



# From feeling broken to the road to empowerment: lived experience of using a second language in the healing journey of survivors of torture and organized violence.

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## Background

- Awareness and understanding of multilingualism and its effects in mental-healthcare processes could improve outcomes (e.g. Dewaele & Costa, 2018)
- Few studies explore the lived experience of multilingualism in the healing journeys of asylum seekers and refugees
- To fill this gap my research project focuses on rehabilitation and second language acquisition and use in survivors of torture and organized violence. A unique London-based therapeutic community (TC) supporting such people is the microcontext of the study
- The research fulfils our disciplinary mandate to add to knowledge "of all types, shades and grades of multilingualism" (Ortega, 2019: 34) and aspires to contribute to mental health needs pertinent to the global socioeconomic upheaval & surge in migration in recent years (International Organisation for Migration, 2019)

## Main research questions

1. Can a later-learned language, English (ELX) contribute to the healing & reparative space offered by a TC supporting survivors of torture?
2. What are the main experiential features of learning and using a later-learned language (LX) in the context of living in exile?
3. What are the participants' thoughts, feelings, attitudes and experiences, regarding the use of the ELX in the context of their rehabilitation?

## Multilingualism, emotions and sense of self

- Multilinguals are people who use a later-learned language (LX) outside of the learning context, and whose LX proficiency may range from minimal to maximal
- Multilinguals' languages carry different levels of emotionality or emotional tones, for example, languages acquired later in life can feel more detached than first languages (L1). Switches from one language to another can lead to a different sense of self as language is often a marker of identity (see Pavlenko, 2005, 2012 ; Dewaele, 2013)
- These differences have important implications for applied domains such as marketing and forensic or health contexts (for a review see Caldwell-Harris, 2015)

## Methodology

- Qualitatively driven Innovative mixed-method research design
- Phenomenological approach taken to explore subjective, lived experiences
- Employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, 1996) integrated with ethnography
- The core component and theoretical drive IPA was used to address the main research questions
- Strategies from ethnography helped researcher/participant trust develop and enhanced understanding of participants & their context enriching the data analysis
- The ethnographic component was facilitated by the fact I worked in the TC before and during the research project: getting close to participants "...can make for better qualitative data" (Toma, 2002: 179).



- I interviewed 15 survivors, attendees of the TC
- The semi-structured interviews consisted of questions about participants' language learning histories, the relationship between participants' languages emotions and sense of self and their language experiences within the community and beyond
- Data from the interviews were subjected to IPA

## Microcontext and participants



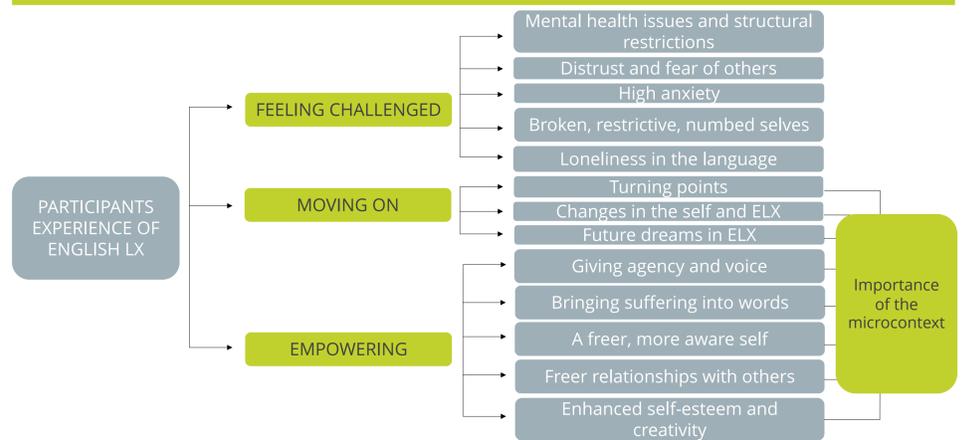
**The microcontext:** the community's primary function is to provide a mental health service for refugees. It uses community as a healing force- providing safety, security and a place of belonging. Community work is complemented by individual and group therapy & casework.  
**Participants:** differ in many things from country of origin, languages spoken, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, professions to education. However, they are bound by past traumatic experiences, exile, English as a lingua franca and the therapeutic community they belong to.

## Some References

- Cook, S.R., & Dewaele, J.-M. (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1177/13670069211033032>.  
Dewaele, J.M. (2013). Emotions in multiple languages (2nd ed). Palgrave Macmillan  
Ortega, L. (2019) <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12525>  
Pavlenko, A. (2012) <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207594.2012.743665>

## Findings

- Overall, I identified two levels of themes: superordinate and subordinate. The three superordinate themes identified : **Challenging, Moving On** and **Empowering**
- They have been arranged into the participants' journey of healing through the lens of their ELX



## Participants' voices

- 1) **Challenging:** Raymond describes the challenge of his restricted sense of self in ELX: *"the thing is [in ELX] I am not that person... I am a person who expresses very fast...I imagined talking in English like a balloon - when you are talking, you put air in it and you just want to fill this balloon but, in the balloon, there is some holes and when you put the air in, the air goes from the holes, so the balloon never gets filled..."*
- 2) **Moving on:** Helen describes a sense of her moving on in ELX: *"... in English I can dream of how I want my life to be-my envisioning is sort of like cooking. I'm given this life I'm going to do something with it I am going to do something good with it - and I think that it is going to happen - it's like you want it - it's like you build your own self"*
- 3) **Empowering:** Brontes, Helen, Gabriel and Dian: ELX facilitates disclosure and gives a freer sense of self (see vignettes below)

I can say things in English, and you don't feel it - it doesn't hit you. It's like telling a story which didn't exist but if I say it in Luganda

*Brontes*

When I talk about it in [my L1], that sense of shame and shamefulness ... it's hard to talk about it, the words don't come as easy - they don't come as easy in my language as in English

*Helen*

Finally, I was able to express myself and find my own identity, which has never been done or possible in [my L1]. It's not just like I don't know how to do it in [my L1], but it's the feeling it's all too charged in [my L1]. English is my language of safety. [my L1] is my language of persecution

*Dian*

When I speak [my L1] I feel, more manly, more masculine and more - yeah - and when I speak English it's more me, who I am - I am very comfortable with my soul

*Gabriel*

## Discussion and limitations

- My main aim was to shed light on participants' language experiences within the process of their rehabilitation
- The findings suggest that the ELX contributed to the reparative, healing space offered by the community
- The perceived detachment effect of the ELX helped facilitate disclosure- (remembering & telling the truth about terrible events are the prerequisites for an individuals healing)
- In people who had experienced sexuality-persecution or sex-trafficking the LX was experienced as a tool with which to [re]invent and 'perform' a new self. (Cook & Dewaele, 2021)
- Implications- psychological interventions that enable refugees to recognise their own experience across languages could well promote engagement and rapport within the context of their rehabilitation and help their recovery
- Awareness and understanding of multilingualism can provide useful lenses for professionals to see the person within the refugee, and discover the uniqueness and complexity of the person's story
- Main limitation-it is one of the first attempts to combine IPA with ethnography; thus, as yet, validity has not been properly established

## Future research aims

- **Continue** exploring my participants lived experience of LX acquisition and use and rehabilitation to generate knowledge and understanding of the impact of the pandemic on these experiences
- **Apply** the methodology to explore multilingualism & refugees in health care settings using Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice as a framework for the research
- **Develop** fresh, new approaches to disseminate research findings among policy makers, professionals working with refugees, refugees themselves and a wider general public