"Equitable multilingualism" for equitable access to learning: Addressing the digital and linguistic divide in connected higher education for refugees

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Abstract: Addressing the digital divide for refugee learners accessing higher education in displacement also involves addressing the linguistic divide, particularly as we live in a world of interlanguage inequality where academic digital resources and learning opportunities available largely require fluency in colonial languages like English, French, Spanish, etc. This paper focuses specifically on English as many connected tertiary programs available to refugees around the world are English-mediated. It is crucial that as connected higher education becomes a key strategy for access by the United Nations, INGOs, bilateral institutions, and private donors, universities involved in this work expand their use of technology to deliver programs to integrate technology-mediated language education for digital-skills, language awareness, and language development. This argument is based on an emancipatory approach that argues literacy (i.e., English literacy and digital literacy) only empowers people when it renders them active questioners of the social reality around them.

Keywords: digital divide; interlanguage inequality; English language learning; connected learning; higher education for refugees; emancipatory literacy

1   Introduction

In 2021, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported 94.7 million people of concern in 135 countries and territories who have been forcibly displaced as a result of violence, conflicts, persecution, and environmental disasters (UNHCR, 2021, p. 7). The drawn-out nature of modern crises burn for decades without drawing global attention; this, combined with policies of externalization where countries work increasingly to establish barriers to prevent asylum-seekers from entering their borders, means that millions are living in protracted displacement in refugee camps, urban dwellings, and/or detention centres, their lives in limbo for decades, without state rights and protection (Frelick et al., 2016; ICRC, 2016; UNHCR, 2021). Generations of refugees live in displacement with little to no access to schooling and/or technological resources for online learning. In 2019, less than 1% of refugees were able to attend university (UNHCR, 2019). There has been a shift in recent years, with concerted efforts by some universities, humanitarian organizations, philanthropic foundations, as well as the United Nations to increase access to higher education for displaced learners (Dippo, 2021). These institutions, through programmatic and pedagogic innovations, have been offering technology-mediated online/blended credentials for refugees. The UN has explicitly named "connected learning" or

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digitally-supported education, as one of the key pillars to increase access to higher education for refugees (UNHCR, 2022a). This past year, there was a significant increase from 1 to 6 percent of refugees enrolling in tertiary programs (UNHCR, 2021a, p. 6). While 6 percent is still minute, this is an astonishing leap. However, access to most of these educational opportunities is limited to those who have a strong command of the English language and long-term/reliable access to electricity, devices, and digital resources like the internet. Despite many refugees being multilingual, the opportunities to learn dominant languages like English and purchase devices are scarce in contexts like refugee camps or for displaced persons who are trying to survive with limited resources. Ortega (2017) notes that "the majority of the world is multilingual, but inequitably multilingual, and much of the world is also technologized, but inequitably so" (p. 285). Without fluency in the English language, digital literacy and resources, access to educational opportunities is limited to a select group of learners in displacement.

This paper will argue that addressing the digital divide for refugee learners accessing higher education in displacement also involves addressing the linguistic divide, particularly as we live in a world of "interlanguage inequality" where the available academic digital resources and learning opportunities require fluency in colonial languages like English, French, Spanish, etc. (Wee, 2011). This paper focuses specifically on English, as the majority of connected tertiary programs associated with the UNHCR are offered in English (see Programme Archive in CLCC, 2022). It is crucial that as connected higher education becomes a key strategy for access, universities involved in this work expand their use of technology to deliver programs to integrate technology-mediated language education for digital-skills *and* language development. This argument is based on an emancipatory approach that argues literacy (this paper focuses on English literacy and digital literacy) only empowers people when it renders them active questioners of the social reality around them (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

2   Outlining Challenges: The digital and linguistic divide for learners in displacement

2.1   Digital divide for refugees

The digital divide (i.e., the gap between those with and without access to technology) is a significant issue for refugee learners, as they often lack the resources to access and utilize technology. 83% of the world's refugees are hosted in low- and middle- income countries (UNHCR, 2021b, p. 2) as more developed countries located in North America, Europe, and Oceania work actively through externalization controls to keep asylum-seekers out (Frelick et al., 2016). It should be noted here that less than 1% of refugees are resettled into third countries like Canada, United States, Australia, etc.; in 2021, only 56,000 of the 94.7 million displaced persons were accepted for resettlement (UNHCR, 2021b, p. 9). However, the vast majority of language education research on refugee learners is in the resettlement context. Due to the sheer scale of the number of refugees *in displacement* (vs resettlement), there is need for dedicated research and focus for refugee learners in countries of first asylum. As the majority of these learners are located in low- and middle- income countries, we already establish a backdrop of inequity, as the consequent bandwidth divide between high- and low- income countries "is linked to the income divide, which is notoriously persistent" (Hilbert, 2016, p. 567). This inequity is exacerbated by refugees' protracted time spent in refugee camps, which are often located in underserved regions of host countries and lack the necessary infrastructure and power to seamlessly support technology-mediated learning (UNHCR, 2021b). Digital illiteracy, poor infrastructure, the high cost of installing Information and Communications Technology (ICT) infrastructure, volatile political environments, and limited electricity supply are some of the challenges in these spaces

(Bakibinga-Gaswaga et al., 2020, p. 1). Thus, vulnerable learners in low-resource contexts like refugee camps face a greater digital divide preventing their meaningful participation and advancement in learning through online opportunities (UNHCR, 2021b). Even for refugees who had access to technology before displacement, being uprooted into a new country without status, protection, and secure employment may become major barriers to securing the resources and time needed to pursue educational opportunities.

In addition to the resource divide, language proficiency is also considered a key factor for knowledge acquisition and success in higher education. 72% of all refugees under the UNHCR mandate originate from Syria, Venezuela, Ukraine, Afghanistan, and South Sudan—all of these countries do not have English as their first language (UNHCR, 2022b). Yet, the majority of connected tertiary programs associated with the UNHCR are offered in English (see Programme Archive in CLCC, 2022). In addition, a study exploring the identification of vulnerable groups (including refugees) in terms of language proficiency in higher education notes that "English is a lingua franca in higher education as well as generally… A certain level of proficiency in English is usually expected for academic studies at the international level" (Happ et al., 2021, pp. 126-127). Thus, we need to address the question of access to connected higher education, not only by considering the digital divide, but also the linguistic divide faced by refugee learners whose L1 is not English while the available higher educational opportunities are offered in English. Both the digital and linguistic divide among refugee learners highlight the need for efforts to bridge this gap and provide equal access to education. In the endeavor to increase access to higher education for refugees, we see the intersection of multilingualism, digital literacy, and social justice (Ortega, 2017).

2.2 Interlanguage inequality

Migration involves the movement of not only an individual, but the individual's language as well. Since languages have become standardized into systems of the modern nation state (Fairclough, 1992), not speaking the language of the country into which refugees are displaced creates additional barriers. For refugees, depending on a person's age, gender, familial responsibilities, or other circumstances (e.g., health, employment, resources/services available at refugee camp, etc.) during displacement, they may or may not have the opportunity to become proficient in the language of the host country. In situations of forced displacement, access to and control of resources becomes a matter of survival and any disadvantage can be exacerbated and lead to further marginalization in an already precarious context. For refugees who cross geopolitical borders into nations that do not recognize them as their own, how proficient they are in the dominant language(s) of the host nation and/or humanitarian aid can have a significant impact on how they access resources and opportunities. In a world of "interlanguage inequality", opportunities and resources are typically available to those who speak "dominant" languages, particularly colonial languages such as English (Wee, 2011). Education is an example of one of these resources and opportunities. With the proliferation of technology and the increasing amount of knowledge that is available online, as well as the increased move to online modes of learning post-COVID-19, many resources and opportunities are readily accessible if you are proficient in English and digital literacies. This creates tensions, as the use of English can be seen as an imperialistic influence (Phillipson, 1992). Yet, the dominance of the English language in accessing higher education as well as in digital resources remains the reality (Happ et al., 2021): is it right to leave people behind and deny them access to opportunities in fear of perpetuating "linguistic imperialism"?

While there is an authoritarian side to dominant languages and literacy practices, Freire argues there is a liberating side as well. Freire and Macedo (1987) note the importance of securing the base of one's native language; however, this does not mean the dominant tongue can be ignored. They write, "although the concept of voice is fundamental in the development of an emancipatory literacy, the goal should never be to restrict students to their own vernacular" (Friere & Macedo, 1987, p. 105). They go on to cite Giroux and McLaren (1986, p. 235) to claim that:

> Empowerment should also be a means that enables students "to interrogate and selectively appropriate those aspects of the dominant culture that will provide them with the basis for defining and transforming, rather than merely serving, the wider social order." This means that educators should understand the value of mastering the standard dominant language of the wider society. It is through the full appropriation of the dominant standard language that students find themselves linguistically empowered to engage in dialogue with the various sectors of the wider society. (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 105)

Egbo (2000) argues that the "demand for increased access to literacy does not imply the abandonment of epistemic and unique philosophical foundations upon which each individual sees the world… rather, such demands are based on the notion of enhancement" (p. 10). The notion of enhancement, or the idea that learning a new language is an additive process, suggests that it is important for individuals to become proficient in both their mother tongue and "dominant" languages like English in order to participate in educational and economic opportunities. If English is a lingua franca, in higher education and generally, and if the majority of connected higher learning programs aligned with the UNHCR's educational strategy are offered in English (CLCC, 2022; Happ et al., 2021), then facilitating meaningful participation for refugee learners in accessing higher education means offering them opportunities to grow in the "standard dominant language" of English language and digital literacy. Here I would argue that this must be done through culturally-responsive pedagogy that emphasizes the significance of connecting the culture of students with the curriculum (Marette, 2023). This is particularly relevant given the rapid pace of technological advancements in the world, the potential of connected learning increasing educational access, and the sheer scale of refugee learners in protracted displacement, unable to physically cross borders and/or who may not have access to university education in their own language. Universities active in this space of education and development (see CLCC, 2022) have a social role to play in addressing this issue, both by offering language learning access and by promoting digital literacy, while remaining committed to promoting "equitable multilingualism" (not elite bilingualism) as advocated by Ortega (2017).

3   "Dual" opportunities in addressing the digital and linguistic divide

Teaching language learning and digital literacy can potentially offer a "dual" opportunity to address the digital and linguistic divide, particularly in higher education programs where English language skills and technological literacy are identified as impediments in students' programmatic progress (Bauer & Gallagher, 2020). Many initiatives that aim to increase educational access for refugees begin with the intention of offering language training, then onboarding students to their specific Learning Management Systems (LMS), but often end up offering programs in English with some preparatory work. An integrated approach, where language learning and digital literacy can be integrated into onboarding activities could enhance learning in both areas. However, it is important to approach this in a diversified manner, taking into account the specific circumstances and resources available to learners, including their access

to technology and bandwidth, as well as their language proficiency levels. A needs assessment for refugee learners and the context is critical (Lomicka & Lord, 2019).

While resource divides may present challenges, refugees have shown a strong investment in staying connected online (UNHCR, 2021a) and using digital communities to support teacher training, access digital content, and enhance literacy and learning opportunities. Many refugees spend up to a third of their limited financial resources to stay "connected" online. Being part of digital communities via WhatsApp and other social networks is critical for refugees and their networks, both "on-the-move" and in protracted displacement; these digital communities may be "an asset to teachers and their students to … provide digital content, and enhance opportunities for literacy and learning" (Dahya et al., 2019, p. 775). While the motivation to stay "connected" is strong, it is important for universities to be cognizant of the challenges of low-resource, low-power spaces. It is also possible to overcome these challenges through the use of low-bandwidth models of learning (i.e., content and activities that use less data and thus can be delivered with limited internet) and a focus on universal design for learning (UDL) that consistently integrates inclusive technology-mediated language learning for the development of both language and digital literacy (see Bauer & Gallagher, 2020; Dahya et al., 2019; Moser-Mercer et al., 2018). Mobile learning is also an important consideration, as it allows learners to access resources from a variety of devices and locations (Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013).

4   Opportunities for virtual exchange

Wu and Li (2019) write "as the world is increasingly interdependent and diverse, cultivating the abilities to communicate across differences has become one of the important goals of language teaching and learning" (p. 111). Developing cultural competencies and global awareness as well as ICT literacy is seen as a core 21st century skill (Glossary of Education Reform, 2016). There is a case to be made that through technology-mediated language teaching and learning for refugee learners, universities have the opportunity to create reciprocal opportunities that benefit both refugees and students from the domestic institutions themselves. Two key questions that Ortega (2017) raises in considering good Computer Assisted Language Learning Second Language Acquisition (CALL-SLA) pedagogical implementations are: "'Have I carefully considered in my design bridges between out-of-school digital worlds and classroom technological worlds?' and 'Have I yoked digital literacy objectives and language learning objectives?'" (p. 305). She notes that those who infrequently use technology could greatly improve their digital skills as a side-product of language learning when included. However, I would argue that the inclusion of refugee students in an integrated course is a benefit to non-refugee students as well by way of virtual exchange. Such inclusions would be a valuable way of allowing refugee and non-refugee students to make international connections (Ibrahim, 2021). As Wu and Li (2019) note:

> Enabled by technological affordances and increased connectivity, learners with various backgrounds share their understandings about writing traditions and styles in an online space unbounded by geographical, linguistic, or cultural borders. The fluid, cosmopolitan nature of digital practices makes the online space a meaningful site for learners to build up a globalizing meaning-making repertoire (p. 111).

One example of a blended/integrated courses including both domestic teacher's college students in Canada and international students residing in Kenyan refugee camps and/or other contexts of displacement recorded both curricular and pedagogical benefits of the inclusion and exchange. Of course, proper onboarding and contextualization of such an endeavor is critical as the instructor of this initiative noted that:

Productive, worthwhile engagement, however, doesn't just happen when students come together in an online course. The first time I had students in Toronto and Dadaab in a course together, sharing a Moodle [online learning management system], I assumed that they would be so enthusiastic and keen to participate in this innovation ... I was partly right, about the enthusiasm, but totally wrong, about the meaningful engagement. The welcoming exuberance expressed by my students in Toronto completely overwhelmed my students in Dadaab who were new to using keyboards and uncertain about their English language skills… The next time I offered a blended/integrated course, I provided much more by way of orientation to the unique features of the course to students in both locations. I was more deliberate in discussing the aims, objectives, and rich possibilities for creating meaningful learning experiences together…[then] the students did begin to engage." (Dippo, 2021, pp. 24-25)

After recalibrating his course through deeper and catered orientation based on locale, the next time this course was offered, students in Dadaab engaged more deeply with students in Toronto over "book club" studies and TedTalks where they shared their different perspectives on geopolitical topics and humanitarian issues. They brought new perspectives and dialogues that would not have been feasible had the class not included refugee students online through the Moodle. It was also evident implicitly in this study, that through this integration, students who were uncertain about English language writing as well as technological skills, grew in their confidence and ability to input text into the LMS and share their writing (Dippo, 2021). The instructor of this course shared:

What have my students in Toronto learned with and from our classmates and colleagues in Kenya? We've learned that to become effective teachers of children from families who have sought asylum in Canada, we need to educate ourselves about the histories and politics of displacement induced by conflict, development, and environmental collapse. We've come to better understand our own implications in national and international policies that have direct impact on the lives of those forced to flee. Sharing virtual classroom space with refugees, we've seen the power of ideas in action and the sources of hope for the future. (Dippo, 2021, p. 28)

This example offers an encouraging case study around the improvement of language and digital skills, as well as the mutual benefits of virtual exchange, through the inclusion of refugee students in an online university education course.

5 Conclusion

This research paper examined the use of technology-mediated language education as a means of increasing access to higher education for refugees and other displaced learners. While advocating for language proficiency through digital learning, it is part of a broader call to recognize the responsibility to use technology to broaden access to education for marginalized learners. Despite advancements made in the field of technology-mediated language teaching and learning, there is a need for greater focus on the millions of refugee learners in protracted displacement (vs resettlement) with little to no educational options. As Ortega (2017) notes:

… in the context of language learning, we must ensure that marginalized as well as elite multilinguals benefit from the promise of technology. This can only happen if we also actively strive to combat the well-documented inequities and perils of the complex digital divides in which we are all complicit (p. 304).

Here I want to consider the social role of the university in society. What role does the university play, not just as an academic institution, but as a social institution in the current world? The COVID-19 pandemic has presented an opportunity for a transition to more inclusive and accessible models of education, and institutions in the global north, particularly universities, have the expertise and resources to lead this charge. By leveraging the changes brought about by the pandemic and the increased use of online education, as well as through the implementation of culturally-responsive pedagogy in English language education, we have the opportunity to move towards a more "equitable multilingualism" that can increase more equitable access to education for all learners across borders. Considering recent strategic developments in the humanitarian-education sector, I argue that the digital and linguistic divide be tackled together, specifically in the space of connected higher education as a key strategy point that is being advocated by the UNHCR and select universities in the world. I hope that this will be the direction that new developments in technology-mediated language teaching and learning will lead universities into the future.

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