RESEARCH ARTICLE:

The Potential of the Language Portrait as a Self-Reflective and Decolonial Research Tool for Undergraduates: A Case Study

Intisar Alsagier Etbaigha[1], Abdullah Bayat[2] and Khadijah Moloi[3]

Abstract

The study reports on undergraduate students' introduction to the Language Portrait (LP) as a creative inquiry resource that they used to embark on a scholarly journey through which they could potentially decolonise their subjectivities. We argue that the coloniality of English in the South African context has undermined subaltern students' scholarly knowledge production and contribution, ways of thinking, and how they value themselves outside the accepted Western norms as embodied in the English language. Consequently, this has shaped their subjectivity. By using LPs, students were able to reflect on their learning experiences. The study finds that self-reflective research skills can provide resources for shifts towards a non-colonial subjectivity. Using an exploratory case study design, students' engagement with LPs was utilised as data, accompanied by interviews. Twelve students studying at an Islamic higher education institute were asked to colour in a body silhouette (LP) and were then interviewed to explain the meaning of their LPs. The study found that the LP was an effective tool for reflecting on students learning and scholarly aspirations. Students responded very positively to the way they could do self-reflection in a colourful and playful manner. We also found that learning Arabic allowed the students to realise that there are alternative ways of thinking about who they could become. LPs added to their skill set by giving them a new research tool that they may use to pursue an epistemic delinking from the colonial project.

Keywords: language portrait; undergraduate research; decoloniality; Arabic; subjectivity

Introduction

This paper argues that research tools like the Language Portrait (LP) and the learning of Arabic can be used by students to enact shifts in their colonial subjectivities. Learning Arabic, although not an indigenous language in South Africa, can be a decolonial[i] resource for people, particularly Muslims, for whom Arabic is a religious and spiritual resource. The fact that students seek linguistic citizenship (Williams and Stroud, 2015) in Arabic allows them to value the potential of a subaltern[ii] language in offering a way to act, value themselves, and think differently in the current cultural and social world. In this study, we discovered that students understood the content of Islamic-related topics better when Arabic was introduced as a subject. They also began to understand the content because of learning Arabic. We observed that students were more capable of articulating and reflecting on their experiences when the LP was introduced to them as a research tool. This discovery prompted the research into LPs and Arabic as self-reflective and learning tools to empower students to embark on a self-decolonising journey.

The coloniality of language in South Africa gives English dominance by undermining non-white ways of thinking, their exercise of power and the way they value themselves. Learning a subaltern language and LPs as research tools can facilitate students' decolonial journey. In learning skills such as Arabic and the LP, students can embark on research and reflect on their learning practices, which help them to ground new ways of thinking and to change their colonial beings. This gives

[1]Madina Institute SA, intisar.etbaigha@madinainstitute.ac.za
[2]University of the Western Cape, abbayat@uwc.ac.za
[3]Madina Institute SA, khadijah.moloi@madinainstitute.ac.za

them the ability to challenge micro-colonial power structures. The research tools can potentially unshackle students from conventional ways of thinking manifested in adopting Western norms and practices.

Coloniality can occur insidiously through language by making subalterns think in a colonial language. Conventional banking teaching maintains the metaphor that students are "empty jars" into which knowledge should be poured. This means that students are not acknowledged and valued as knowledge contributors and are not given the opportunity to grow as potential researchers (Freire, 1996). This leaves them disempowered and unable to do research for themselves, placing them in a position of viewing themselves and the world according to the lens of their colonisers, which affected the students' Muslim identity. English as the dominant medium of teaching and learning in schools and universities in South Africa indicates the coloniality and hegemony of English (Motala *et al.* 2021). This results in the subalterns being placed in the Western conceptual frame of superiority and being limited by it (Stroud and Kerfoot, 2020). Similarly, steps towards decoloniality can be pursued by introducing a subaltern language or the learning of potential decolonial tools such as LPs. In addition, learning from the subaltern – including their language and culture – has been suggested as a way towards border thinking (Mignolo, 2000), which is a bridge to decoloniality. Williams (2019) argues that indigenous languages enable a transformation in subjectivity (how one thinks about oneself) as well as in ontology (what one believes constitutes reality and epistemology) and in the ways one learns and gains knowledge.

Owing to the nature of the study, an exploratory case study research design was used. The purpose was to empower students to use an LP as a research tool to reflect on how learning Arabic had influenced them. Students studying towards a BA degree in Islamic studies at an Islamic institute were purposively selected. The LP was used to assist students to unravel the perceptions of their linguistic repertoire and how they position themselves in this multimodal exercise. To triangulate the findings', semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants to give them the opportunity to reflect on their experiences of learning Arabic and using a new research tool, and to share their narratives on how this helped them to take the first steps in their decolonial journey.

One of the problems in the Islamic institute is that students do not have enough space to hold discussions about what they are learning, and how this learning affects the way they think about the world generally and the world of work after completion of studies. The curriculum at the institute is primarily Islamic studies and Arabic. The texts that are used are written in classical Arabic, requiring translation by the lecturers to facilitate learning. Since the inception of the institute, Arabic has been taught for understanding and mastery of the language's grammar with little or no practice in using it for communication purposes. Since the arrival of one of the authors of this paper, efforts have been made to push for Arabic as a spoken language within the classroom, at the institution. Notwithstanding these efforts, the students at the institute, and South African Muslim students in general, mostly communicate in the dominant languages of the country, such as English, Afrikaans and, where applicable, their indigenous language.

Many Muslims in Cape Town are descendants of a mixture of Indonesian, East African and Bengal slaves brought to South Africa by the colonial powers. Other groups of Muslims include those of Indian descent and indigenous South Africans. Since 1994, many Muslims from various parts of Africa and other Muslim countries have made South Africa their home. To varying degrees, they are influenced by the norms of Western colonial ideas and thoughts (Da Costa, 1994) and are subjected to colonial discourses of power. However, they have retained their religion and its related discourses. The students at the Islamic institute largely reflect these demographics. Their identity is influenced by colonial ideas because they are schooled in English and taught colonial knowledge formations. Therefore, students are not given the opportunity to nourish themselves as knowledge co-creators during instructional activities, nor as contributors or beginner researchers.

The paper is an attempt to introduce undergraduate students to LPs as a research tool to help them assess the extent to which the teaching of Arabic has assisted them to change their perceptions of themselves and the world. As far as we know, this is the first study on the potential of the LP as a self-reflective and decolonial research tool to empower undergraduate students to reflect on the relationship between the learning of Arabic and decoloniality in South African higher education. The gap which this study addresses is how encouraging students to become researchers in their own learning of Arabic contributes to changing their perceptions of themselves and the world. The problem is significant, especially in the South African context where colonised institutions continue to teach colonial knowledge formations. The research questions posed in this study were:

- What is the significance of the LP as a self-reflective and decolonial research tool for undergraduates?
- How can undergraduate students use LPs in the learning of Arabic to facilitate their decolonial journey?

Literature Review

The LP as a multimodal research tool, is widely used in the field of language and identity. An LP is a line drawing of an empty whole-body silhouette in or around which research participants colour languages or language associations (Kusters and De Meulder, 2019). The silhouettes were initially used as a language awareness exercise in education (Busch, 2018). However, since the beginning of the 1990s, LP has also been used as a research tool. The drawing and colouring are combined with students' narratives of their experiences in language learning, which make the LP a multimodal research tool (Kusters and De Meulder, 2019). The human body can be viewed as a container or channel for languages (Coffey, 2015). The importance of the LP lies in the fact that it sheds light on how students portray their subjectivities and thinking patterns about the subject matter, allowing them to do self-study. Self-reflection is critical for undertaking a journey to self-decoloniality. Mortari (2015) suggests that radical reflection is a reflection which, through in-depth interrogation of the mental life, aims to hunt down assumptions. These assumptions are the taken-for-granted beliefs that seem so obvious to us that they need not be stated explicitly. For example, an assumption exists that English is the only legitimate language for teaching and learning, and that those who can express themselves clearly in English without an accent are superior in intelligence. These assumptions are therefore paradigmatic and prescriptive because they establish what ought to happen in a particular situation, while causal assumptions explain how reality functions (Brookfield, 1995).

The LP offers new ways of understanding how students engage with languages; an understanding that goes beyond how students learn languages into exploring how these languages are experienced, conceived, and represented in their lives (Busch, 2012; Coffey, 2015). Busch (2012: 503) describes an LP as a novel, multimodal methodological approach that offers "a close reading of the visual and verbal representation of linguistic experience and linguistic resources". Coffey (2015: 500) states that language portraits offer "an alternative and emerging paradigm" that is critical to reflect not only on language content but also perceptions of language(s) and language learning. LPs can provide different and broader modes of reflexivity to promote a more nuanced picture of how individuals relate to and personally invest in languages (Coffey, 2015). In this study, the LP was introduced to undergraduate students as a research tool to reflect on how learning Arabic and a research tool helped them to begin their self-decolonising journey. To understand the gains of the introduction of this research tool, it was important to reflect on the students' experience with undergraduate research. The process of individual decolonising works to examine and carefully transform unequal relations of power, and reflective research is one micro-tool that can be used to achieve this goal.

In our endeavour to unpack the potential of LPs as a self-reflective and decolonial research tool for undergraduates, we draw from Argyris and Schon (1974), who introduce the critical reflection

approach. Argyris and Schön conceptualise theory-in-use (one's actual behaviour) and espouse theory (how one thinks one behaves). Reflecting on the differences between the two enables learners in organisations to transition to deeper models of learning. The key findings of Argyris and Schön (1974) were that Model 1 learning is characterised by goal-centred learning, maximising wins, minimising losses, minimising expression of negative feelings, and emphasising rationality. They argue that this leads to a unilateral management style and defensive routines, ownership of actions, but competitive behaviour (at a cost to interpersonal relationships), self-protection resulting in limited testing of ideas, and little freedom of choice. Instead, they argue for Model 2 learning, focusing on an environment promoting linkages between actions and their causes, informed choice whereby tasks are jointly controlled, and commitment to freedom of choice, resulting in testing of ideas. Model 2 learning allows assumptions about how to obtain goals to be accessed.

The transition between Model 1 and Model 2 can be supported by ensuring learners have the freedom of choice to shift to Model 2, and by introducing approaches to management education that exposes the inconsistencies between espoused theory and theory-in-use (Argyris and Schön, 1974). Building from Argyris and Schon's (1974) concept of reflection, Mezirow (1991) and Freire (1996) emphasise that the way in which one processes one's critical reflection of experience is central to one's learning. A learning cycle begins with experience, continues with reflection, and later leads to action, which itself becomes a concrete experience for reflection. Kolb (1984) refines the concept of reflection by dividing it into two separate learning activities: perceiving and processing. In his experiential learning theory, Kolb (1984) divides the reflection process into four main stages: (i) You have an experience event, be it positive or negative; (ii) You think about what happened, how you felt, how you behaved and the outcomes; (iii) You understand the experience differently and form some ideas about how you might do things differently in the future; (iv) The next time you face that experience event again, you experiment to act or react differently.

Studies by Davis (2022), Habash (2022), Mortari (2015) and Gläser-Zikuda (2012) point to self-reflection as an essential mental activity that enables a better understanding of oneself, one's motivations, behaviours, thoughts, desires, feelings, thinking about own experiences and critically learning from things that happened, and thereby developing knowledge, attitudes or behaviour, which provide more effective ways of working in the future. For Franks (2016), self-reflection encourages researchers to look back on past events, recall their personal thoughts and feelings and ask questions about the ways they behave and the meanings they hold for their actions and reactions. Building on these thoughts, our theoretical stance is, for example, that English as a colonial form of power shapes the way we, as non-white subaltern Muslims, relate to ourselves; it shapes our sense of self. To decolonise, we need to learn subaltern symbols and languages. We cannot escape English, but we can undo some of the harm that it inflicts.

Learning another language and skills that allow critical reflection are necessary to encourage multiple elements of learning (Davis, 2022) and engage students with the objective of forming a hybrid decolonial repertoire through which they can transform and develop a hybrid decolonial subjectivity. Kramsch (2009) emphasises that learning a language is about becoming and not just learning new labels for familiar objects. This suggests that language shapes and influences one's sense of self. Kramsch (2009) also affirms that learning a new language contributes to developing an altered state of self. According to Davis (2022), the best self-reflective exercise can help one not only to become more self-aware, but also to gain a better understanding of personal strengths and where one wants to go next in life. Using one's imagination allows the brain to experience the things one imagines as if they are real (Davis, 2022). Moreover, Mortari (2015) claims that learning the practice of reflection is fundamental because it allows people to engage in a thoughtful relationship with their life-worlds and thus, they can adopt a proactive stance toward their lived experience. Similarly, Davis (2022) suggests that when one imagines the best version of oneself, the brain can begin to build pathways that support one in becoming that person. In the context of this study, we believe that reflection provides our students with the platform to reflect

on past choices, learn from them, and make whatever changes they feel are appropriate for now and their future. In this way, students become not only lifelong learners, but agents of future change.

Vaughn *et al.* (2020: 723) define agency as "identity making, adjusting, resisting and interactive" as one participates in the world. Using LPs, students can reflect on their experiences of learning a subaltern language that can provide resources for shifts towards a non-colonial subjectivity and thinking. Mignolo and Hoffmann's (2017) theories on decoloniality, Kramsch's (2009) notions on the relationship between second language acquisition and identity, and Vieira's (2019) notions of hybridity are useful in helping us to unpack how self-reflection can enable our students to become competent beginner researchers and be able to reflect through LPs as a research tool in a deep way while learning Arabic. For Gläser-Zikuda (2012), self-reflection is a conscious mental process relying on thinking, reasoning, and examining one's own thoughts, feelings, and ideas, using introspective or self-reflecting methods such as the "thinking-aloud" interview or stimulated recall, in which subjects engage in a task and speak their thoughts aloud. This kind of self-reflection, in our schema, enables our students to challenge the colonial matrix of power that dominates human subjectivities, knowledge and power in the modern social world. We argue that our sense of who we are is shaped by colonial values of the superiority of whiteness, the English language and individuality.

Coloniality is defined as "long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007: 243). Mignolo (2017) argues that people need decoloniality because political decolonisation failed as it did not question the structures of knowledge and subject formation (desires, beliefs, expectations) that were implanted in the colonies by the former colonisers. Decoloniality is a form of critical reflection that accepts that there is a virtual, historical reality that has been shaped by structural factors over time. A critical reflection approach further acknowledges both the material reality and one's internal construction of that reality. This enables the analysis of contextual factors and exploration of how individuals construct, interpret, disengage, and make sense of the structural context and their sense of agency related to it. Considering the foregoing, it is taken as a given that individuals live in an intellectual and discursive social world where coloniality pervades all aspects of humanity (Mignolo, 2017). It is the continuation of colonialism through the colonial institutions and colonial languages and thinking that remains in place within formerly colonised countries like South Africa. For Mortari (2015), this means that students need to reflect not only on the practical acts of research but also on the mental experience which constructs the meaning of practice. In line with this thought, Habash (2022) suggests that:

> "Self-reflection is a skill; the ability to be aware of yourself. It is a particular kind of awareness that is applied to yourself on many levels: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. When we engage in self-reflection, we're developing what is known as an inner witness. This is the ability to look at yourself – even your own thoughts and even what is beneath the thoughts and emotions – from a slight distance. It's almost like peering at your image in the mirror, except that the potential and importance of self-reflection goes much deeper than your outer appearance."

Accordingly, self-reflection is an essential skill for personal growth (Habash, 2022). Self-reflection also allows researchers to see how they imagined, projected ideas onto others, and situated themselves within a specific social context that allows them to identify the factors that influenced these processes (Franks, 2016).

Methodology

This study was designed to explore the potential of the LP as a self-reflective and decolonial research tool for undergraduates to enable them to examine their deeply ingrained assumptions about what knowledge is and how they learn Arabic critically. The study was also designed to

establish how students question structures of knowledge and subject formation (desires, beliefs, expectations) that were implanted in the colonies by the former colonisers in South Africa.

A qualitative phenomenological case study design was chosen situated within an interpretive research paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 2012). Phenomenology is an approach to research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon (potential of the LP as a self-reflective and decolonial research tool for undergraduates) by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it, that is, the "what" and "how" of human experience. A qualitative inquiry which allows researchers to focus on meaning in context, requires a data collection instrument that is sensitive to underlying meaning when gathering and interpreting data (Creswell, 2003; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Mortari (2015) avers that phenomenological reflection is a basic cognitive exercise to practise in order to develop the capability to search for personal mental experiences and accordingly gain awareness of these experiences. This kind of reflection is what allows researchers (our students) to perform real reflective practice and not mere thinking about practice. Radical reflection is a condition for carrying out the critical reflection that leads to the uncovering of hegemonic assumptions.

In the context of this study, using the LP as a reflective and decolonial research tool required commitment and contemplation from the beginner researchers (our students), while observing their behaviours during the process of learning Arabic. Self-reflection encourages them to look back on past events, recall their personal thoughts and feelings, and ask questions about the ways they behave, and the meanings they hold for their actions and reactions (Franks, 2016). It also allows them to see how they imagined, projected ideas onto others, and situated themselves within a specific social context, while identifying the factors that influenced these processes (Franks, 2016). The choice of this analytical method makes it possible to analyse the reflective activity in depth and, in so doing, to support an adequate process of productive teaching and learning in the classroom. When one uses self-reflection, one observes one's own journeys to gain knowledge from what happened to them. This knowledge is gained through thinking about how one was affected by the research and the drawing and writing processes.

The research participants were third-year students in a three-year Bachelor of Arts in Islamic Studies degree who had about three years of exposure to the study of Arabic. A sample of 12 participants comprising eight females and four males, made themselves available. Their ages ranged between 20 and 25 years. Three of the participants were non-South Africans. We believed that the sample would be able to provide us with rich insights into their experiences of learning Arabic using LPs. The study was conducted at a higher education institution based in Cape Town, South Africa. Besides using it as a data collection tool, the LP was introduced to the students as a research tool. They were encouraged to use LPs as a mode of reflexivity to identify the influence of learning Arabic on their sense of self. In-depth individual interviews were also used to collect data and explore the students' experiences of learning Arabic using LPs. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The main questions that guided the interviews were: Which language does each colour represent? Why did you choose that specific colour and body part to represent that language? How did the learning of Arabic influence you? How did the use of an LP aid you to reflect on your own learning experiences? What were the gains from using the LP, and will you use it in the future?

Qualitative data from the interviews and the silhouettes were analysed by using content data analysis. We used an inductive qualitative data analysis approach that involved analysing many transcripts to search for similarities and differences in the data and subsequently finding themes and subthemes (Wong, 2008: 14). The rich information that was provided by the informants about their experiences, views, and feelings regarding the learning of Arabic and using an LP as a research tool were coded using labels for allocating themes from the data (Wong, 2008: 14). First, we acquainted ourselves with the collected data and assigned preliminary codes to describe the content. Then we looked out for patterns or themes in developed codes across the different interviews and silhouettes. Portions of the data were assigned labels that described, summarised,

and categorised the data (Adu, 2019). We constantly moved back and forward between the data sets. This involved a process of going from disordered data to a map of the most important themes in the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Finally, these themes were defined and named to produce the final report (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This logical procedure, we hoped, would guarantee a grasp of the presentation and the findings of this study.

Among the measures to be adopted to ensure trustworthiness or the equivalence of reliability and validity of the study (Maree and Taylor, 2016: 462) were triangulation, pilot study, member check and an audit trail. Triangulation implies the use of more than one data collection method or cross-checking data from multiple sources in search of credibility in the data findings (O'Donoghue and Punch, 2003: 78). We kept an audit trail, which is a transparent description of the research steps taken from the start of a research to the development and reporting of findings (Akkerman and Meijer, 2011: 33) to ensure that the study maintains its trustworthiness. This process enabled us to audit the events, influences and actions taken as part of the study (Akkerman and Meijer, 2011: 31). The final measure adopted for trustworthiness was member-checking, which helped to improve the accuracy, credibility, validity, and transferability of this study. The research ethics of the Islamic higher education institute were considered while conducting this study. Permission was granted by the Ethics Committee of the institute to conduct the study. The selected participants were informed about the aim of the study and that participation in the study was voluntary. They were informed that should they for some reason, want to withdraw from the study, they had the right to do so at any time. They were advised that everybody participating in the study should complete an informed consent form and that their privacy would always be respected. Information they shared would be treated as confidential. To ensure anonymity, the three participants whose portraits are discussed in this paper were given pseudonyms, while the other participants were assigned numbers rather than names.

Discussion

Traditional research which sustains the colonial project is organised in such a way "that there is the knower and the known, the subject and the object, the rational and the irrational, raw data and theory" (Hlabangane, 2018: 665). This "reflects a worldview that signals a relationship with the world that is based on fragmentation, opposition, and domination" (Hlabangane, 2018: 665). The LP was an attempt to subvert this colonial thinking.

As a consequence of the rich insights that LPs provide and the space limitations of this study, only three participants' LPs were presented and analysed using our theoretical framework. Before receiving the silhouettes, students were introduced to and provided with a general overview of the LP and how it can be used to reflect on one's own learning experiences. Examples of other LPs were shared with the students to ensure understanding. Students were further informed that the usage of this research tool is not limited to language teaching and learning. The silhouettes were then distributed, and students were asked to colour them using different colours to represent the language(s) they think form part of their repertoire including the one(s) they know and the one(s) they wish to learn.

Fatima is a South African student who is 19 years old. Even though her parents speak Afrikaans as their first language, Fatima was raised speaking English as her first language and Afrikaans as an additional language. Her first encounter with Arabic was as an elective at high school.
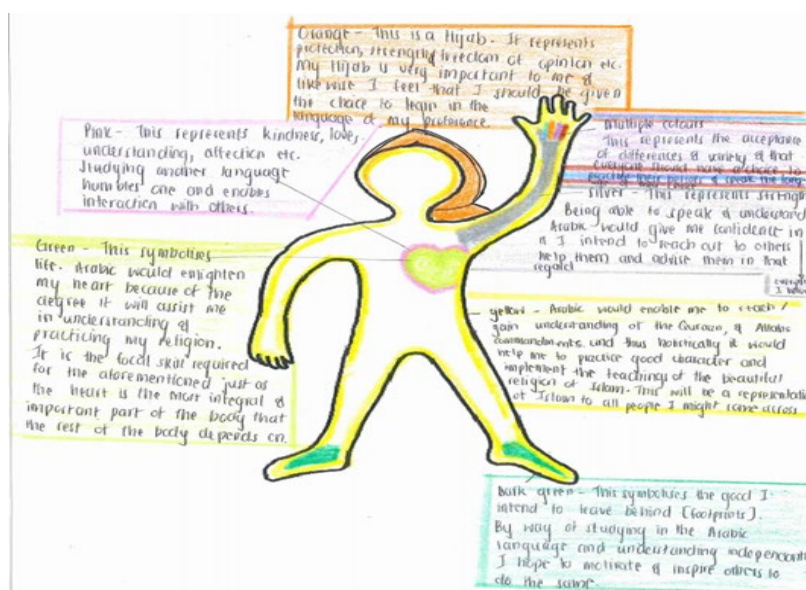
Figure 1: Fatima's portrait

Below, we have reproduced what was written on the portrait.

Orange: This is a hijab. It represents protection, strength, freedom of opinion etc. My hijab is very important to me and likewise I feel that I should be given the chance to learn in the language of my preference.

Multiple colours: This represents the acceptance of differences and variety and that everyone should have a choice to practise their beliefs and speak the language of their choice.

Silver: This represents strength being able to speak and understand Arabic and would give me confidence, I intend to reach out to others help them and advise them in that regard.

Yellow: Arabic would enable me to reach/gain an understanding of the Quran, and all are commandments and thus holistically it would help me to practise good character and implement the teachings of the beautiful religion of Islam. This will be at representation of Islam to all people I might come across.

Dark green: This symbolises the good I intend to leave behind/footprints by way of studying in the Arabic language and understanding independently I hope to motivate and inspire others to do the same.

Green: This symbolises life. Arabic would enlighten my heart because of the degree it will assist me in understanding and practising my religion it is the focal skill required for the aforementioned; just as the heart is the most integral and important part of the body that they list of a body depends on.

Pink: This represents kindness, love, understanding affection etc. Studying another language humbles one and enables interactions with others.

During the interview, Fatima spoke about the joy of learning Arabic. It was also interesting for us to note that the colours in her portrait do not symbolise language, but rather the concepts that she associates with the study of Arabic. She explains:

> *"When I came to [name of institute] and started learning the language … I really developed a big love for the language because of the doors it opens … it's so nice that I don't have to ask someone else for the interpretation even when it comes to [the] Quran. It makes me feel independent … I think by learning Arabic … it's giving me a lot of confidence … because of the doors that it opens."*

This feeling of empowerment that Fatima expresses shows how learning Arabic has given her new avenues to explore herself and the world. It has opened the door to alternative sources of knowledge that can be used to question hegemonic European ideas. In the interview, Fatima highlighted another dimension of learning Arabic involving choice and preference. She comments that *"because I'm given that choice to practise what I want and choosing to … learn in Arabic as a language of my choice would be very good"*. Fatima finds that using the non-hegemonic language, Arabic, is a means of empowerment and exercising her right of choice.

Fatima also spoke about how learning Arabic and using the LP has influenced her thinking:

> *"It develops your mind so … I think that it just challenges you so much … it just expands your mind so much … I think it [LP] was a very interesting way of research because it was able to show me how I would want to go about even speaking about the language barrier out of experience."*

This demonstrates that she is exploring an alternative way of thinking while using a new research tool that allowed her to reflect on her learning experience and demonstrate an open point of view. Fatima is ready to question the norms and fixed modern ways of knowing and researching. This speaks to the decoloniality of thinking and understanding the socially constructed nature of the social world and languages. Nevertheless, this is a hybrid venture. She is not totally delinked from coloniality, but small possibilities become noticeable, as seen in the following extract:

> *"I love my independence and … educating myself, especially being a female and because of the way society views women in the incorrect or the sexist ideas that they have so I think educating myself as a female to get me, or just for me to be able to stand on my own feet and achieve things in life … is very important to me".*

Fatima realises that modern norms can box one into narrow ways of being a female. She is open to more opportunities to explore different ways of being a woman in modern colonial times and finds that learning Arabic has given her intellectual resources to make alternative choices. Her decoloniality of being has been influenced by using Arabic and the access that it affords to an alternative and valid Islamic tradition to shape herself in relation to others. Furthermore, her learning of Arabic has also broadened her potential decolonial political mini-actions such as choosing to wear Islamic clothes in public. When we analyse her portrait and statements, it seems that Fatima is engaged in repositioning herself in relation to English. Her LP speaks to her adoption of non-colonial Islamic norms that portray a dissociation from certain Western feminine norms regarding hair and what constitutes beauty. Learning Arabic strengthens her capacity to be different and motivates her to embrace her differentness and to accept the differentness of others.

Ahmad is 21 years old and is a South African of French and Malaysian descent. He grew up with a diversity of cultures and languages. Although he considers Afrikaans his "other tongue", he admits that English is dominant in his life. His first exposure to Arabic was learning how to recite the Quran. This does not involve learning Arabic as a language of communication but rather as a liturgical language.
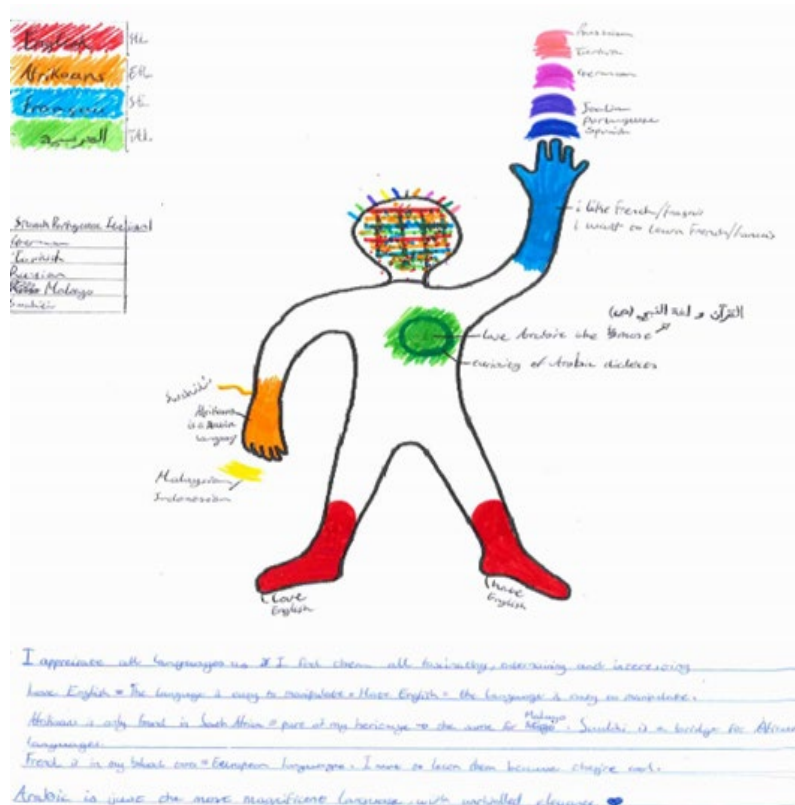
Figure 2: Ahmad's portrait

To ensure that no valuable data are lost owing to the text being illegible, we have reproduced below what was written on the portrait.

Red: Home Language (English)
Orange: First Additional Language (Afrikaans)
Blue: Second Additional Language (French)
Green: Third Additional Language (Arabic)
Yellow: Malaysian/Indonesian
Blue: Spanish, Portuguese. Italian
Purple: German
Pink: Turkish, Russian

- I appreciate all languages as I find them all fascinating, entertaining, and interesting.
- I love English because the language is easy to manipulate. But I hate English because it is so easy to manipulate.
- Afrikaans is only found in South Africa and is also part of my heritage. Malayo and French are also part of my heritage.
- French, however, is also a European language and I want to learn them because they're cool.
- Swahili, I think is a bridge for African languages and Arabic.
- Arabic is just the most magnificent language in the world with unrivalled elegance.

Ahmad also has a love of Arabic which stems from the eloquence of the language as well as the access it gives him to his spiritual and religious textual sources. He explains:

> *"So definitely learning Arabic has brought me closer in some ways to understanding what it means to be a Muslim … because now you have an understanding of what my religion [is] saying which I feel [is] something many people lose or do not have the opportunity to fully explore which ultimately impact their identity as who they are personally and in terms of the global spectrum of Muslim Ummah[community]".*

This comment demonstrates how learning Arabic connects Ahmad to the global Muslim community which, in South Africa, is generally a subaltern community. Learning Arabic enabled

him to explore his religion and his identity as a Muslim. This learning has also enabled and empowered him to shift elements of his subjectivity in that he now engages meaningfully with his religious texts as opposed to being a blind adherent. The Islamic religious texts are now accessible to him as resources for adopting non-Western norms and thinking.

He also has an openness to learning other languages, which means that he appreciates differences. This openness may lead to the acceptance and valuing of differences in cultures which are non-Western. He states that:

> *"Looking for patterns … and constancy sort of shifted my thinking into … looking for things that are logical … I try and figure out things by myself …. Arabic is sort of my playing field where I can experiment with all these things on a mental level, subconsciously".*

Ahmad is able to explore his religion and his understanding of the world from multiple perspectives. It contributed to reshaping his thinking by trying to understand and make sense of things by himself. Learning Arabic empowered Ahmad in terms of challenging his thinking, which was influenced by his colonial being, and gave him ways to rework his habits of reasoning and thinking in a decolonial manner.

> *"It has opened up a different way of thinking and … in many ways has broken the previous chains of thought that I had coming from a secular institution and educational system which was built upon".*

In his LP and comments, Ahmad portrays himself as multilingual. Using the LP to reflect on his learning of Arabic allows him to express his love of the language and to observe how it has allowed him to reconnect to and expand his understanding of the Muslim community in general and his Muslim self in particular. It is through this reconnection and understanding that Ahmad has begun to embrace alternative ways of understanding the world.

Amal is a non-South African student who is 20 years old. Her first language is Uzbeki, and she learnt to read Arabic script as a young child. She learnt English as an additional language in Grade 6 when her family moved to South Africa. In Grade 9 she went to a Turkish-run school in Cape Town, South Africa, where she learnt Turkish.
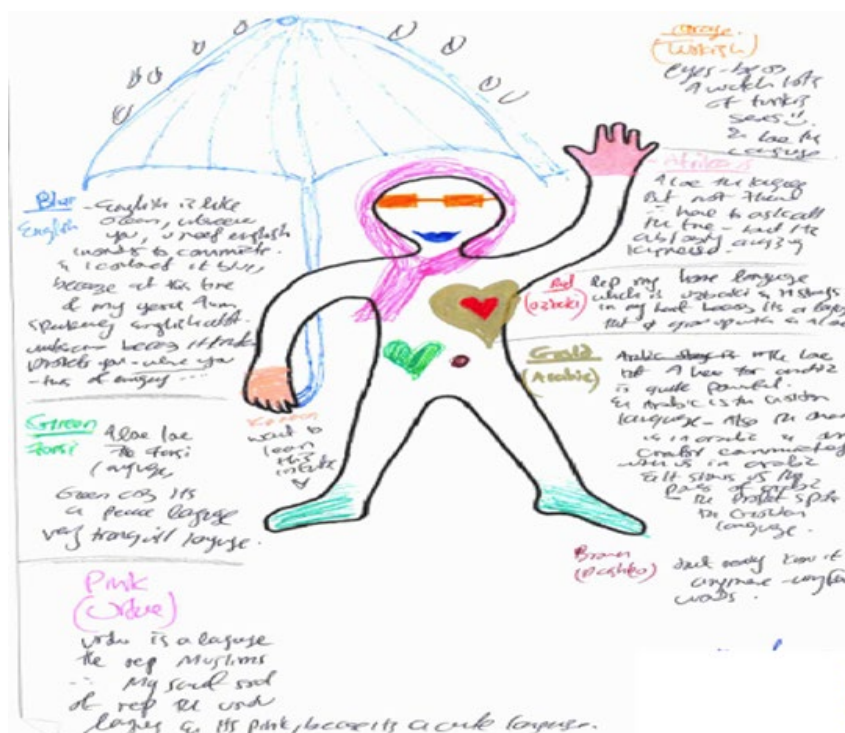

Figure 3: Amal's portrait

Below we reproduce what was written on the portrait.

Orange: Turkish {EYES} the reason why I chose eyes for Turkish language is: because I watch lots of Turkish series and love the language
Pink: Urdu {SCARF} Urdu is one of a language that represents Muslims, and it's in pink, Because I think a cute language. And Afrikaans {HAND} Love the language, although I'm not fluent, so I constantly have to inquire. Nonetheless, it is a great language.
Red: Uzbeki {HEART} Red, my home language, which is Uzbeki, and it says in my heart because it's a language that I grew up with and love it.
Gold: Arabic {HEART} The love for Arabic I have is quite strong. The Quran is in Arabic, and since our creator talked with us in Arabic, it proves that Arabic is a tremendously powerful language and that the Prophet Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم) actually spoke the Golden language.
Brown: Pashto {STOMACH} Don't really know it anymore.
Light Orange: Korean {HAND} Want to learn more about this language.
Green: Farsi {FEET} I love Farsi language, it's in green because it's really tranquil and peace language.
Blue: English {UMBRELLA} Everywhere you go, you need English to be able to communicate. It's like an ocean. It also safeguards you in emergency situations when you are in a foreign country and are unable to communicate in the local tongue. In these kinds of circumstances, knowing English can be helpful.

Just like Ahmad and Fatima, Amal considers Arabic to be valuable and sees it as a treasure as indicated by the big golden heart she drew. She explains that this is linked to the Islamic spiritual and religious textual sources:

> *"There's a bigger heart which is in gold the Arabic language and the reason why … coloured in gold because the golden language as our Creator communicated with us in Arabic and as well as the Prophet (SAW) he spoke the golden language".*

Learning Arabic has allowed Amal to value languages to connect with people. Instead of perceiving language as just words and utterances, she thinks of language as thoughts and feelings that create a bridge to other people and cultures, exposing her to a broader range of influence outside of her cultural norms as well as Western norms. Learning Arabic allows Amal to change her perception and attitude towards the dominant language which is crucial for cultivating a decolonial being. *"It [learning Arabic] has affected me in a good way like now, I love the Arabic language more because I understand it more".*

Judging from Amal's comments in the interview, it seems that learning Arabic has shifted her agency. Although the following quoted extract might be interpreted as her desire to bring Western norms to her land of birth, we suggest it is more appropriate to conclude that she has learnt that religious texts have multiple interpretations.

> *"I am like more open minded. Because in my country … men … put their culture over their religion because this is how they grew up. And for me now my aim is to go back … and do what I have learnt so I like to speak and teach the women what is your rights, especially in marriage … It might be difficult, but the truth is the truth, even if the world is against it and the wrong is wrong even if the world stands with it".*

Amal feels empowered in that she is now able to recognise the difference between religion and culture. She wants to correct misconceptions and to make a change in the life of others by inspiring them in the same way that learning Arabic and creating an LP has empowered her. Decoloniality of being implies a change of mind and thinking, and Amal demonstrates this. Her view of the world and what she feels she can do in it has shifted.

In summary, the LPs and comments of the three students highlighted in this paper indicate that the study of Arabic has influenced their sense of self; their identity as Muslims started forming when they began learning Islamic studies through the Arabic language. It empowered them to gain access to an alternative epistemology. They embrace their differences and do not feel the need to subscribe to Western norms. For each of the three, their understanding of their role as members of society has changed with regard to their identity, empowerment, embracing difference and dissociating from Western norms.

In the next section, the themes derived from interviews with all the participants in the study are discussed. In discovering the themes, we analysed statements from the accounts of the participants and drew on the literature reviewed.

Shifting the power in research tool usage

We follow Hlabangane (2018) in regarding method as another micro-technique in the arsenal of discharging power. However, the respondents in this study used the method of the LP to provide themselves with the potential to use this micro power to lay claim to the tool and use it in an autonomous, active manner. This was displayed in the two portraits with scarves where the students reformulated the silhouettes to show their values. Looking at Fatima's portrait, we were struck by the way she had appropriated the silhouette and made it her own. She added a scarf (a Muslim symbol) and a heart. She demonstrated that she was not a passive respondent in a research setting, but rather actively used the research setting to shape the data being collected. When asked about her perception of the LP as a research tool, Fatima said that:

> *"It was something strange, new and very fun … when I first attempted it, how I went about it was I would link bodily functions to the languages that I deem important … I think it is very important and a tool that I would use in the future … It would be beneficial for me personally and for future students"*.

Reflecting on Ahmad's colouring of his silhouette, we note that he used the tool to do self-reflection and self-assessment that capture his past, present and future aspirations. It has become a thinking tool for him. Ahmad expressed his appreciation for learning a new research skill:

> *"When I was first presented to this [LP], it was very strange that it was used as a tool for research, but it was also very refreshing … that was really something different and creative and … sort of forced me to think in a different way … forced me to change the way I perceive my own understanding related to the languages that I know and want to know … definitely I see it as a fun activity to be used with future students and … It will be very rewarding to broaden people's perspective … and try to understand how other people understand things. This research tool was very entertaining and fruitful"*.

The silhouette was reimagined by Amal as a tool for self-expression. It showed her hopes and aspirations. Like Fatima, Amal added a scarf. She also added an umbrella, hearts, glasses, and lips. In the interview, Amal expressed her excitement at learning a new research skill while doing something she is passionate about:

> *"When I first came across the language silhouette and I came to understand it, I was very surprised how something very basic could help me express myself in this way … Drawing and colouring is my hobby, and I am surprised that there is such a thing … I feel I will use it more and not only in my learning. I teach two children and I want to use the portrait with them as well"*.

Like the others, Participant 6 added a personal touch to her portrait, in this case, a mouth saying, *"For me, the mouth represents my, I would say my struggle in speaking the language, because I'm a very visual person".* In the interview, Participant 6 demonstrated pleasure in finding a way to reflect and express herself without needing to say too much, as she describes herself as a shy person.

> *"I still can't believe it … I thought you were joking when you told us about the portrait to reflect on my journey in learning Arabic … I mean, it is a body shape, and I could do that much with it. Thank you for showing us this. It is valuable"*.

We argue that the use of a research tool that allows agency and affords the respondent micro-power can facilitate the transition from a monoculture of top-down extractive scientific knowledge to an ecology of knowledge where alternative perspectives are celebrated. This makes

possible the replacement of knowledge as regulation with knowledge as emancipation (Santos, 2014). It also allows to produce knowledge where inclusiveness, cooperation, compromise, accommodation, value-laden and creative diversity flourish (Nyamnjoh, 2019).

Recognition of the dominance of English

The subtle domination of coloniality can be seen in the dominance of English in South Africa. Although this is not always recognised as a sign of continued coloniality, it is the medium by which the coloniality of being, power and knowledge is perpetuated. If one were to recognise this, it would be a sign of a small decolonial awakening. Participants mentioned the dominance of English. For example, Participant 11 noted that *"the standard is being set from one perspective. And that perspective is dominated because it's … in one language"*. The following statement by Participant 10 shows her recognition of the dominance of English: "*I think they put the English out there as, as the powerful or the language that you need wherever you go*". Participant 5 explained:

> "*I chose this part of my head because I get confused between the languages. Sometimes I feel like English is taking over all my other languages. And I really do not. I do not feel nice about this*".

Participant 8 does not consider English,

"*As a medium that allows you to speak to people from all over the world, even though it's a great influence … But to me I just consider it … that is indoctrinated as the powerful language that should be superior … That's why I just attributed it to only a part of the body*".

The participants showed a general awareness of and dissatisfaction with the dominance of English. This is significant, because it is only when one acknowledges that something is wrong, that one can do something to change it.

Love of Arabic

Love is an emotion that changes one's subjectivity. Arabic is a non-European language. Arabs are often portrayed in the media as the "bad guys". Valuing and showing love for that which the colonial matrix of power devalues, allows for healing of the self. Decolonial theorists such as Ureña (2017) indicate that love offers a path by which the subaltern treads the decolonial path to rehabilitate the relation between self and the symbols of the subaltern self. In the present study, the hearts drawn by participants in their LPs, in addition to their explanations in the interviews, make it clear that they have developed a love for and a special connection with Arabic, as it is the language that gives them access to the source of their spirituality. Thus, in the 12 LPs the participants portrayed the Arabic language in their hearts. Participant 9 stated, "*I used the red colour because it … represents love … which is the love that we give for Arabic language as the students of din [Islamic religion].*

Providing epistemological access and a source of an alternative epistemology

Coloniality privileges one epistemological perspective and that is the perspective of the West. In other words, one's understanding of self and the world is influenced by the norms and epistemology of the West. This study contends that acknowledging and valuing subaltern languages pave the way to disassociate from the hegemony of one way of thinking and being. Using LP to reflect on their learning of Arabic allowed students to recognise not only the love they developed for the language itself but also how it provided them with an alternative avenue to access knowledge. This epistemological access to the source texts of Islam generated a great sense of agency and empowerment. Participant 8, for instance, stated that:

> "*if I compare myself to say maybe three years ago, then I would say that the person I've become is very different because of the Arabic language … because I started to realise that even though I understand things better in English, which is sometimes they are, for lack of a better phrase, they are hidden jewels within the language [Arabic] that can't always be*

> *explained in English … I think learning Islamic studies in Arabic has opened my mind a little bit to, to notice that there is more to it than just what you see on the page … this makes me feel good. It's almost encouraging to keep going because you can see the changes within yourself".*

Learning a subaltern language can lead students to be open about the diversity of cultures and thoughts. At the beginning, students were only exposed to the hegemonic language that reinforces Eurocentric conformity and norms. However, learning Arabic allowed them to discover other ways to experience the world, since each language portrays the social world from a different perspective. The students spoke of how learning Arabic influenced their thinking beyond Arabic. Arabic becomes a resource to think about other aspects of the social world; students have developed a big picture approach to looking at the world. Participant 12 stated,

> *"If we put ourselves in different situations and we view things differently … our perception can change … studying the Arabic language in Arabic has changed my view … the way I view things".*

In other words, learning Arabic provided students with an alternative epistemological access which in turn allowed for a partial break from the students' colonial thinking and subjectivity. In summary, learning Arabic does not automatically lead to the decoloniality of knowledge or being. Rather, this research found evidence of slight shifts in the colonial mindsets of students. This finding confirms Vieira's (2019) insights that attempts at forming an authentic decolonial subject will be unsuccessful. We argue in this study that cultivating a decolonial subjectivity is a lifelong, self-motivated project and that many hybrid subjectivities come into being as the students learn Arabic. As can be seen, students demonstrated various small shifts in subjectivity.

Conclusion

Learning a language can lead to changes in one's sense of self. Furthermore, becoming familiar with a research tool and then using it for self-reflection has the potential for self-development and growth. The findings suggest that learning Arabic was a transformative experience. The participants demonstrated an emotional attachment to Arabic that speaks to the decolonial love of subaltern symbols. This further suggests that language not only de-establishes the hierarchy of knowledge, but also creates a partial emotional delink from colonial languages. Learning Arabic affords students in this study the opportunity to explore the Islamic tradition, providing them with alternative ways of being and knowledge and encouraging epistemic delinking from the colonial matrix of power. Arabic is also seen as an alternative source from which to access knowledge and challenge the dominant way of thinking. Decoloniality is being able to exert one's agency outside of colonial norms. The students adopted a pragmatic approach to English as a tool to negotiate the world without being bound by it. However, they used Arabic as a resource to imagine a different world, formulating hybrid subjectivities coloured by both colonial and subaltern symbols. Learning Arabic allowed students to embark on a decolonial journey. They used the LP as a reflective tool for self-research to establish where they were on the journey.

The study finds that learning subaltern languages like Arabic, when combined with self-reflection via a research tool like the LP, is a small decolonial step that can contribute to shifts in students' colonial subjectivities and their imaginations. Therefore, the findings support calls for mother tongue, indigenous language instruction and decolonised education based on self-reflection. The study has shown that learning a subaltern language helps to create hybrid decolonial subjectivities which can be activated through a self-reflective research tool. Because decoloniality of being, thinking and power are interrelated, learning a subaltern language embedded with self-reflective tools like LP should be encouraged. Such learning helps students to embrace their subaltern sense of self and to reconstitute themselves. This empowers them to critique the hegemonic way of thinking and broaden their view and understanding of being and the world, beyond Western norms and standards. We recommend that further studies should investigate the teaching of subaltern and indigenous languages – beyond Arabic and its intertwined cultural

connections with the Islamic faith – combined with a self-reflective tool, to explore how this can allow and encourage students and lecturers to embark on a self-decolonising journey.

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