data range from informal social media postings to formal health information source material, as well as interview data about the talk that goes on around these texts and the social practices and networks of which they are part. At the end of the project, a team of community researchers will be equipped with the skills to carry out qualitative research drawing on ethnographic approaches. The second aim of the project is to generate a database of useful resources for migrants and refugees, and those who work with them, for understanding information about the Covid-19 coronavirus and how these resources can be used by other NGOs with an interest in dialogic pedagogy.

As we continue to experience a mass migration of research from physical to digital spaces, we see increasing opportunities for dialogic engagement across communities which provide new opportunities for dialogue among and within displaced communities. With this in mind, digitally mediated interviews on Skype and Zoom were used to facilitate social research, with peer-to-peer mentoring for relationship-building work. In the following sections two more perspectives on dialogue in the field of Applied Linguistics will be explored through examples from the case study: dialogic teaching and dialogue in data collection (i.e., dialogue in research design).

Dialogue in classroom teaching (dialogic pedagogies)

Talk-intensive pedagogies are common to English language teaching, though approaches differ in terms of how far teachers aim to cultivate inclusive classroom discourse. An assumption dominates among current practitioners in the NGO sector that learners learn best through participation in meaningful classroom discourse as well as in classrooms where all learners are encouraged to participate in classroom dialogue (Capstick 2020a; Capstick and Ateek 2021). However, this kind of dialo-

gic pedagogy raises questions about teachers' and learners' views about the appropriation of dialogic pedagogies in classes made up of displaced learners with different cultural and linguistic knowledge. The NGO in this study frames this question as: how do teachers manage the demands of dialogic pedagogies (which include cognitive challenge, inclusivity, and the fostering of supportive relationships) in cross-cultural interactions? To respond, it is important to look at how research on dialogic pedagogies has developed over the past twenty years. This section provides a brief review of this literature on these talk-intensive pedagogies. Most of this literature has grown out of a concern with sociocultural psychological theory and a dissatisfaction with traditional classroom discourse structures (Mehan 1998) and an increasing interest in the efficacy of dialogic teaching such as the work of Resnick, Asterhan and Clarke (2015). However, what is of specific interest to the education of displaced learners, many of whom have been uprooted from their homes, is the concern with learner voice and the need to help learners prepare for critical participation in deliberative democracy (Burbules and Berk 1999). The differences between critical thinking and critical pedagogy have been discussed at length elsewhere. In this respect, Burbules and Berk (1999) distinguish critical pedagogy from critical thinking, where the latter focuses on the development of learners who can make well-substantiated choices about their values and behaviour by giving evidence and identifying reasons. Educators taking this stance tend to avoid an explicit ideological orientation in their teaching, opting for pedagogy which aims to encourage thoughtful and reasonable people (Sibbett 2019). Burbules (1995) has argued that for classroom dialogue to be transformative, citizenship educators choosing a critical thinking approach align themselves with advocating for pluralism (Sibbett 2019). These educators value disagreement as well as difference in classroom talk. Indeed, pluralism here motivates learners to justify their proposals with appeals to justice, thereby contributing to social knowledge (Parker 2006). These instructional approaches therefore seek to exploit the power of talk to engage learners' thinking and learning (Alexander 2008) which is central to dialogic pedagogy. Lefstein and Snell define dialogic pedagogy as teaching and learning in which, firstly, learners and teachers address authentic problems and play an active role in the joint construction of knowledge and, secondly, as the kind of teaching and learning where learners are empowered to express their voices, thereby promoting the interaction of multiple perspectives (2018). Lefstein and Snell stress that in dialogic pedagogy, teachers and learners adopt open and critical stances toward this construction of knowledge as part of a classroom community which is characterised by supportive relationships and inclusive norms (ibid.). What is of concern in this paper is the extent to which these different features may be in tension with each other in a class of displaced learners and how refugee teachers go about researching these tensions in their own lessons. A critical stance on one learner's knowledge may entail the loss of face and a conflict with support and care for that learner. For these reasons, Snell and Lefstein (2018)

see dialogic pedagogy as a problem space – 'a set of issues and concerns to attend to – rather than a 'best practice' prescription (Lefstein, Snell and Israeli 2015).

Dialogue in data collection

Having introduced the nature of the dialogic approach that the NGO in this study takes in its English language lessons for refugees in Jordan, this section focuses on the role of dialogue in the methodologies drawn in the *CV19MM* project which seeks to bring together refugee teachers with academic researchers with an interest in dialogue. The approach taken in this research project is that of linguistic ethnography. The overarching aim of linguistic ethnography is to make meaning from the speech and writing of others. For the kind of team ethnography pursued by the *CV19MM* project team, this process becomes complex as researchers engage together in the process of meaning making. These processes are rich in potential for dialogue. In this research study, we were initially (until the Covid-19-related restrictions on travel and social distancing came into force) following an approach taken by the linguistic ethnographers working in multilingual teams to investigate linguistic practices and identities of multilingual learners. Blackledge and Creese (2010) developed an approach in which they 'demystify' the research process for those who teach and study multilingualism in the UK and in 2012 explored the role of voice and meaning making in team ethnography by asking how teams of researchers negotiate and come to (dis)agreements in the process of making 'meaning' out of 'data'. That is, how multiple linguistic practices in and out of informal educational settings are synthesised into 'research findings' (Creese and Blackledge 2012). Arguing that this process of meaning making is often, at best, implicit in social research generally, this demystifying of the research process is taken up here in an attempt to explore its application to work in Dialogue Studies, in this case, the dialogue of the research team embarking on research with displaced language learners and teachers. In order to take this ethnographic approach to data collection, the NGO and academic researchers delivered training in interview methods and text collection, after which the refugee community researchers collected data from members of their own communities and networks. The community researchers save information relating to language use, language learning and Covid-19 (e.g., Facebook postings; medical information; Tweets) and ask the friends and family in their networks about the reading and writing practices related to these texts. The interviews include questions about the texts as well as questions about their wider language and literacy practices. The NGO led on the ethical procedures for working in this way and university ethical consent was obtained. As part of the texts collected and interviews carried out the community researchers ask respondents to provide demographic information on their household including age, gender and language use. In the interviews, participants were not asked for identifying details and all data is anonymised by the re-

searchers prior to uploading to the website. The following research questions were agreed by the teams of community researchers:

RQ1: What language and literacy practices do refugees and migrants draw on in their English language lessons and when sharing information about COVID-19?

RQ2: What literacy mediation and translation takes place to make texts about Covid-19 accessible to refugees and migrants and who acts as literacy mediators in these networks?

The questions are broken down into the following three main categories:

1. Current practices: What language and literacy practices do you draw on most often? What networks are you part of? What online sites do you visit? Do you visit different sites in different places (home computer, school/work computer, mobile devices)?

2. Ways of participation: How much reading and writing do you do on these sites? What are the different functions of these sites? Do you make cross reference (i.e. similar content posted on different sites, though may be written in different ways)? Do you enjoy posting on these sites? Why? Do you use different languages/scripts on different sites? Why?

3. Covid-19 information sharing practices: Do you write things about Covid-19? What do you write? Do you read things about Covid-19? What do you read? Do you share things about Covid-19? What do you share? Who do you share these items with? Do you need to translate or explain these items? Any interesting experience in posting information about Covid-19? Have you noticed any changes in your computer/mobile phone use over the years? What are they?

In the final section, we move from the collection of data to the emerging findings and the key issues that we have identified at this point in the project for taking the methodological approach described in this section.

What we are learning in the CV19MM project

In the final section, an overview of the initial findings of the CV19MM project will be discussed. The focus of this concluding section is to bring together issues relating to dialogic teaching and dialogue in data collection for those practitioners working in Dialogue Studies at this time of social distancing as we continue to adjust our ways of teaching, as well as our ways of collecting and analysing data. Linguistic ethnographers across the world continue to respond in creative ways to working in

teams of researchers which foreground the emic view in social research about refugees and migrants. Foregrounding data collection methods which re-think researcher–researched relationships was central to understanding online ethnography. For example, we worked hard to ensure that our data collection among displaced communities was sensitive to who was included and excluded and though we aimed to include a focus on working with disabled people and ensuring a gender balance, this was not always possible when recruiting community researchers. We continue to seek advice from our partners in Jordan about how to ensure inclusion and equity when working with researchers from across several countries and in different research settings. These discussions inform the research training that we deliver through the project website which is aided by an interdisciplinary approach that sees us draw from a range of disciplines in which we now include Dialogue Studies. Similarly, taking a stance towards ethics which fosters researcher resilience was essential. What we found was that resilience emerged out of the adversity faced by the community researchers and their (online) research participants and learners, teaching us that it was the capacity for dialogue among researchers which enabled them to respond to and move through the different stages of social distancing and lockdown. Research participants continue to communicate and foster relationships through these adverse conditions as they rely on their peer mentors and transnational networks. In dialogue with their peers and through the shared experiences of these challenges, the community researchers collaboratively adapt and challenge research assumptions and behaviours as they meet regularly online to respond to new and ever-changing restrictions. The outcome here has been a revised sense of community that serves both the research process as well as enabling wider transformative goals in the community researchers' classroom teaching. These transformational goals are achieved through a reflective approach to their research design and working with their peer mentors to expand on the kinds of reflective practices which helps us to identify what works and what does not work in researching language and literacy practices online. Reflection and communication (cornerstones of dialogue) form the foundations of our work with displaced people in these challenging times.

Doing research during a global pandemic could have resulted in increased pressure on research participants and the communities of which they are part. Throughout our project we have sought to identify the potential our work holds for meaningful benefit to participants and their communities and evaluated this against the original research aims and purpose. For example, relationship-building has been essential to the dialogic approach to refugee language education work taken in the CV19MM project, but it has been particularly important during the pandemic as we work with displaced people, many of whom are vulnerable and have experienced trauma or at least adversity as part of their displacements. Our response has been focused on the needs of the community researchers and, at their request, drawing on the WhatsApp

platforms which are a regular part of their social interactions. These networks have become a catalyst for creativity, as well as building a sense of community, particularly by using these platforms for extending the peer-to-peer mentoring networks. However, while the community researchers, academics and NGO staff involved in the project are dealing with unforeseen circumstances, it has been necessary to foreground the mental and physical health challenges that are often related to gender and other identity-based stratifications, and this is often constrained by the WhatsApp platforms which deny access to many and mask many of the difficulties some of the team of community researchers are facing. What we are learning is that social media platforms constrain opportunities for dialogue for many of the most vulnerable within our communities of researchers. This finding aligns with the entrenchment of gender biases confronted in the work of Minello (2020), who suggests that widening existing inequalities is a potential outcome of poorly designed and implemented leadership practices during pandemic-related projects. An important orientation for us in this light is the work Tzanakou (2020), who provides guidance on embracing new understandings of the changing nature of inequalities.

Finally, the coordination of a completely remote research team revealed difficulties of staying connected and implementing the right digital tools for responding to the research questions outlined above. These research questions have therefore been reformulated several times. Also, the analysis of ethnographic interview data and examples of writing from across social media networks and classroom settings are proving rich but are also part of a much bigger set of the community researchers' and their participants' literacy practices. The diversity of data sets has presented challenges and forces us to be ever more vigilant about the critical stance we take in our project. For example, while the team is developing new digital skills relating to remote and online team-based ethnography, we are still only able to capture a snapshot of the digital literacies which our research participants draw on in their lives. Therefore, while we are experiencing a considerable migration of research from physical to digital spaces, the digital research approach to education research with a focus on dialogue discussed in this paper recognises that our initial findings are partial. Social research continues to be grounded in social relationships, which can only flourish by careful maintenance over time. In the past 18 months, we have found that qualitative methods such as digitally mediated interviews have enabled us to reach a variety of research participants while not always facilitating the kinds of relationship building and participant observation among researchers and within research settings that qualitatively oriented researchers regularly engage in. The consequences which arise from participants being inaccessible, particularly those who are most vulnerable or marginalised, risks quieting voices. Paradoxically, these are so often the voices of those we most need to hear when considering interventions and responses to the pandemic. Therefore, in the final stage of our CV19MM project, we are focusing our

critical consideration on whose voices are being privileged at this time and whose are not.

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