

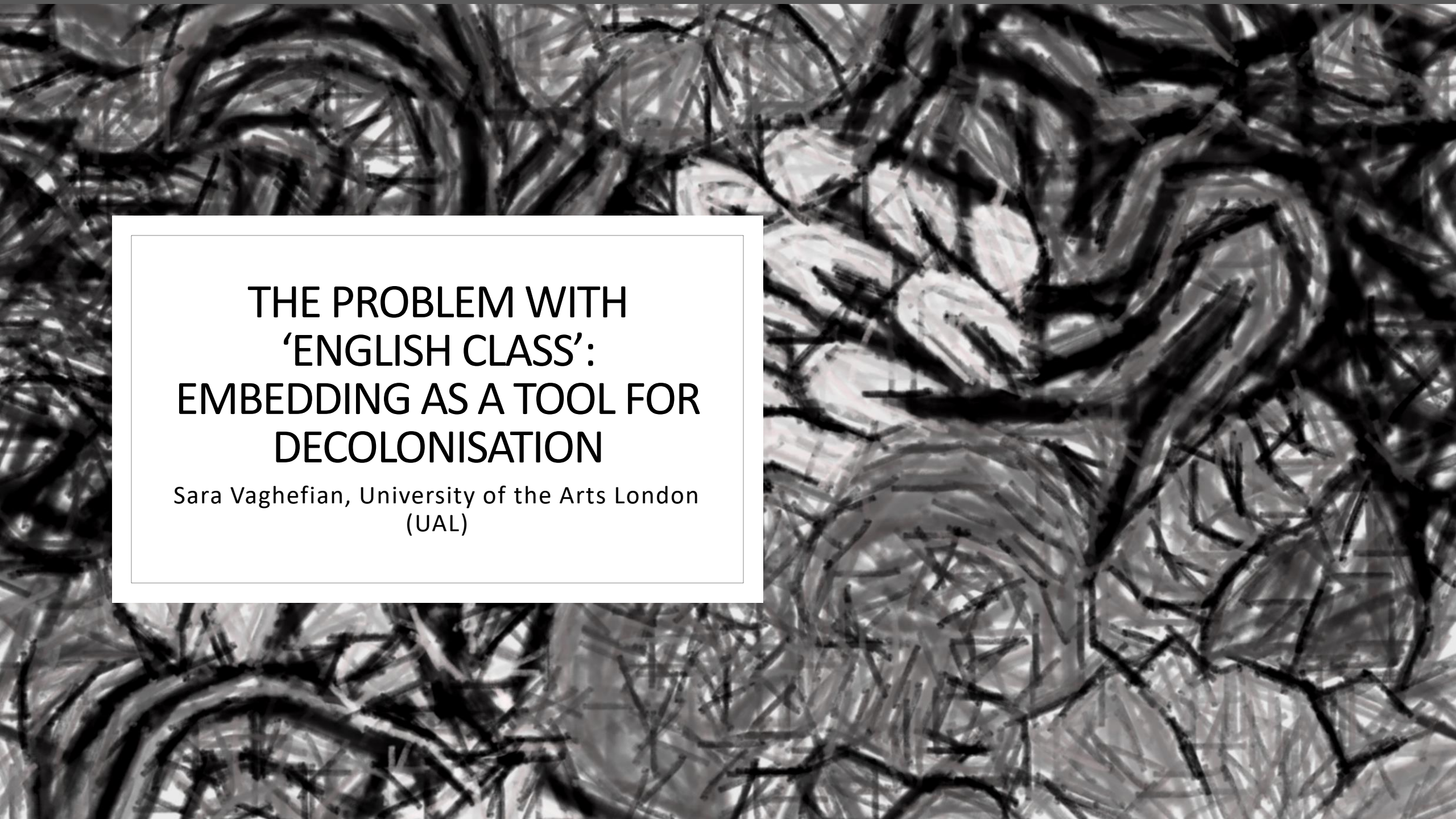
# The problem with 'English class': embedding as a tool for decolonisation

Sara Vaghefian, University of the Arts London (UAL)

The Future of English Language  
Teaching Conference **ONLINE**

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# THE PROBLEM WITH 'ENGLISH CLASS': EMBEDDING AS A TOOL FOR DECOLONISATION

Sara Vaghefian, University of the Arts London  
(UAL)





# PRESENTATION STRUCTURE

1. Reflection task on decolonisation
2. Introduction: Aims of the talk + UAL context
3. What is Language Policy?
4. How can we begin to decolonise Language Policy?
5. How does this relate to an embedded approach?
6. How do we decolonise Language Policy for the teaching and learning context?
7. How can this be applied in teaching practice?
8. Findings from my own research
9. Obstacles, challenges and related factors
10. Review of main points
11. Concluding remarks
12. Q+A

# REFLECTION TASK

- What do we mean by “decolonisation” in relation to teaching, learning and systems?
- In what ways is your university / institution looking to decolonise its teaching practices and contexts?
- How effective do you think these aims will be? (What impact might they have and what are the obstacles and challenges in meeting these aims?)

# INTRODUCTION: AIMS

- to highlight the relevance of decolonisation within 'EAP' and how it is tied to the wider decolonisation initiative at the university
- to identify systemic and pedagogic issues related to the decolonisation of Language Policy and how that relates to teaching
- to evaluate the situation at UAL and encourage a discussion on the issues, successes and challenges at your institutions

# INTRODUCTION: THE UAL CONTEXT

- University of the Arts (6 colleges):
  - Central Saint Martin's (CSM)
  - London College of Fashion (LCF)
  - London College of Communication (LCC)
  - Chelsea, Camberwell and Wimbledon (CCW)
- Over 100 undergraduate courses and over 100 postgraduate courses across the 6 colleges

# INTRODUCTION: THE UAL CONTEXT

- Course-specific Language Development:
  - course-specific classes to every BA, Grad Dip and MA course at the university (all 6 colleges)
  - LD tutor liaises with course leader/tutors at the beginning of each term and throughout each term. In the most successful cases, this involves:
    - ✓ agreeing on the approach, focus and priorities for the term
    - ✓ course leader reporting on students' progress and offering suggestions for LD class
    - ✓ LD tutor providing weekly updates of attendance and class content + student feedback on class content
    - ✓ course leader and LD tutor planning classes together / delivering some sessions together

# DECOLONISATION AT UAL

- led by the Teaching and Learning Exchange
- strategy to reduce/close the Awarding gap by 2022
- 3 strands of support offered to course teams:
  - ✓ Fostering belonging and compassionate pedagogy
  - ✓ Enhancing assessment for equity
  - ✓ Decolonising pedagogy and curriculum (UAL, 2020)
- 2 Decolonising the Arts Curriculum zines (compiled of staff and student contributions) (UAL, 2018; UAL, 2019)

**This is only the beginning of the long process of decolonisation**



# Non-Native English Speaker?

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Best wishes.



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Critical Pedagogy is most typically associated with the work of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian Educationalist, who was interested in raising literacy levels amongst peasants. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire criticised traditional rote learning methods that alienated the learner (and the teacher) and instead aimed to develop self-reflexivity in the learner and awaken a critical consciousness. Education is intimately linked to the production and reproduction of social relations, power and politics. Therefore, the critical pedagogue argues that questions of oppression, social justice and democracy are not distinct from the acts of learning and teaching.

In Critical Pedagogy #4, Gurnam expands on the importance of non-hierarchical dialogue and exchange to develop critical consciousness, to connect ideas to lived experience (and vice versa) and to affect change in the world. In practice, the pedagogical approaches that we, as both educators and students, can take forward would be to realise that creative teaching methods on their own are no guarantor of transformative learning but we should aim to deploy a broader canvas – visual, auditory, tactile, that can engage and stimulate.

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks writes "I enter the classroom with the assumption that we must build "community" in order to create a climate of openness and intellectual rigor. (...) It has been my experience that one way to build community in the classroom is to recognize the value of each individual voice." (1994, p40)

By decolonising our pedagogy, the learner can create a new framework for negotiating the idea of intelligence that is both critical and action orientated leading from personal perspective transformation to social and political change.

Youtube link - [bit.ly/CriticalPedagogy](https://bit.ly/CriticalPedagogy)

# WHAT IS LANGUAGE POLICY?

- Language policy involves 3 interconnected elements (Spolsky, 2004):
  - practice (the actions, behaviours and linguistic choices of teaching staff and students)
  - beliefs (the ideologies embedded in official language policies and practices)
  - management (the explicit action taken by authority figures that can influence the practices or beliefs of the language users)

# WHAT IS LANGUAGE POLICY?

- Some examples of Language Policy in your institution could be:
  - certain beliefs about how language should be used
  - the way teaching staff use language when teaching / giving instructions
  - (the language on) university webpages
  - (the language in) assignment briefs / unit guides
  - the analysis of the ideologies behind the language used in official documentation has been widely discussed in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) research (e.g. Fairclough, 2010).



# CRITICAL LANGUAGE POLICY

- Critical Language Policy (CLP) is concerned with combatting inequalities to achieve greater social justice (Tollefson, 2006; Young, 1990)
- it acknowledges the colonial legacy of ELT to which LP is still tied (Pennycook, 1998)
- it is self-reflexive about the Othering ideologies of institutional agents (Tollefson, 2006; Pennycook, 1998);
- it foregrounds agency (Holt & Margonis, 1992; Hornberger, 2005), acknowledging that those affected by language policy should take part in shaping those policies.

# HOW IS LANGUAGE POLICY MANIFESTED IN TODAY'S HIGHER EDUCATION PRACTICES AND POLICIES?

- The LD tutor is sometimes seen as an 'English language teacher'
- Students are told to 'go to English class' if they lack confidence in spoken English or are perceived not to have the appropriate language level
- East/South East Asian students are stereotyped: lack of confidence is conflated with lack of language competence; little knowledge of the British ways of learning is seen as a lack of critical thinking skills; it is assumed that these students always engage less than Home students (Caruana & Spurling, 2007)
- International (particularly East Asian students) are expected to 'integrate' with Western cultural / theoretical concepts and Western students rather than having their social and cultural capital valued (Singh, 2017)
- Posters and online signposting to LD characterise it as 'English Language Development'
- Emphasis in teaching is sometimes still on traditional EAP approaches that are largely irrelevant to- UAL Art and Design students

# HOW DO WE DECOLONISE LANGUAGE POLICY IN TEACHING AND LEARNING?

- naming, framing and advertisement of LD classes
- attitudes and language used among staff and students
- focus on intercultural communication
- approaches to teaching:
  - ✓ Inclusive Teaching
  - ✓ Design Literacies: digital and multimodal literacies; non-traditional genres; storytelling
  - ✓ Critical Pedagogies

# 1. INCLUSIVE TEACHING

- **An inclusive teaching approach (Richards & Finnegan, 2015) from the beginning of the course:**
- course teams introduce and clarify learning aims, outcomes, ways of learning, key words and concepts at the beginning of the course. LD tutor reinforces this throughout the course
- Intercultural communication and community building tasks delivered by both course team and LD tutor throughout the course. This can be embedded within group project work.



## 2. DESIGN LITERACIES

- Rather than relying on traditional EAP that foregrounds English vocabulary and rhetorical writing genres, the focus should move to Digital Literacies and Multimodal Literacies (Jewitt & Kress, 2003) relevant to Design disciplines. This involves:
  - ✓ teaching to the specific genres Design students are expected to produce as assessed assignments on their course: blog posts; reflective journal entries; zines; research papers with no fixed style at all.
  - ✓ a focus on language as semiotic tool – communication through storytelling
  - ✓ an emphasis on creativity and flexibility in writing so that international students do not feel forced to write in a formal academic style (Jenkins, 2014; Canagarajah, 2015)

### 3. CRITICAL PEDAGOGIES

**“education as the practice of freedom” (Freire, 1972; hooks, 1994):**






- dismantling the teacher-student dichotomy – each can learn from the other
- Moving away from a Western-centric or ‘deficit’ approach to teaching (McLaren 2011; Ramachandran, 2011)
- engaging with students’ learning histories and lived experiences and recognising them as valid social/cultural capital (Singh, 2017)
- Community building (hooks, 1998): working with students to develop a safe space where their differences are accepted, valued and treated as a learning resource (Ryan, 2020)

# TEACHING TO THE ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

- Within the assessment criteria, the main areas students are assessed on are:
  - ✓ depth of knowledge and research
  - ✓ synthesis of knowledge and research
  - ✓ appropriate, clear communication
  - ✓ critical analysis, reflection and evaluation
  - ✓ linking of theory to practice.

# ual:

## Assessment Criteria | Level 7

		F	E	D	C	B	A
	<b>Enquiry</b> Engagement in practice informed by comprehensive analysis and evaluation of diverse complex practices, concepts and theories	Little or no evidence	Insufficient evidence	Satisfactory evidence	Good evidence	Very good evidence	Excellent evidence
	<b>Knowledge</b> Critical analysis and synthesis of a range of practical, conceptual and technical knowledge(s)	Little or no evidence	Insufficient evidence	Satisfactory evidence	Good evidence	Very good evidence	Excellent evidence
	<b>Process</b> Experiment and critically evaluate methods, results and their implications in a range of complex and emergent situations	Little or no evidence	Insufficient evidence	Satisfactory evidence	Good evidence	Very good evidence	Excellent evidence
	<b>Communication</b> Articulation of criticality, clarity and depth. Communicating a diverse range of intentions, contexts, sources and arguments appropriate to your audiences	Little or no evidence	Insufficient evidence	Satisfactory evidence	Good evidence	Very good evidence	Excellent evidence
	<b>Realisation</b> Advancing the personal, professional and academic standards of production	Little or no evidence	Insufficient evidence	Satisfactory evidence	Good evidence	Very good evidence	Excellent evidence



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# HOW DOES THIS WORK IN PRACTICE? (EXAMPLES OF TEACHING MATERIALS)

MA SEDI: GLOBAL DESIGN FUTURES

(BLOG POST ASSIGNMENT)

**CREATIVE WRITING: STORYTELLING**

## **TASK**

A. Write a paragraph for your blog post using one of the following models – 1, 2 or 3.

You have 20 minutes to do this (if you finish early, try another one!)

**1. Write a mini story about the situation/challenge facing the group of people you are researching for.**

- Instead of talking about the group as a whole, you will talk about it as if it were one person: this person is the protagonist (main character of your story).
- Give him/her a name. For example: if your design is for obese teenagers, your character could be an obese male teenager called Harry.
- Tell the story of the problem of obesity through (Harry).
- You could end the paragraph by speculating on what could be done to help him.



**2. Write a paragraph about either a Utopian (ideal) world or a dystopian (worst case scenario) world.**

- The utopia would explore the potential reality if your design was implemented.
- The dystopia shows what could happen if the issue you are designing for continues to be neglected.
- It is OK to exaggerate for this task.
- Focus on painting a detailed picture of this imagined world. How does this world look, feel, taste, smell, sound? How do people/society/companies/government feel and behave? How is the quality of life?

### **3. Make a poem based on a list of 'What if' questions.**

- Start by brainstorming all your 'What if' questions that you used during your project. Check they are all still relevant. Do you have any more to add?
- Organise them in a way that makes sense to you. (Think about why you are organising them in this way, and what point are you trying to make by doing this?)
- Can you add any extra lines (sentences) in between some of the 'What if' questions? You might like to add a line at the beginning and end to introduce and close the poem in a creative way? This will also make it easier to make a point about the 'What if' questions.
- When you finish, give your 'What if' poem a title.

### CREATIVE WRITING: STORYTELLING

- B. Post your piece of writing on the Moodle forum. Then read some of your classmates' entries and give at least one other student some constructive feedback on their work.
  
- C. Discuss where/how you might want to include this paragraph in your blog post. Use the following questions as prompts:
  - Could it be the introduction? An interesting way to grasp your reader's attention?
  - Would it be better placed in the middle? Within a section on a particular design trend? What title would you give that section?
  - If you think your paragraph could fit into a specific section, what else would you add into that section? Images; factual information; results from your prototypes etc?
  - Do you think you could insert this paragraph into your blog post as it is? Is there anything you would change?

# FINDINGS FROM MY OWN RESEARCH

What Design students need:

- clarity around learning expectations and ways of learning from the beginning of the course
- focus on communication rather than discrete language items
- focus on soft skills – even hard skills can be taught as soft skills
- greater support with intercultural communication – issues arising from working in multicultural groups

## WHAT THE STUDENTS SAID...

### ...ABOUT WAYS OF LEARNING:

“I think maybe the purpose of the first unit is to make us comfortable with failure and experiment on that. So the process is: first experiment, observe, fail, reflect. And that’s a process that’s *absolutely brilliant*. I don’t have *any* criticism about that.

But it’s about expectations and clear expectations. Like, from the beginning if you say, these are the things that are important, this is fundamental, you show examples of why failure is fundamental, why experiment, and you bring a lot of speakers, they give you feedback and then you are pushed to then experiment – that’s a *totally* different experience. *Totally* different. And that’s something that was missing.”



# WHAT THE STUDENTS SAID...

...ABOUT SOFT SKILLS:

“I remember you once held a class to teach us how to network.

**[SV: “Yeah”].**

“That's quite useful for us. And not only like the things in college, but also things when we go out when we're communicating with, with women with men with older people with children what language we should use.

**[all: “Yeah, yeah”].**

“So sometimes language can be misleading. Something I want to express in this way. And they will feel very offensive.

**[“Yeah, totally”].**

“So I feel the more things is the softer skills like make decisions, being confident, speak with society, knowing more people ... make friends ... its very hard aspects.”

# WHAT THE STUDENTS SAID...

## ...ABOUT INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION:

“I think one of the big problem in this group team work is group members cannot communicate very well because of communicating problems. It's really a big problem. Even we already stay here half a year, we still have this problem in our group members. So I'm thinking, it's really helpful if the Language Development class can help in this part, yeah.”

# REVIEW OF KEY POINTS

- UAL has an impressive LD provision that goes beyond generic EAP, but there needs to be a consistent application of the decolonisation of Language Policy across the university.
- The decolonisation of Language Policy within Language Development tuition is key to the wider decolonising aims of the university
- The prioritisation of digital and multimodal literacies over traditional EAP and Ac Lits is in some ways tied to the decolonisation of Language Policy by shifting the focus from British academic discourse to communicative competence via Design Literacies
- Engagement with Critical Pedagogies, Digital and Multimodal Literacies and Inclusive Teaching practices is paramount

# OBSTACLES, CHALLENGES AND RELATED FACTORS

- The decolonisation of Language Policy on in-sessional courses is dependent on the 'decolonisation' of our admissions process – IELTS + other admissions tests (Jenkins & Wingate, 2015; Jenkins & Leung, 2019)
- The corporatisation of our university system means that monetary gain is prioritised over educational rigour. By default, international students in particular are relied on as a financial crutch (Jenkins, 2014; Green 2016, in Hyland, 2018)
- Course leaders are already overworked – this needs to be a collaborative approach that grants agency to students (Hornberger, 2005) rather than a top-down approach.
- Tied to the issue of decolonisation is the need to employ more BAME and SEAL teaching staff in EAP/ESP roles and on course teams (Robinson, 2020; BALEAP, 2020).



# CONCLUDING REMARKS

- The reforms proposed for embedded LD must be seen and treated as part of the wider aim to decolonise the university – they are part of the same goal
- Digital and multimodal literacies are more relevant to students than traditional EAP: communicative competence within Design Literacies must be favoured over Academic English discourse
- Systemic issues persist, but we must do what we can within the constraints of the system
- Decolonisation is a long process with no clear end goal. We need to work at a systems level and pedagogic level to introduce interventions that benefit students.

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THANK YOU FOR LISTENING.

IT'S Q+A / DISCUSSION TIME!

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