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# Towards a well-being focussed language pedagogy: enabling arts-based, multilingual learning spaces for young people with refugee backgrounds

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## ABSTRACT

The following article explores the conceptual background and pedagogical realities of establishing a well-being focussed language pedagogy in the context of an informal educational event called 'Language Fest'. The event was organised as part of the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded large grant project 'Researching Multilingually at the Borders of Language, the Body, Law and the State' – for the UK's 'Being Human Festival' 2014. The event aimed to celebrate the multiple languages present in the city of Glasgow in Scotland. Participants consisted of 40 teenage ESOL learners with asylum and refugee backgrounds. Based on auto-ethnographic reflections and short interview excerpts, the article focuses on one particular situation of 'shared singing' which took place as part of one of the event's music and drama-based workshops. The author reflects on her act of learning how to sing the Chinese children's song 'Two Tigers', from Chung, a Mandarin speaker and ESOL college student in Glasgow. The article explores the valence of the author's linguistic incompetence in this learning situation and argues that arts-based language learning is a situated practice that prioritises ethical, relationship-based objectives over static notions of language competence.

## KEYWORDS

Multilingual learning; arts-based education; transgressive validity; language deficit; language plenty; well-being focussed pedagogy; language competence; ethics; education for humanity

## Introduction

**Katja:** On our second day we were 'entertaining' over 40 college students (all multilinguals, newly arrived in Glasgow and ESOL-learners) making them try out musical instruments, sing and act. We counted 36 different languages in the room. The nicest thing for me was when one of the ESOL teachers, who had accompanied the group, came up to me afterwards to say that he was surprised to see one of his weakest and shyest learners in the class all of a sudden light up, become expressive and confident when singing in her native French and acting in front of the whole group. She seemed so very proud of herself. Just a small story feedback from language fest. (Email from 25.11.2014/11:20 am)

**Carla:** What you say chimes with comments at an event we arranged with the British Academy last night on community languages and bilingualism. One speaker talked about the perceptions of speaking a language other than English as a deficit and impairment, and about how some teachers even talk of pupils with languages other than English in terms similar to those used for special educational needs ('severe EAL case', 'student has no language', etc.). She told some stories similar to yours about how pupils considered reluctant, timid and otherwise challenged have blossomed when allowed to speak their own language and to recognise its worth. (Email from 25.11.2014/14:07 pm)

## The language deficit argument

I introduce this article with an email exchange that occurred after our Language Fest event in Glasgow, Scotland/UK. Here, my grant colleague Carla and I reflect on the significance of valuing multilingual students' spoken languages, as opposed to labelling them as 'lacking' English language skills. Our email conversation touches on what is commonly referred to as the 'deficit discourse' by sociolinguists. It is a common misconception that certain aspects of a student's language behaviour not only impede his/her educational attainment but are a sign of linguistic, cognitive, or even cultural deficit. These aspects are his/her ability to speak several languages (multi-lingualism) or variants of a language, e.g., the language use of working-class speakers. We call this idea 'the language-deficit argument'. The UK's Centre for Policy Studies 'Why can't they read' [WCTR] (Gross 2010) – report which 'argued that the presence of street talk (non-standard and immigrant languages) in the classroom was partly responsible for unacceptable levels in UK school leavers' (Grainger and Jones 2013, 95), is just one such example of a more recent UK language policy based on the deficit argument. The report has also led to, once more, renewed academic criticism by sociolinguists, including a special issue of 'Language and Education', entitled 'Language deficit revisited' in 2013. Here, the authors argue against the idea that 'the ordinary language or languages of home, family or community for some groups of children are deficient or inadequate as a foundation for cognitive development and learning' (Grainger and Jones 2013, 96).

Seeing the presence of multilingualism and working class language use as an 'impairment', points for many sociolinguists towards deeply ingrained 'socially motivated prejudices and faulty conceptions about the relationships between language, cognition and learning' (Grainger and Jones 2013, 96). In her critical analysis of two major think-tank reports which suggested an automatic, causal relationship between linguistic competence and social success, Grainger (2013) warns against 'the dominant ideology of language' (Milroy 2004, quoted in Grainger 2013, 100) reflected in the 'Getting in Early' (GIE) (Gross 2008) and the 'Why can't they read' (WCTR) (Gross 2010) report. WCTR 'relies on evidence produced by bodies that gain from the pathologisation of working-class language and parenting practices' (Grainger 2013, 100). Authors of the GIE report (a labour MP, a CEO of a children's communication charity) write knowledgeably about 'how speech, language and communication are linked to social disadvantage' (ibid.) but offer no sociolinguistic or sociological evidence for such deeply sociological claims. In its chapter on immigration, the WCTR (Gross 2010) deems the high number of immigrants to the UK over the last 15 years responsible for low literacy levels in inner city schools, but also concedes that immigration isn't the root problem, 'though of course children who have very recently arrived in this country are bound to lower literacy scores, at least temporarily' (Gross 2010, 25). Rather than pointing towards structural problems located within an UK education system geared towards assimilation, WCTR lays blame on teachers and 'low-achieving' schools who supposedly take immigration as an excuse for bad teaching because they have low expectations of immigrant pupils' true potential (Gross 2010, 26).

WCTR never even suggests that deficit views of immigrant learners might be caused by more structural problems and biases located within the UK education system itself, in which not only monolingualism, but a class-specific monolingualism is the presupposed linguistic norm against which all other language practises are judged. The complex set of pedagogical challenges mainstream educators in the UK face when teaching students who bring a variety of non-dominant language backgrounds to the classroom, occurs against the background of a wider, systematic and institutionally ingrained 'English language hegemony' (Tsuda 2008, 2010). Here, language use is considered for its instrumental (e.g., economic) value only, rather than carrying inherent value as a human social practice and source of personal learning and growth. The notion of competence bound up in the deficit argument is thus solely located within the individual's capacity to attain, in the UK's case, (middle-class) English native speaker fluency, but hides the spatial, environmental factors which set the conditions for this specific type of English language competence to be favoured in the first place. Blommaert, Collins, and Slembrouck (2005) draw our attention to this 'old sociolinguistic insight: how people use language is strongly influenced by the situation in which they find themselves' (9). A spatial view destabilises the static notion of competence that underlies the deficit models:

A lack of competence to communicate adequately is here not seen as a problem of the speaker, but as a problem *for* the speaker, lodged not in individual forms of deficit or inability but in the connection between individual communicative potential and requirements produced by the environment. (Blommaert, Collins, and Slembrouck 2005, 2)

As a consequence, the static, individualised notions of competence bound up in deficit ideologies ‘have detrimental consequences on non-white immigrant students’ (Trueba and Bartolomé 2000, 280). The teachers’ comment, as reported by my colleague Carla in our email exchange above, in which a multilingual student was described as ‘having no language’, only makes sense when notions of competence are regarded spatially. Multilingual speakers can only be declared as ‘having no language’ in environments that are structured to enable some forms of language practice to be valid (e.g., middle-class English) whilst disabling and thus discounting others as having no value at all (the student’s non-dominant language practice). As a consequence, ‘competence is about being positioned, not about general or open-ended potential’ (Blommaert, Collins, and Slembrouck 2005, 15). In contrast to a de-humanising language which solely problematises the presence of learners’ non-dominant languages – ‘the student has no language’/‘The student is a severe EAL (English as an additional language) case’ – the verbs Carla and I used to describe the positive effect on students when allowed to express themselves multilingually, are rather more poetic and affective. I told Carla in my email about Ruth, the French speaker who suddenly ‘lit up’ when allowed to sing and act in her mother tongue; Carla in turn reported about other stories of students who ‘blossomed’ when encouraged to speak their spoken language and recognise its worth. The educational discourse associated with Carla and my language use – ‘blossoming, lighting up’ – is reminiscent of the humanistic, educational discourse of *Bildung* and liberal arts education (Nussbaum 1997) and its aims of creating a more human and hopeful future, beyond the borders of nationhood:

The accident of where one is born is just that, an accident; any human being might have been born in any nation. Recognizing this, we should not allow differences of nationality or class or ethnic membership or even gender to erect barriers between us and our fellow human beings. We should recognize humanity – and its fundamental ingredients, reason and moral capacity – wherever it occurs, and give that community of humanity our first allegiance. (Nussbaum 1997, 58, 59, quoted in Todd 2008, 2)

In this view on *Bildung*, learners’ educational development spans more holistic aims and competencies, not only those of becoming a learned, ‘competent’ person but those of becoming more human (moral and respectful) in the process. Verbs such as ‘flourishing’ and ‘blossoming’ also resonate the language of humanitarian agencies, committed to ideas of a shared humanity across national borders (Todd 2008):

Not only confined to a philosopher’s dream of a better world, however, the term humanity is also regularly placed in the company of such words as ‘cultivating’, ‘promoting’, or ‘caring for’ by organizations such as UNESCO, words which suggest that humanity is something indeed desirable to educate for – even if it is not immediately in evidence (Todd 2008, 2)

My aim in contrasting the anti-humanist language evoked by educational deficit views and the more humanistically bent language used by advocates of humanistic educational principles, is not to create a dichotomy of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ education. Indeed, the authors of the above-mentioned UK think tank reports ‘Getting in Early’ (Gross 2008) and ‘Why can’t they read’ (Gross 2010) would, if asked, justify their plea for early educational interventions amongst working class and immigrant children with reference to the same humanistic principles. I draw attention to Carla and my word choice not in order to unthinkingly promote humanistic views as a solution to the deficit models per se. Instead, I hope to highlight the actual difficulty and challenge of imagining, and more importantly, practising, an education that takes up the cause of an education *for* humanity. Following Todd’s (2008) article on the ‘Difficult Task of Cosmopolitan Education’, I would like to problematise an education that simply seeks to ‘cultivate’ humanity without taking into account the enormous difficulties we, as human beings, seem to have in creating and sustaining relationships that are not marked by exclusion, oppression and violence, and where violence is often even morally justified under the banner of protecting humanity (Todd 2008, 2).

In moving beyond the polarized terms of humanism and anti-humanism, the task at hand is how to think of humanity as a problem, as a question for education, rooted in the difficult relations between actual persons, and not simply as a solution or an abstract justification of it. (Todd 2008, 3)

Like Blommaert, Collins, and Slembrouck (2005), Todd (2008) suggests a spatial view that addresses concrete societal processes of inclusion and exclusion and ways of solving these in context-specific ways. In order to re-think the aims of a multilingually-oriented education for humanity as one that doesn't simply seek to cultivate humanity in an abstract way, but one that 'faces humanity head-on' (Todd 2008, 3), Blommaert, Collins, and Slembrouck (2005) 'truncated multilingualism' offers a good starting point for my inquiry. Multilingualism here is not located within the individual and understood as the ability to attain fluency in different languages. A 'truncated multilingualism' instead considers language competencies to be organised around certain domains or specific activities (Blommaert, Collins, and Slembrouck 2005, 3). I structured the article in three reflective points, in order to explore how language competence was organised and played out during our Language Fest event. Here, it is concretised how I, as one of the workshop facilitators, 'faced humanity' and was equally faced by it, in the body of Chung, a 16 year old Mandarin speaker, ESOL learner and newly arrived asylum seeker in Glasgow. The three reflective points combine auto-ethnographic reflection and interview excerpts, in order to explore how the difficult task of a humanity-oriented education – one that doesn't 'cultivate' but 'faces humanity head-on' – was negotiated in the context of our UK-based Language Fest event and in the presence of 40 multilingual college students.

## Background

Language Fest was organised as part of the UK-wide 'Being Human Festival' (<http://beinghumanfestival.org/>), a national forum for public engagement with humanities research. The academic framework was provided by the AHRC large grant project 'Researching Multilingually at the Borders of Language, the Body, Law and the State' (RM Borders), on which I work as a postdoctoral researcher. The RM Borders project works across five international research sites located in the academic fields of Language and Arts Education, Psychology, Law, and Anthropology, with the aim of researching interpretation, translation and multilingual practices in contexts where language use is marked by different kinds of institutional, psychological and political pressures. Together with some of my grant colleagues – all experienced community artists and themselves, like me, immigrants to Scotland, we planned Language Fest as a public educational event. It set out to celebrate the diversity of languages present in the city of Glasgow through music and drama-based workshops and took place in one of the main arts venues in inner-city Glasgow (Scotland), the Centre for Contemporary Arts (CCA). Our event was attended by students from one of our research project partners, Glasgow Clyde College. At this point I had only met these students a few times, when visiting the college to meet their teachers, our project collaborators, for occasional classroom-observations. They were 40 ESOL-students who attended the Fest, together with their two ESOL teachers. These were all new learners of English and with at least one, and often more than one, other spoken language. Altogether, I counted 36 languages during Language Fest, including the students' as well as the facilitators' spoken languages. Most ESOL students were between 16 and 19 years old and newly arrived asylum seekers in the UK. They had escaped from war, political turmoil or had fled other personally traumatising experiences. They were residing in Glasgow as unaccompanied minors, i.e., without a parent or a guardian.

Some students might also not have had continuous access to formal education in their home countries (Education Scotland 2014, 9).

## First reflective point: language plenty

With 36 languages in the room during Language Fest, I can't say this was a deficit situation, at least not on the side of the students. I am a little ashamed to say it, but the deficit was on me, the facilitator and researcher in the room. With 'just' two languages to offer in this situation of language plenty, I was lacking language.

The language-related realities during Language Fest took shape (and sound) in the bodies of forty students, two teachers and four workshop facilitators. The creative workshops we offered allowed this

linguistic richness to emerge. Students and facilitators were invited to teach each other to speak their favourite words and sing their favourite songs, in their chosen languages. Within this multilingual space, and with English taking a subordinate position, the roles of teacher and learner were momentarily subverted whilst the student group's self-expression was prioritised. The abundant presence of languages in the Centre for Contemporary Arts' theatre space, as well as the fact that almost every person in the room, including the facilitators, didn't have English as their first language, somewhat turned the language deficit argument on its head. This was a room of language plenty, a multilingual soundscape that emerged from our mutual acts of 'facing' our linguistic presence.

By setting out to celebrate the languages present in Glasgow, the location of our Language Fest asserted the value of participants' languages as social practice. This went beyond valuing students' languages as mere methodological resources in service of successful, classroom-based L-2 English language teaching, or as Trueba and Bartolomé (2000) call it, in service of an 'assimilationist ideology' (278). Trueba and Bartolomé (2000) criticise the often sole focus on 'best practice' in for example teacher training programmes and the lack of addressing ideological and political dimensions of teaching immigrant students as part of teachers' preparation. An exclusive focus on methodological and pedagogical questions perpetuates the hegemonic structures present in classroom instruction, which can promote deficit views and punish linguistically and culturally different students (Trueba and Bartolomé 2000, 278). In other words:

Children with minority languages or indeed multilingual backgrounds are often marginalised and even to a certain extent excluded from unfolding their full potential for their individual progress and for the benefit of society. (Conteh and Meier 2014, 2)

The absence of a wider sociological and political lens, as for example suggested in the concept of 'truncated multilingualism' (Blommaert, Collins, and Slembrouck 2005), which acknowledges this disadvantage, can then run the risk of conceptualising immigrant students as academic problems and 'several EAL cases' with linguistic limitations only. In other words, 'the framework within which the individual is constructed [as having "no language"] remains hidden from view' (Allen 2014, 3). This is not to mean that teachers of immigrant learners generally act without the 'political clarity' (Trueba and Bartolomé 2000, 278) that their students' linguistic repertoires are merely disqualified because they are 'assessed on the basis of criteria belonging to the national order' (Blommaert, Collins, and Slembrouck 2005, 17). On the contrary, academic publications which 'offer contextualised accounts of teachers' resistance to those negative constructions of linguistic diversity provide examples of response, personalization and differentiation' (Leung and Creese 2010, xxiii). These teachers resist the deficit models in their daily classroom practice and acknowledge what Conteh and Meier (2014) termed the 'multilingual turn' in ESOL education internationally.

ESOL teaching staff at Glasgow Clyde College are a Scotland-based example at hand. The following two short excerpts from an interview with senior ESOL lecturer Lisa, one of our research project's main collaborators, illustrate her anti-assimilationist stance. They demonstrate Lisa's awareness of the pedagogical implications that emerge from acknowledging the ideological and political pressures at play in her students' lives. After the Language Fest event and a series of weekly, follow-up ESOL classroom-observations at Glasgow Clyde College, I interviewed Lisa about her communication strategies with students. Based on my classroom observations, I noticed the way Lisa spoke about our project's research aims. She used a language that was accessible to her students. Rather than mentioning abstract words such as 'research', 'translation', 'multilingualism', Lisa centred her explanation around her students' languages and our (the researchers') aims to learn how to best share and use their languages for the benefit of the classroom community. In reflecting with Lisa on her role as 'translator' in the classroom, she described a classroom pedagogy and subsequent communication strategies underpinned by a strong ethical perspective and rooted in the 'real world' of her students' life contexts.

### *Interview excerpt I*

So by saying this is how we learn a language and this is looking at the different languages we have in the classroom and what languages you can bring to this place and how we can share these languages, that's very much saying, this is who you are at this point in time as a student but this is also what you bring to this situation we are in. (Lisa)

In excerpt I, Lisa consciously asserts students' linguistic rights and acknowledges their spoken languages as potential sources of 'pride and dignity' (Tsuda 2010, 261) in the classroom, as well as a potential learning resource in their own right. By focussing on 'what her students can bring to the situation' she allows possible position takings beyond the role of L2-speaker. Lisa creates a classroom environment in which young people's languages are acknowledged as a valuable social practice and a potential vehicle for learning and curiosity about their own language and that of others (Conteh and Meier 2014, 3). Tsuda (2008, 2010), proponent of linguistic pluralism, believes that addressing the problem of linguistic hegemony from a social justice perspective is significant to the development of what Todd (2008) might envisage as a more human and hopeful future. Like Lisa, Tsuda (2010) recognises the significance of honouring people's languages, and with that their potential for self-expression and human agency, in all forms of communication, in the ESOL classroom and beyond.

Language, especially the mother tongue, is not merely an instrument, but is a source of human pride and dignity. Therefore, language rights should be established as an essential part of the right to be oneself. Everyone is entitled to the right to use the language(s) s/he chooses to speak and this right should be honoured in all forms of communication. (Tsuda 2010, 261)

### *Interview excerpt II*

And when we talk to young people, another thing that struck me when we talk to young people that have been through the process, another thing they say about being in the 16 + programme is the first time that somebody has ever asked them 'What do you want to be?'. So that's a completely new concept for them. And when we think about this idea of identity and changing identity, so it's not only you have no idea what you can be because of the external circumstances, you also don't know what does that mean. (Lisa)

Lisa refuses a solely instrumental view of her students as L2-learners (of English) that deems their linguistic competencies institutionally invalid. Her multilingual awareness is linked to a wider pedagogical and political awareness of the detrimental consequences of deficit pedagogies on her students' view of their own abilities and perceived possibilities for personal and professional development. Her daily classroom pedagogy is marked by an ethical orientation that is rooted in students' real life contexts. She is aware that the ability to learn, grow and develop is not solely dependent on the individual's vision for the future, but closely connected to environmental factors in which these ambitions are enabled or disabled. Lisa, in the same way as advocates of mother-tongue-based or multilingual education, does not conceptualise language use in technical terms and methodological or pedagogical arguments only. She operates with a political clarity resonant of wider social justice discourses in multilingual education. These pursue the goal to reduce non-dominant language speakers' cultural and socioeconomic inequalities (Tupas 2015, 114) in order to allow students to unfold their full potential for the benefit of society (Conteh and Meier 2014). By rejecting an assimilationist ideology that conceptualises learners as mere academic problems, Lisa allows a wider focus on the psychological and political dimensions of her students' contexts of life. As a result, she negotiates what Todd (2008) might call a 'humanity'-oriented position within the interstices of an English-only, and often deficit-oriented discourse, in mainstream UK education institutions – as exemplified by the WCTR (Gross 2010) and GIE (Gross 2008) reports. Lisa's pedagogical orientation and classroom practice doesn't reverse a deficit-led educational debate but calls it into question and implies 'the use of languages in education as a major indicator of institutionalised linguistic discrimination (Mohanty 2010, 138, quoted in Tupas 2015, 114). A third excerpt from Lisa's interview illustrates how the effects of institutionalised deficit pedagogies might be experienced by her students.

### Interview excerpt III

The future is very uncertain, not just because of the external forces that are controlling young people's lives like the home office or you know like benefit agency all that stuff, but actually in terms of their identity because their identity is in a constant state of shift. You know and I have mentioned this before but I was very struck in discussing with a couple of young people about the changes that have happened to them since they came to the UK and one of them said 'when we came here we were broken and what has happened is a process of becoming whole again but it's not finished yet' and it's also a process that almost, it goes forwards and it goes backwards because there is part of the process which is coming to accept that I will never be the person that I was in my own country, in my own family, in my own context. (Lisa)

Writing about the dynamics of individual and social healing in countries that have suffered unspeakable violence and trauma, John Paul Lederach and Angela Jill Lederach (2010), scholars in the area of International Peacebuilding, link the experience of violence to the feeling of internal uncertainty and the loss of a sense of self. Their description of the individual's loss of trust in the outer social landscape might make clearer the internal and external levels of 'brokenness' that Lisa's students refer to.

Violence destroys what was understood and known. What was assumed, taken for granted as 'normal' on a daily basis, has disappeared and people suspend, or outright lose, the capacity to feel *at home*. Home often serves as a relational metaphor of feeling *surrounded* by love, a sense of well-being, shelter and unconditional acceptance. Violence destroys this feeling and the capacity to be oneself without mistrust or pretension; it destroys a sense of *at-homeness*. (Lederach and Lederach 2010, 63)

The students' description of 'being broken' refers to the manifest, external facts of having lost a home and everyday relationships, as well as to the internal uncertainty and loss of trust caused by such experience of violence. Their lives are in a constant shift, not only as normal teenagers growing into adulthood, but as individuals who have 'lost the capacity to feel at home' (Lederach and Lederach 2010, 63) and are now 'in a process of becoming whole again' (Lisa). The process of 'being broken' and 'becoming whole' is then best understood spatially. The 'home' metaphor poignantly reveals the significant link between inner healing and the presence of social surroundings that foster a sense of 'at-homeness.' 'Becoming whole' is thus not solely located within the individual's efforts but dependent on environmental factors that accommodate or deny the individual's healing process. Lisa recognises her role in establishing an educational environment that assists students in reclaiming their sense of self and helps them to regain trust in their social surroundings. The students' description, as recounted by their teacher, indicates the need for a humanity-oriented educational approach that 'faces humanity' (Todd 2008). Such an approach doesn't separate students' educational attainment from the wider psychological, social and political dimensions that keep their lives 'in constant shift'. To put it simply: A humanity-facing education fosters students' sense of self and their sense of 'at-homeness' as the basis for (language) education. In this conception of education, ethics is not an abstract humanitarian value but produces context-specific classroom pedagogies rooted in students' real-life experiences. My experience of language plenty during Language Fest then reflects our educational efforts to assert an arts-based (language) pedagogy that fosters a sense of 'at-homeness' beyond static notions of language competence. Such focus on students' well-being values the processes of relationship-building inherent in participatory arts activities (Milevska 2006).

A well-being focussed language pedagogy equally exposes the paradox at the heart of a neoliberal education that defines success by linguistic and cultural assimilation only. The neoliberal model favours economically strategic forms of multilingualism that punish students who are linguistically bountiful in (non-dominant) languages but can't function within a narrow, neoliberally-defined form of success (Phipps 2014). The kind of cosmopolitan education that can work alongside such neoliberal views of success, might then be committed to a Western model of 'humanity', an abstract enlightenment ideal of commonly shared values (e.g., democracy, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) that can be taught separately from the social (and linguistic) realities of the classroom. An educational vision that narrows value to capital only, even if cloaked in humanitarian rhetoric, denies a more embodied view on 'classroom ethics' that is rooted in individuals' and communities' concrete hopes for 'at-homeness'. Humanity, as Todd (2008) reminds us, rather than being in service of a capital-driven and thus



deficit-driven education, should thus become a provocation and question for an education concerned with humanity. 'Real' cosmopolitan education, in Todd's (2008) view, must necessarily disturb the deficit model and humanitarian rhetoric. It asserts that students' humanity, and with that their linguistic practices and contexts of their lives 'in constant shift', have indeed a place in the classroom and within wider educational conceptualisations. Following Irigaray (2001) and Levinas (1969), Todd (2008) suggests that 'the respect, dignity and freedom, which have become signs of humanity, are not bred from within, but in relation to the disturbing and provocative event of being confronted by another person [radically different to oneself]' (9). By 'facing humanity', as manifested for example in the social reality of an ESOL classroom, cosmopolitan education aims to 'keep the space between self and other open in expectation and hope without ever needing arrival and acceptance' (MacDonald and O'Regan 2012, 12).

Falling back into English, a 'foreign' language to us all, and one that most people in the room are only just learning, is not an option. There is no 'neutral', no 'pure' way to communicate. We can't easily cloak our communicative difficulties with a (supposed) lingua franca. There is no easy way to artificially smooth the sharp linguistic edges of our intercultural communication. Insisting on English now could mean silencing this group's self-expression, dismiss their *Lebenswelt* (from German, meaning 'life-world') and suppress those unexpected encounters that might be potentially meaningful to us all. But how then to connect when our language competencies are unravelled and all we can bring is good will and our linguistic vulnerability?

This excerpt from my workshop reflections reveals how 'humanity', embodied in the diverse linguistic and cultural presence, hopes and fears of our participating students and workshop facilitators, became indeed a provocation for our event. It became a provocation that triggered my pedagogical reflections but didn't produce easy answers or solutions on how to instantly overcome our (linguistic) vulnerabilities. The next reflective point explores in more detail how the workshop's discursive structures developed in the face of this provocation.

## Second reflective point: shared singing and linguistic incompetence

*After sharing my favourite German childhood lullaby, I instructed the group to pair up and teach each other their favourite songs in their chosen language. I sat with Chung and after some musical exchange we discovered that there is a Chinese and German version of 'Bruder Jakob/Frère Jacques', in Chinese called 'Two tigers'. The Chinese version is about children afraid of a dangerous tiger, the German version about a monk who likes sleeping in. My singing partner Chung listened hard to me singing the song in German over and over. He memorised the sounds and sang them back to me. I found it difficult to pronounce the words in Mandarin and had to be taught line by line. He sang a few words for me, I echoed them. We laughed at our flawed attempts to sing the foreign words but we kept practising, listening, echoing, laughing. We scribbled down the lyrics and transcribed them phonetically.*

*My personal notes on the day read:*Jansenauhu, jansenauhu, paudequai, paudequai. Itzemayourdur, Itzemayourdur, Itzemayowiba, Donchequai, donchequai.

*Chung and I rehearsed together, tuning into each other's language rhythms. Then my singing partner disappeared for ten minutes. He left the room to rehearse outside, by himself. When he returned he had learnt the song off by heart and proudly performed for me:*Bruder Jakob, Bruder Jakob, schläfst du noch, schläfst du noch? Hörst du nicht die Glocken, hörst du nicht die Glocken. Ding, Ding, Dong, Ding, Ding, Dong.

*We sat in a circle. Each pair performed their songs for the group. Beautiful female voices sang French; Mandarin and Vietnamese love songs reverberated around the room; an Aramaic performance was accompanied by dance and clapping, and one voice in particular, never heard in class, always falling silent (the teacher told me afterwards), sang on that day so beautifully.*

*Chung and I presented our songs together, two versions of the same melody. I felt proud. This was the very first time in my life that I had ever spoken, let alone sung, in Mandarin.*

My story of how Chung taught me patiently how to sing 'Two Tigers' in Mandarin reveals my communicative vulnerability and limitation, despite my more authoritative position as facilitator and researcher. Phipps (2013) explains how being turned into the position of learner or non-speaker of a language during research and learning encounters can open important ethical and reflective dimensions.

This ‘fabulous’ dimension of engaging in research, in multilingual fields, where I did not possess the languages, means I have found myself open to important ethical dimensions and have experienced research from a position of considerable humility, lack, limitation, wound and partiality – the very qualities which Butler determines as necessary for an account to be received and for ethical social relations to form. (Phipps 2013, 8)

(...)

Is there an ethical valence to my linguistic incompetence? Can there be an ethical valence even to monolingualism, and certainly to the impossibility identified by Spivak (1999, 22), of ‘knowing all the languages in the world’ (Phipps 2013, 8)

Asserting students’ or research participants’ linguistic presence in a research or teaching encounter can result in a shift of power over the linguistic flows of a conversation, normally propped up by institutionalised forms of language use. Within this experience of lack and vulnerability on the side of the teacher or researcher normally in charge lies the potential for an ethical consideration of people’s language positionings. Is there then an ethical valence to my experience of linguistic incompetence during Language Fest? I am a bilingual German-English speaker and in a clear position of power – a white female researcher and language teacher, an EU citizen with secure political status, speaking languages which are deemed linguistically valid within neoliberal educational views. Acknowledging students’ multilingual presence and thus their abundance of languages exposed my paucity of languages – a fact that I can normally hide behind my L2-competence of English and the roles of teacher and researcher which I inhabit within my work environment (a UK university) and within a wider dominant, white, Eurocentric culture (Trueba and Bartolomé 2000). Experiencing linguistic incompetence and the loss of power associated with it, allowed me to experience and re-evaluate my position of limitation – ‘the very qualities which Butler determines as necessary for an account to be received and for ethical social relations to form’ (Phipps 2013, 8). Following Spivak’s (1999) logic (quoted by Phipps 2013) the question arises, what methods can then be most appropriately employed within the communicative paradox at play? Since we cannot speak all students’ languages, or become competent in them during Language Fest and yet the facilitators value the students’ linguistic presence, how can we connect?

Participatory, arts-based methods, such as shared singing, foster a focus on relationship-building, well-being and ‘at-homeness’ (Lederach and Lederach 2010) rather than fully-formed language competence. This enables a multilingual space in which students are positioned as social, embodied actors rather than competent (or incompetent) L2 speakers/learners. ‘Music is able to connect people through emotional evocation that in certain contexts may transcend language, economic and other social barriers’ (Leavy 2015, 123). My decision to introduce our session by singing a German lullaby which had personal meaning to me was born out of my wish to establish communication with students across our language barrier but without falling into English-only communication. A lullaby, even if sung in a ‘foreign’ language (in my case German), through its rhythm and melody, can carry meaning beyond solely cognitive understandings into a sensory, emotional realm (Leavy 2015). Ahmed (2000) calls such a stance of listening beyond the register of speech a form of ‘hearing as touch’ (156). My act of singing a German lullaby was then a position in which I was sharing a song with students as a personal attachment, for its personal, emotional rather than educational value.

What is most intimate to me – singing a nursery rhyme or a lullaby in my mother tongue, German – is most strange to you. But you have been sung to and been singing as a child. You have been comforted, put to sleep and entertained by your mum’s singing.

As my reflections suggest, a lullaby, by establishing an embodied, emotional connection, can evoke the listeners’ own memories of singing or having been sung to. Singing might then be said to trigger a form of ‘imaginative engagement that you get when you read a novel or watch a movie or attend to a work of art that speaks from some place other than your own’ (Appia 2006, 85). Imaginative engagement through singing can create a sensory resonance in people’s bodies that allows for a form of visceral empathy and human connection beyond linguistic decodification (Leavy 2015). In other words, a lullaby might carry meaning beyond the register of speech and allows for an emotional, embodied understanding, which can be ascribed to people’s own ‘skin memories’ (Ahmed 2000) of having been sung to, rather than their actual linguistic comprehension of the song’s lyrics. hooks (1994) suggests

that there lies a personal power in the use of our mother tongue as the most personal position of our embodiment. This is a position that is usually suppressed by the educational requirements of UK college classrooms to inhabit a body that displays English language competence. The sharing and teaching of songs as forms of personal attachment during Language Fest, asserted students' language presence as a powerful form of embodiment. The act of sharing songs denies static notions of competence and fosters a view of language learning as social, situated practice:

An optimal, realistic view of language learning as situated practice involves: mutual engagement, a joint, negotiated enterprise, and a shared-but-structured repertoire of negotiable resources, resulting often not in full or general competence, but in specific and functionally-diversified competencies. (Blommaert, Collins, and Slembrouck 2005, 213)

Within such realistic view of language learning, language competence is defined in relation to the more concrete, situational aims of relationship-based exchange. In the context of Language Fest, these aims were also framed by a focus on well-being, as exemplified in Lisa's interview excerpts. Chung and my attempts to teach each other a song with the same melody but in our different languages, Mandarin and German, can thus be seen as a situated language learning practice that didn't result in full or general language competence, but in our more or less competent attempts to connect as human beings *through* language. There is then, as Phipps (2013, 8) suggests, an ethical valence to the impossibility of competence, that is of 'knowing all the languages in the world' (Spivak 1999, 22, quoted in Phipps 2013, 8). Experiencing my linguistic incompetence and students' abundance of languages in the context of Language Fest, lead me to engage imaginatively across language barriers and static notions of competence. A connection between Chung and me was not enabled through the instrumental use of English as a 'neutral' language for communication. Getting involved as 'human instruments' (Leavy 2015) during our multilingual singing wasn't a neutral act, but resonated our 'most personal position of embodiment' (hooks 1994).

These tacit, embodied dimensions during Language Fest – my experience of linguistic incompetence, the abundance of languages, 36 of them, and the paradox of establishing communicative connections in the midst of it all – resulted in me singing (neither beautifully nor gracefully). It resulted in Chung and me discovering a common melody and teaching each other the respective words in Mandarin and German. For me, listening to Chung's singing, observing how he formed the words, writing my own phonetic notes and echoing the song back for his approval, is an example of situated language learning practice. Our shared giggles, diligent rehearsal and note-taking are an expression of a newly established, communicative connection through an arts-based language learning that is framed by a focus on learners' well-being.

In the following paragraph I shall discuss how a well-being focussed language pedagogy that 'transgresses' notions of native speaker competence might be evaluated through poststructuralist forms of validity.

### Third reflective point: giggles as a transgressive form of validity

*I meet Chung again a week later during his English class. When he enters the classroom he looks at me and smiles. 'I know you', he says. 'I know you too', I reply. He sits down and starts singing 'Bruder Jakob' in German. I join in. With his help I return the song in Mandarin. We giggle. During the lesson, he passes a small piece of paper across the table, it says: 'Do you know where I can buy a hot water bag?' 'A hot water bottle?', I whisper back. He nods. I write down 'Boots' (A UK chemist's chain) and 'Byres Road'. He nods again. After class, we shake hands and say goodbye. I don't know what a 'perfect' multilingual life looks like. As much as I wish I was, I am not one of those people who learn new languages easily, but beyond my unrealistic dreams of quick linguistic fluency lie the real memories of 'being human': connecting and crossing language barriers, listening, singing, echoing, laughing, rehearsing.*

Chung and my giggles and mutual recognition, as described in my workshop reflections, be considered what Lather (1993; 2007) calls a postructuralist form of validity for a well-being focussed language pedagogy? In other words, can our embodied expressions of relationship-building (laughing, recognition,

chatter) be seen in the context of 'validity as an ethical relationship in which ethics and epistemology are brought together' (Lather 1993, 686)? In the previous reflective point, I described how facing my linguistic incompetence, recognising the impossibility of competence per se, and acknowledging students' linguistic presence, led to an arts-based engagement. Shared singing established a human connection between Chung and me through an 'artful' language use (singing, echoing) that didn't aim at competence per se. During this act of singing as imaginative engagement and becoming (slightly) more competent in Mandarin and German in the process, Chung and I giggled. We giggled at our own flawed attempts to sing in a, to us foreign, language. We giggled out of embarrassment about the sound of our singing voices, and maybe also at the paradoxical situation of sitting and singing without any immediately discernible functional, educational purpose, e.g., to improve our English language competence. Why were we singing after all? What was the chain of critical, methodological considerations that led to our singing in Mandarin and German and to our shared giggles?

We were singing because we didn't want to speak English but acknowledge the value of our linguistic presence. We were singing because, as a group, we couldn't all speak each others' languages. We were singing and learning how to sing because singing carried communication beyond the register of speech. Without falling back into English-only communication but singing playfully and multilingually instead, the group wasn't confined to their 'learner roles' or immediately implicated in deficit views. Teaching your 'own' song to somebody who, in real life, inhabits a more authoritative role by teaching 'you', momentarily subverted expert positions. It valued, even celebrated, our spoken languages against the institutionally ingrained 'English language hegemony' (Tsuda 2008; 2010), in which language use is considered for its functional value only, rather than carrying inherent value as social practice and embodied expression of our humanity (Figure 1)<sup>1</sup>:

Guten Abend Gute Nacht

兩隻老虎

Two tigers

Bruder Jakob.

I contend that shared singing and the other situated social practices and phatic gestures that occurred during and after our singing – *listening, echoing, laughing, improvising* – can all be seen as part of the process of building a well-being focussed language pedagogy during Language Fest. These social practices emerged as part of our arts-based workshop structures and developed out of critical methodological considerations and *in situ* pedagogical decisions. Refusing the language deficit argument and conceptualisations of immigrant language learners as academic problems, Language Fest aimed to provide a platform for the acknowledgement and celebration of students' diverse linguistic presence. A singing space as a celebratory, multilingual space recognised the 'impossibility of knowing all the languages in the world' (Spivak 1999, 22, quoted in Phipps 2013, 8) and valued the process of 'learning', 'relationship-building' and fostering 'at-homeness' (Lederach and Lederach 2010) over notions



Figure 1. Tiger and monk in our common childhood song

of fully pre-formed language competence. Language Fest sought to promote a situated, celebratory gesture that didn't fetishise the act of linguistic or cultural performance but was embedded in well-being focussed aims.

Chung and my giggles as well as the, now many, 'moments of recognition' when visiting and sitting in on his ESOL class at Glasgow Clyde College, are an expression of a moment of relationship-building within a well-being focussed language pedagogy; a transgressive, embodied, poststructural (Lather 1993) form of validity that points towards the concrete discursive structures established during Language Fest. Our giggles and mutual recognition crossed over from the informal educational event into the more formalised college environment. They are a tentative expression of how relationships in learning and research situations might be built through an arts-based, well-being focussed (multilingual) language pedagogy. The concrete activity of shared singing stands as an example. In other words, 'giggles', 'mutual recognition' and 'chatter' can be considered as a form of embodied validity that points towards the 'ethical impact of the research instrument [or the educational methods'] discursive structures' (Levin and Greenwood 2001, 103). Aiming to understand the way the ethical intersects both the interpersonal and the epistemological, Lincoln (1995) formulates criteria of quality emerging out of this epistemology/ethics nexus (Lincoln 1995, quoted in Denzin and Lincoln 2011, 123). I chose one of Lincoln's (1995) quality criteria – *voice* – for a final, tentative reflection on validity in relation to Language Fest:

Chung and my giggles, our sometimes bemused and sometimes embarrassed singing voices when learning to sing in a new language, is an embodied expression of our 'voices' as linguistically poly-vocal, abundant and resisting, for a moment at least, the deficit arguments often surrounding the English language expectations of our everyday college and university lives in the UK. Our giggles as 'voice' hint at the process of relationship-building that has taken place in the face of our mutual linguistic incompetence and desire to establish a dialogue anyway. Our giggling, singing voice has become the sound of our 'joint, negotiated enterprise' (Blommaert, Collins, and Slembrouck 2005, 213) to establish a human connection that carries tentatively across institutional boundaries and echoes our moments of situated (multilingual) learning and meeting.

### A pedagogical note

In this article, I have described how a practice of shared singing might emerge as a result of a well-being focussed language pedagogy. Memorising songs in other languages isn't a 'good' language teaching method in and of itself. When taken out of context, it might facilitate, even fetishise tokenistic acts of celebrating multilingualism and using arts-based methods. These can be easily assimilated into strategic, neoliberal language teaching models (Trueba and Bartolomé 2000). 'Shared singing' is only a small (creative) cog in the bigger wheel of a humanity-facing educational orientation. A well-being focussed language pedagogy necessarily involves a more extensive resistance against (linguistic) discriminatory tendencies in our education systems. It celebrates students' language practices as powerful forms of embodiment that echo their affective, social and political real life contexts and gives voice to their concrete hopes for the future. Denying static and individualised notions of competence, a well-being focussed language pedagogy promotes language learning as a situated practice, and in opposition to a deficit-driven educational discourse. This does ideally not just result in accumulations of tokenistic acts, but in more in-depth, praxis-based reflections on how multilingual and arts-based practices can be developed to further support students' creativity and criticality. Collaboration between teachers and researchers is important here. Conceptual and pedagogical developments – in multilingual teaching *and* research – can then be rooted in existing critical pedagogical orientations that harness the key role – as translators, mediators and confidantes – that teachers (like Lisa) play in young people's lives. Additionally, activities can be tested in praxis as well as reflect and shape latest academic developments, for example with a view to the 'cultural turn' (e.g., Byram, Nichols, and Stevens 2001; Risager 2006), or lately the 'multilingual turn' (Kramsch 2009; Ntelioglou et al. 2014) and the 'performative turn' (Schewe 2013) in (foreign) language education. Since Language Fest – now almost a year ago – Glasgow Clyde College teachers, RM Borders researchers and college students have embarked on more acts of

developing, testing and reflecting on arts-based, multilingual teaching and research practices, in the college classroom and during out-of-school activities. I will give just one example of a classroom-based lesson that followed on from Language Fest:

Lisa built on students' love for music by creating a lesson that centred around multilingual, Swedish-Lebanese singer-songwriter's Maher Zain's song 'One Big Family' (2012). Students identified with Zain's own background as a multilingual refugee (to Sweden) and learned about his role as an active supporter of the UNHCR and World Refugee Day (20th June). Based on a listening exercise (in English), students engaged with his song's message for peace and subsequently composed their own multilingual 'messages to the world', in the form of poems or lyrics. Some students used these texts to process their own experiences, write a message to a lost loved one, or give advice to people in similar circumstances to themselves. Lisa's lesson is just one example of how pedagogical practices might further build on a well-being focussed language pedagogy, in order to integrate teaching practices, which do not only connect to students' real life contexts but aim to develop their creative and critical engagement with their own social realities and wider world issues affecting their lives.

The day you went away.  
 Little gray sky,  
 can't see you most love blue sky.  
 There is one less person to quarrel,  
 more comfort.  
 Everything is illusion,  
 too late to say thanks,  
 story is ending,  
 too much, too late to regret.  
 I have so much desire,  
 too many dreams don't come true.  
 The table left  
 The last photo  
 My insomnia  
 (...) (Excerpt from a student text in English)

## Conclusion

This article explored the process of building a language pedagogy which concentrates on well-being and humanity in the context of Language Fest, an arts-based celebration of multilingualism, that was part of the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council's 'Being Human Festival' in Glasgow, Scotland. My experience of learning how to sing a Chinese children's song from Chung, a 16 year-old ESOL learner and newly arrived asylum seeker in Glasgow, led to a reflection on a humanity-oriented education through three reflective points. In the introduction I explained the highly problematic (English) language deficit arguments perpetuated by recent UK government reports (Gross 2010; 2008), which conceptualise multilingual learners as academic problems. The first reflective point contrasted such deficit views with students' abundant multilingual presence during Language Fest. I maintained that the acknowledgement of students' 'humanity' (including their language practice) is the key to an education for humanity that is underpinned by ethics and a situated view of language learning practice. The second reflective point contrasted my experience of linguistic incompetence with the use of arts-based methods, namely shared singing, which allowed for human connection beyond 'perfected' verbal exchange. The third reflective point discussed how Chung's and my phatic gestures (e.g., our giggles) might be regarded as an embodied, transgressive form of validity for a well-being focussed language pedagogy. The practice of honing the discursive structures of a well-being focused language pedagogy

through the practice of shared multilingual singing, took students' humanity as the key for learning. The article thus doesn't offer a pedagogical or methodological answer in terms of a 'best practice' example that can be universally applied. The momentary reversal of learner-teacher power-relationships during Language Fest must not deflect from the overall realities of institutionally ingrained, discriminatory tendencies towards non-dominant language use (Gross 2010; 2008). Shared multilingual singing can't subvert these power dynamics but might be seen as a momentary, context-specific rupture in deficit discourse in relation to our Language Fest participant group, that built on the anti-assimilationist pedagogical practice of their educators (see Lisa's interview excerpts). The sound of multilingual singing, sharing and laughing then tentatively echoes the possibilities of establishing a well-being focussed language pedagogy that resists deficit arguments, and in which students' complex human realities (linguistically, socially, politically) become key elements of a (multilingual) education *for* humanity. It is hoped that this article might further encourage reflections and accounts from educators from diverse, international contexts who rethink static notions of language competence against the 'old refrain' of deficit arguments, and with the aim of exploring how an education *for* humanity might be negotiated in their specific educational contexts.

## Note

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## Song

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