

An exploration of student MFL teachers' emerging perceptions of decolonising the MFL curriculum

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ABSTRACT

How we teach Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) is currently being questioned in light of growing awareness of coloniality within the secondary curriculum and racial inequalities. Within this context, this research set out to explore the emerging perceptions of five student MFL teachers around decolonising the MFL curriculum during their second teaching placement at one university. Results indicated that whilst student MFL teachers have a theoretical understanding of decolonising the curriculum and are able to address the Eurocentric white narrative of individual lessons, which included the representation of their learners, they felt unable to move away from standalone lessons. Furthermore, individual positionality relating to decolonisation was for the most part absent. Greater support in terms of professional development and collaboration was identified for the future.

Keywords: Decolonising the MFL curriculum, Student MFL teachers

Introduction

The existence of racial inequalities and impact on learners are clearly outlined in Williams's report (Welsh Government, 2021a). The Welsh Government's (2022) Anti-Racist Action Plan includes a specific section for education providers, aiming to become an anti-racist country by 2030.

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Attempting to decolonise the curriculum addresses a major area of racial inequality in the educational systems. If curriculum lies at the heart of schooling, then central to this are student teachers who will teach and inspire the next generation of learners. Working to decolonise the curriculum is complex in a system where coloniality still exists (Domingu ez, 2019; Gabi et al., 2023).

As a white schoolteacher of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) working in an ITE context, I recognised the lack of research on decolonising the secondary modern languages curriculum. I wanted to explore this theme with MFL student teachers as they embarked on their teaching careers.

Literature

Despite numerous publications grounded in decolonising secondary teaching (e.g., Elliott et al., 2020; Harris, 2020; Olsson Rost, 2022; Glowach et al., 2023; Arday, 2021) decolonising the MFL curricula in UK secondary schools is an underexplored area. Current research challenges assumptions around the diversity and inclusivity of teaching presuming a neutral point in situating diversity, putting the ‘white norm’ at the centre and considering ‘others’ as diverse (Panford, 2021; Hirsch, 2021). Using the word ‘foreign’ to describe the discipline of language teaching gives a clear indication of ‘othering’ (Agudo, 2021). Increasingly there are calls for it to be replaced with ‘global’, ‘world’ (Agudo, 2021; Kohl, 2018) or ‘international’ as evidenced in the CfW (Welsh Government, 2021b).

Representation in MFL Teaching Materials

While literature addressing decolonisation in secondary MFL is scarce, research on race and racism in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages highlights issues, including stereotypical imagery in textbooks, hiring preferences for white native speakers, and marginalising teachers of colour (Kubota and Lin, 2006). Panford (2021) identifies similar themes in MFL teaching, such as stereotypical representations in secondary textbooks and assessment materials. For example, Bedecarr e (2022) and Spiegelman (2022) consider maps celebrating ‘la Francophonie’ problematic as they fail to address the multilingual nature of these countries or highlight current

discourse around removing French as an official language. Moreover, there is little attempt to explain the violent history which took France to all continents (Mbembe et al., 2018; Spiegelman, 2022).

Who are Native Speakers in MFL Teaching?

Terms such as 'native speaker (NS)' and 'authentic pronunciation' are used in MFL teaching (Creese et al., 2014; Doerr, 2009) but the problem is that the concept of NS is associated with a monolingual white speaker (Benaglia and Smith, 2022). There is a preference for 'Parisian French' (Benaglia and Smith, 2022) or Spanish speakers from mainland Spain (Macedo, 2019) and in the context of teaching German, being a native speaker of German is linked to being white (McGregor, 2020). How we define a NS is far from inclusive, or representative of the global context in which languages are spoken.

Which Languages are Taught in Secondary Classrooms?

The Euro-centric domination of language provision at Key Stage 3 is reflected in the languages taught, with a focus on the 'big three' - French, German and Spanish (Collen et al., 2022). School practices reflect racial hierarchies of languages, placing greater value on languages associated with whiteness than racially minoritised languages (von Esch et al., 2020), with 'high culture' status given to the European languages taught (Wardhaugh et al., 2014 p. 85).

Decolonising the MFL curriculum requires a critical examination of teaching materials and language provision to challenge Eurocentric norms and promote linguistic and cultural diversity. Further research is therefore needed to explore the complexities of race and representation in MFL education and develop inclusive pedagogies that centre marginalised voices.

Methods

Affording student teachers time and space during their training year to discuss issues of race and identity, white privilege and colonial pedagogies

could eventually mobilise teachers into becoming ‘agents of change’ (Johnson and Mouthaan, 2021) and disrupt the Eurocentric narrative. Le Grange (2023) suggests that this work could be done through ‘complicated conversations’ which not only exchange information but provide students space to find their own voice and allow for self-criticism. In this context, I explored the perspectives of MFL student teachers during their second teaching placement, after they gained experience of the reality of the classroom in their first placement to be able to respond to the topic.

Ethics

Before starting the research, ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee. Student teachers were given an information form detailing the voluntary nature of the study, their right to withdraw at any time and the purpose of the research.

An overarching ethical consideration related to my position as the lecturer of the participants, recognising the hierarchical relationship (Braun and Clarke, 2013). To mitigate the effects of my positionality I was transparent with participants about the aims of the project and my use of data, both prior to the start of my research and in the participant information sheet. For the online focus group, I removed myself from the focus group and a colleague who was familiar with the theme but did not teach the group facilitated the discussion using predetermined questions.

Sampling Procedure and Description

The study participants comprised the PGCE MFL secondary group for which I am subject lead. All eight students were invited to participate in my research, but only six submitted completed consent forms. All students had completed undergraduate European Language degrees, both within and outside the UK. Of the six students, five completed the online questionnaire, and four participated in the online focus group.

This case study used a qualitative approach to explore emerging perceptions of a group of student teachers of MFL during their second teaching placement. The study aimed to answer three research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What do student teachers understand by the term 'decolonising the MFL curriculum'?

RQ2: What do student MFL teachers perceive to be the barriers to decolonising the MFL curriculum?

RQ3: How do student MFL teachers perceive the future of decolonising the MFL curriculum in their own teaching?

Research tools included an online questionnaire and focus group. Questionnaires were distributed prior to the second teaching placement (February 2023). Subsequently, students attended a PGCE study-day on decolonising the MFL curriculum, shaped around responses from the online questionnaire (April 2023). At the end of the second teaching placement an online focus group was conducted to revisit the research questions (May 2023).

Data Generation & Analysis

The online survey consisted of two parts: the first part focused on the participants' own tertiary education and experiences of learning languages; and the second part dealt with perceptions of decolonising the curriculum, experiences of decolonising the curriculum in Wales, anti-racist training in school, understanding of the term 'decolonising the MFL curriculum' and potential barriers.

The online questionnaire contained mainly open questions allowing participants to answer fully about their own experiences of language learning, and training experiences in exploring decolonising the curriculum. Some closed questions were included at the start of the second part of the online questionnaire relating to students' experience and knowledge of the Welsh Government's Diversity, Equity and Professional Learning organisation (DARPL) and the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan (Welsh Government, 2022).

The online focus group took place using Microsoft Teams and was audio-recorded. Questions for the focus groups were semi-structured to allow the moderator to probe, and clarify where necessary, but also to be flexible to follow up if required (Newby, 2010). Using semi-structured questions allowed the moderator to have a clear idea of the issues and questions which I wanted to be explored and these were discussed fully before the focus group took place.

I followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) approach to analyse the data. Much time was spent reading and re-reading the answers from the questionnaire and the interview transcripts in order for me to become immersed in the data before critically engaging with it. Coding of the qualitative responses from the online questionnaire was repeated several times, as coding is an iterative process (Newby, 2010). Following my coding work, I made a list of the codes, before looking to identify broader themes. This was an active not a passive process during which I looked for patterns and themes.

Results and Discussion

What do student teachers understand by the term 'decolonising the MFL curriculum'?

In exploring student teachers' understanding of the term 'decolonising the MFL curriculum' there was a marked shift in responses to the survey (pre PGCE MFL study day) and the later focus group. Before their second placement and PGCE MFL study day, the student teachers' definition is aligned to a more general understanding of coloniality and the Eurocentric focus of teaching in the UK. This perhaps more theoretical interpretation of the term may be explained by the relative inexperience of the student teachers in the classroom after having completed just one term of teacher training, and by the lack of opportunity to discuss and debate the concept, which literature reveals to be important in teacher development (Elliot et al., 2021; Arday, 2021).

During the online focus group discussions all student teachers emphasised the need for learners to see themselves in language teaching. They stressed the importance of representation and inclusion of all learners, as recognised by Olsson Rost (2022), Elliott et al. (2021) and Harris (2020). Although it was not possible to identify specific factors, this change in focus, moving from theory to the learner may reflect factors such as the study day, wider reading, discussions with others, their own teaching practice and relationships with their learners and colleagues, and other personal experiences.

For Johnson and Mouthaan (2021) the ability to confront and question one's own world perspectives and positionality should be the starting point of engagement with decolonisation. In my data, it could be argued that an essential component of 'why we are decolonising' is missing and this is shown through the absence of words such as 'white privilege', 'racism' and 'disruption' given that only one student teacher (1/4) in the discussion directly referred to this.

What do student MFL teachers perceive to be the barriers to decolonising the MFL curriculum?

In the online questionnaire, students echoed challenges identified by Olsson Rost (2022) and Elliot et al. (2021), namely a lack of knowledge, GCSE specifications, time, and lack of resources as barriers, and are exactly as the student teachers identified in the online survey. In addition, tensions between the student teacher and their school or department around the autonomy of the student teacher to decolonise curriculum content, or indeed the priority given to this work, are reflected in Gabi et al.'s (2023) and Elliot et al.'s (2021) work, and these tensions were clearly articulated by the student teachers in both data sets. Elliot et al. (2021) refer to the barriers from colleagues within school as 'pushback' and the focus group revealed that this leaves the student teachers feeling that their voice is not valued, 'we are still just PGCE students' (Student D). This pushback may also reflect a lack of 'buy-in' from senior leadership (Lidher et al., 2023).

A new theme was identified in the online focus group, which was the lack of confidence and ability of student teachers to move away from stand-alone 'decolonised' lessons. This is reflected in student D's comment that 'we don't know how to do that in a scheme of work'. Although the data suggest that the student teachers are anxious about their inability to design a scheme of work or unpin all language teaching through a decolonising lens, this could in fact be considered a strength. It reflects their awareness that decolonising the curriculum is not a tick box activity which can be completed in one lesson, but is an ongoing process as described by Moncrieffe (2020) and Johnson and Mouthaan (2021). This is highlighted by Participant B who said, 'So like, not just, it's not just a theory, but something that's an actual like living and breathing practice that we should be doing every day.'

How do student MFL teachers perceive the future of decolonising the MFL curriculum in their own teaching?

Results from this small-scale study clearly indicate that some student teachers recognise future opportunities to decolonise the MFL curriculum within CfW, whereas others regard the maturity of the learners at 'A' level and their linguistic ability as a more appropriate level to use authentic resources. CfW and the absence of prescriptive content within the Area of Learning and Experience: Languages, Literacy and Communication (Welsh Government, 2021b) provides MFL teachers with an opportunity to design a curriculum which reflects the cultural diversity of learners in Wales and moves from the Eurocentric focus of MFL teaching, but this will require a collaborative approach between departments, schools and ITE providers (Glowach et al., 2023; Lidher et al., 2023).

Conclusion

Although this small-scale study took place within the context of Initial Teacher Education with a focus on student teachers of MFL, there are wider lessons for all teachers of languages. Firstly, it is important for teachers to have time and space for reflection and discussion on positionality within teaching. Secondly, teachers of languages are to be encouraged to engage critically with the content of the MFL curriculum and its Eurocentric focus. Finally, there is a need for a decolonial approach to underpin all lessons with a commitment by colleagues, departments, schools and universities to work collaboratively on this journey.

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