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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A fish tale about "fieldwork," or toward multilingual interviewing in applied linguistics

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Abstract

Focused as we are on uncovering how language works, many linguists are less cognizant of how the communicative strategies we employ in our knowledge-gathering activities impact the language users, identities, and communities we connect with and learn from. This autoethnographic essay, offered as a critical, introspective and analytical account by a U.S.-based, African American woman researcher, unfolds across three scenes of embedded ethnographic research in Micronesia and Tanzania—ocean-facing nations separated by a distance of more than 12,000 kilometers. Each scene's storytelling and dialogue—among users of Pohnpeian and Nukuoro in Micronesia, and users of Korean and Swahili in Tanzania—depicts how competing ideas about the value of marginalized languages surface within the talk of the research interview through allusions to socioracial power and linguistic capital. The essay concludes with a discussion of how a shift toward multilingual, multi-person interviewing can expand and deepen the insights of language-focused research.

Koasoaiepen Ropirop, de Petehkpen Kederpohnpeh sang Pali en Lokaia Tohto nan "Applied Linguistics" de Kasukuhl me pid Duwen Lokaia kan

Ni atail kin rapahki duwen lokaia eh kin doadoahk nan pwungen pwihn en aramas akan, tohtohn linguist, de me kin kasukuhliki duwen lokaia, sohte kin tehk lipwalipw me mie sang atail doadoahk rehn irail pwihn en aramas akan de tohn wehi kan me kitail kin patehng de kasukuhlsang. Doaropwe wet pid soaii kan me sansalehr rehn ekei me kin lokaiahn Pohnpei oh lokaiahn Nukuoro nan Micronesia, oh pil ekei me kin lokaiahn Korea oh lokaiahn Swahili nan Tanzania oh sawehwe kan me kin pwarada ni ansoun ropirop oh kapeidek. Doaropwe wet imwsengkihla koasoaiepen duwen katohtohwe tohn kederpohnpeh de katohtohwe lokaia me kin doadoahk pwehn katehlapahla pepehm kan oh audepen ropirop me pid kasukuhl duwen loakaia.

Kisa cha Samaki Kuhusu "Utafiti wa Uwandani", au Kuhamia kwa Kuhoji kwa Lugha Nyingi katika Isimu Matumizi

Kama tunavyozingatia kuhusu kufunua jinsi lugha inavyotenda, wanaisimu wengi hawafikirii kuhusu jinsi mbinu za kuwasiliana tunazotumia kwa matendo yetu ya kusanya data zinaathiri watumiaji wa lugha, maisha yao, na jumuia tunazounganisha nao na vile-vile zinazotufundisha. Insha hii ya kiautoethnografia, iliyotolewa kama uchanganuzi

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ujifikiriao na uhakikio ulioandikwa na mtafiti mwanamke na Marekani Mwaafrika (anayeishi Marekani), inaendelea kwa njia ya maonyesho (masimulizi) matatu ya utafiti wa kiethnografia uwekao kwenye Mikronesia na Tanzania—mataifa yanayotanisha bahari na ambayo yanatenganishwa na umbali ya zaidi ya 12,000 kilomita. Usimulizi na mazungumzo ya kila onyesho la insha hii—ambalo linaeleza watumiaji wa lugha za KiPohnpei na KiNukuoro kwenye Mikronesia, na watumiaji wa lugha za Kikorea na Kiswahili kwenye Tanzania—unafafanua namna ya mawazo yanayotofautiana kuhusu thamani ya lugha zibaguliwazo yanaonyeshwa kwenye mazungumzo ya mahojiano ya kiutafiti kwa njia ya madokezo ya uwezo wa kimbari na mtaji ya kilugha. Insha hii inakamilishwa na majadiliano ya namna ya hamia ya kuhoji kwa lugha nyingi, na kwa watu wengi, inaweza kupanua na kuzidisha chini umaizi ya utafiti unaolenga lugha.

"현지조사"에 대한 낚시꾼 이야기, 또는 응용언어학에서 다국어 인터뷰를 향하여
언어학자들은 언어가 어떻게 작동하는가에 대한 논의에 초점을 맞추고 있기 때문에, 지식 수집 활동에 사용하는 의사소통 전략이 우리가 연결하고 배우는 언어 사용자, 정체성 및 커뮤니티에 어떻게 영향을 미치는지에 대하여 인지하는 정도가 상대적으로 미흡한 편이다. 본고에서는 미국에 기반을 둔 흑인 여성 연구자가 비판적, 자기성찰적, 분석적 설명을 통하여 12,000km 이상 떨어진 바다를 마주하고 있는 마이크로네시아와 탄자니아에서 수행한 자기성찰적 민족지 연구의 세 개의 장면을 기술한다. 각 장면의 스토리텔링, 그리고 마이크로네시아의 폰페이안과 누쿠오로 사용자들, 탄자니아의 한국어 및 스와힐리 사용자들과의 대화는 사회인종적 권력과 언어 자본에 대한 암시를 통해 연구 인터뷰의 주제에서 소외된 언어의 가치에 대한 경합적 논의들을 제시한다. 결론에서는 다국어, 다자 인터뷰로의 전환이 어떻게 언어 중심 연구의 통찰력을 확대하고 심화시킬 수 있는지에 대한 논의로 마무리된다.

Scene One: Breakfast Time

"Like this?" I say, looking to my friends while I hold the slippery *mwahmw* (fish) by its tail. I try again to scrape at the scales with the knife I have been given.

"Apply more pressure," the three women near me say and demonstrate with their own hands, moving their knives in deliberate motion.

There are no photographs, no recordings, portraying what I was fortunate to learn about preparing fresh catch from women on an ocean-bound, Micronesian atoll a few years ago. But there don't need to be.

Nor is there any reliable documentation of the specific source communities and nations of my African ancestry.

Just the sensory memory and life lessons remain, like the taste of a raw breakfast seasoned only by the sea, a sprinkle of lemon, and a drip of soya sauce. The ease of those flavors returns me to how I was pulled aside by the women to join them in their open-air kitchen that misty morning, as the sole person invited from among the otherwise largely white (European American) research team allowed to visit their island.

My sheer concentration and poor performance with descaling the fish made for a humorous scene.

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First, the women cracked smiles, followed by laughs that even I had to join in!



In this essay, I use narrative storytelling as a frame for problematizing socioracial power and monolingual bias, two persistent anchors of research in (applied) linguistics. To do this, I center the interview as a multi-person, co-constructed research (and communicative) event, and begin by humanizing the people, voices, and contexts that enlivened my research stay among community members and language reclamation activists in Micronesia. First, I examine how colonial orientations to "language endangerment" framed the way members of our research team used language to interview a speaker of Nakuoro. Then, I move to a very different research context, to present what an appreciative orientation to the multilingualism and difference of interviewer and interviewee can look and sound like. This final scene provides a glimpse into what I learned by interviewing South Korean learners of Swahili in Tanzania.

These transregional experiences have shifted my conceptions of what is ethically, methodologically, and sociopolitically possible in applied linguistics, by leading me to actively de-center the role of English in my own work and improvise the multilingual group interview as an alternative model of information-gathering (see also Thomas, forthcoming). I continue to experience improvisation and adaptability as vital to the success and humanization of community-based research activities such as language documentation, language reclamation (Leonard, 2020), interviewing (Choi, 2010), and ethnography (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007).

Through analytic attention to nonverbal cues, pauses, word searches, and other aspects of the unrehearsed speech events I participated in, I aim to lay bare my dual roles as moderator and as interpretive observer. My first-person storytelling and attention to the dynamics between language users are consistent with critical autoethnography (Delesclefs, 2020), in which stories richly situate the researcher's inductive theorizing about power relations. As an African American woman, I also gather wisdom from literary giant Toni Morrison, who in turn, draws upon the insights of linguistic anthropologist and novelist Zora Neale Hurston. Morrison's (1995) "Site of Memory" calls on imagination as vital to the restoration of Black and other marginalized voices and epistemologies—ways of speaking and knowing—that remain excluded, silenced, and censured to sustain whiteness and coloniality. Here, I acknowledge the never-ending Diasporic loss that permeates my life as an epistemological and experiential resource emboldening my commitment to critical reflexivity (Brower, 2010; Bucholtz, 2021; Jacobs-Huey, 2002; Muwwakkil, forthcoming) and unlearning (Delesclefs, 2020; García, 2020).

Further, as an applied linguist concerned with language development as a sociocultural process, my responsibility also extends to the language I use in pursuit of knowledge. Accordingly, I pivot away from phrasings of "fieldwork," "field methods," and "field research," as these reproduce colonizing conceptions of communities and locations apart from the researcher's home site (cf. Bucholtz, 2021).



"Not bad," I told myself, as I took stock of the much-improved fish. Once the scales were fully removed, my friends began using their fingers to pluck bite-sized portions. I followed their lead and polished my bites off with a few delicious drips of soya sauce

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and citrus. Beyond where we sat, other members of the research team, all white men, huddled outside and out of earshot, with cups of instant coffee in hand, but were not invited to participate in the islander breakfast.

Before long, we brought our plates with us to the edge of the kitchen, to join the women's husbands and brothers congregating there. Though we had little language in common, a couple of the men pointed between my rich brown skin and their own, seeming to observe that we came from the same place. Their people came from oceans further afield and from Africa, they said, smiling. I smiled, too, agreeing with the notion of our shared ancestral origins, and the understanding that our solidarity was no coincidence. We laughed joyously all over again, with the feeling that we had known each other forever.

Just then, the battery-powered radio crackled dryly with news from the big island, momentarily interrupting our breakfast chatter. My white male counterparts peered at the animated activity and talk of our group, from where they sat just outside the kitchen tarpaulin draped overhead for shade and rain cover. They appeared stunned at having lost their authoritative edge as arbiters of interaction between the researchers and the local community. This was one conversation they clearly could not control.

Of course, we took notice of their curiosity, but we persisted unbothered. We sent our joy out to the sea, into the coral reefs and deep blue ripples that surrounded us, more than 2,000 kilometers from Papua New Guinea. Each ocean wave held a story; the region had long been fought over by competing imperial interests, beginning with European missionaries and whalers as early as the mid-1800s.

Here, on the atoll, no signs were posted, save for a small marquee outside the local school. But back on Micronesia's largest island, Pohnpei, printed and handwritten signs were in constant view, most in English, some in Pohnpeian and Japanese. Mangroves and leafy overgrowth seclude German and Japanese war cannons, bunkers, and Catholic bell towers. Social stratification surfaces in the ways the distinct Chuukese, Kapingamarangi, Mokilese, Nukuoro, Pingelapese, Pohnpeian, and Yapese languages are being increasingly displaced by Anglophone education, tourism, and the U.S. military-industrial complex (Fisher & Firth, 2020). Similarly, Anglophone dominance extends to the authoritative roles it is locally assumed that white men occupy, via assumptions that outsiders—whether researchers or the occasional tourist—leave unchallenged.

Scene Two: Recording Session at the Big Island Library

In the public library, on a warm afternoon in Pohnpei, children's English-language fiction titles like *Three Jovial Huntsmen* and *Crocodile Creek: The Cry in the Night* line bookshelves. A cardboard cutout of the Cat in the Hat declares, "Reading Is Fun!" alongside other signs in English:

"No food, pets, smoking, Betel-nuts and fighting."

"Keep quiet at all times."

"Protecting your community during a typhoon or tropical storm" (with steps for seeking emergency shelter).

Within this semiotic landscape, a pair of 20-year-old, U.S.-based undergraduates from our research team—both women, one of Asian descent, and the other of European descent—sit at a reading table across from a 40-year-old woman and her two school-age daughters. The woman, a multilingual speaker of Nukuoro, a Polynesian language, has agreed to be audio-recorded for the endangered languages project. Her daughters sit nearby, listening to the interview proceedings while reading

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casual titles selected from adjacent bookshelves. I join the group from the opposite end of the table, as a silent observer and supportive facilitator. Because of its central location in town, the public library acts as an appropriate meeting place.

My role as a research mentor has evolved with my concerns about the language ecology our team is contributing to. I want to document our activity because I wonder whether its reliance on English is helping to reinforce and reproduce the narrowing communicative function of the very languages we are examining. Now, in the library, I use my iPhone to openly video-record the students' interaction with the interviewee, taking note of how English is used to frame their elicitation activity.

"Um, so to say, 'lots of chickens'?" asks the European American student, in the interview already in progress. The Asian American student wears headphones to monitor audio integrity.

"'*Lagolago gaagoo,*'" the language consultant responds. She then repeats twice more for the purpose of the recording, as instructed. "'*Lagolago gaagoo.*' '*Lagolago gaagoo.*'"

"Perfect," the student remarks. "How 'bout—"

Turning the page in her notebook, she scans for another set of words. "Um —'pretty'?"

"'*Mahamaha.*' '*Mahamaha.*' '*Mahamaha.*'" Briefly facing the European American student who just addressed her, the interviewee gently points to the student, and humorously adds, smiling, "*Koe mahamaha* (You are pretty)."

To which the student replies, "'*De abo donu!*' (Thank you!)" and a chorus of polite laughs briefly encircles the table.

Then, resuming her questioning, the same student asks, "Um, and 'ugly'?"

"'*Balaulau.*' '*Balaulau.*' '*Balaulau.*'"

"'*Balaulau,*'" repeats the student, nodding.

"*Au e balaulau* (I am ugly)," offers the interviewee, in a tongue-in-cheek manner, as she gestures toward herself.

"No!" laughs the student.

The second student quickly scrolls through her notebook for a follow-up phrase and extends her hand in a conciliatory gesture. "*Deai!* (No!)"

A few seconds pass, the laughter quiets.

"Um," adds the European American student, "I don't think we got the word for 'thank you.'"

"'*De abo donu.*'"

Then, seeing the student researcher gesture clockwise with her finger, the interviewee interprets this as indicating a request to repeat the phrase.

"'*De abo donu.*' '*De abo donu.*'"

"And that's 'thank you.'"

"Mmhmm."

At the eventual conclusion of their session, the two students verbalize their appreciation in English and turn off their audio recorder.

"Thank you, thank you so much!"

Afterward, the students invite their interviewee and her daughters to the library's computer lab, where a spotty internet signal allows access to the searchable web archive, where they will be adding excerpts of today's recording. As mother and daughters take turns listening through headphones, their faces light up in recognition. However, it is unlikely they will be able to conveniently access the online dictionary in the future because island internet remains expensive, and entry to the locked computer lab has required advance permission.

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Later that evening, I write in my journal about the extractive nature of our research team's well-meaning activity. I consider how Indigenous scholars continue to critique limited community access to—and ownership of—research insights and locations sourced from Indigenous knowledge (e.g., Flores-Marcial, forthcoming; Leonard, 2020; Twance, 2019). Although our broader project has partnered with Indigenous households to record folktales, boat-building instructions, and numerous words and phrases, English remains essential because we outsiders retain mediating roles in the endeavor. Our project does nothing, in fact, to disrupt the acceleration of English dominance, and even contributes to it. Our educational travel and extensive, local economic activity (e.g., van and boat rental, hotel rooms; restaurant, mobile telecom, and souvenir purchases; stipends to local partners and homestay host families) amplifies English-language knowledge as a premier gateway to opportunity.

The Nukuoro language interview is a microcosm of this process, wherein success is measured by the number of discrete phrases recorded. By the end of the recording session, it becomes clear that the students have, through their brief homestays, developed extremely limited competence in Nukuoro. However, the only communicative use of Nukuoro is initiated by the interviewee. Though these humorous moments affirm Nukuoro's communicative capacity, they turn on the interviewee's willingness to bear the brunt of the joke. Her joking evidences an internalized Eurocentric ideological gaze on the physical contrasts between herself, a brunette of average height, and her primary interlocutor, a tall blonde. Though the veracity of both (possibly sarcastic) statements—"You are pretty" and "I am ugly"—are vigorously denied in a mixture of embodied and verbal reactions, the specter of Anglocentrism remains, as the students use English to quickly steer the exchange back to one-way elicitation.

This elicitation session, a cornerstone of traditional information-gathering in linguistics, is further reliant on the English-language competence of the interviewee. Without her expert ability to navigate English, the researchers would be much more limited in what data they could gather in such a short project period. Nukuoro may be the "target language," but English is the language of greater focus and communicative value. Ironically, the session concludes with "thank you," even as the equivalent phrase, *de abo donu,* has been thoroughly elicited (and is well known by the students). These priorities maintain the marginalization of Nukuoro.

Considering the implications of language documentation in Micronesia has helped me reflect on ways that researchers trained via English can and should de-center this language in their activities. To illustrate this practice, I turn now to East Africa, and my interviewing of learners of Swahili in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. In that context, although I was highly proficient in Swahili, I found that embracing multilingualism allowed for greater insights, and enabled me to more accurately acknowledge the geopolitics and language policies impacting language use.

Scene Three: Group Interviewing in a Chai Café in Dar es Salaam

"So," I begin in English, after taking another sip of *chai iliki* (cardamom tea), "Do you ever get the chance to speak Swahili with other students?"

"Hmm," Ndoto says, pausing to look around the quiet café where we sit with friends Habiba and Lulu in Dar es Salaam—or *Dar,* for short—Africa's fifth-largest urban center, and one of the fastest-growing cities in the world.

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The small, round table between us is crowded with tea mugs and glasses of passion fruit juice paid for with Tanzanian shillings from my research stipend.

Eventually, Habiba replies, "인사할 때만 스와힐리 쓰고. [*insahal ttaeman seuwahilli sseugo.*] (Use Swahili to greet.)"

The three young women I am speaking with have been living in Dar for three months. All are from universities in Seoul, South Korea. In addition to a course in academic English, the three have also enrolled in beginning-level Swahili, becoming fast friends alongside students from Austria, Canada, China, Finland, Germany, Ghana, Italy, Japan, Libya, and the U.S. On the first day of the Swahili course, their Tanzanian professor encouraged everyone to "baptize themselves in Swahili," and adopt names from a list compiled on the chalkboard. The learners have since become known almost exclusively by their Swahili names: Habiba ("Beloved"), Lulu ("Pearl"), and Ndoto ("Dream").

Today represents my second attempt at an interview. I have begun the conversation by inviting everyone to use whichever language(s) they feel most comfortable with, explaining that if they use Korean, which I do not understand, I will later seek confidential assistance with transcribing the recording. The idea of a multilingual group interview has occurred to me after observing that the learners often communicate across Korean, English, and Swahili in class.

But the first time I approached them with the idea of individual interviews, even though they knew me through my role as an observer in their (and other) language classes at the university, they understandably turned me down, worried that English—which they felt less comfortable in—would be the sole language of the interaction. After reflecting on this, I decided to try approaching the learners' full linguistic repertoires as a resource during the interview.

"'Greeting'?" Ndoto asks, volunteering an English translation. "'Greeting', 아닌가? [*aninga?*] (isn't it?)"

"Uh, I use Swahili in university," Lulu explains. "Just to *'Mambo, poa'* (Wassup, cool)." Laughing a little, she offers another common Swahili word. "'*Asante.*' (Thank you.)"

Adds Habiba, "'*Habari—habari gani.*' (What's—what's going on.)"

"Uh, but," Lulu resumes, "I'm going to Mwenge."

"Uh huh," I say, understanding her phrasing to signal a role-play.

"Uh, *'Bei gani?'* (What's the price?)," she expands, enacting how she frequents the public market and bus depot in nearby Mwenge, a key business and residential area. "Blah-blah-blah. Swahili. More. Use."

Like others in South Korea, Habiba, Lulu, and Ndoto had each begun learning English as a primary school subject, with further language courses throughout their schooling (Park, 2012). This experience imparted written abilities, as opposed to spoken English. Now at the college level, they desire to improve their English through immersion in an "Anglophone" country. But, as Lulu acknowledges, the linguistic reality of the host country was at odds with her instrumental motivations:

> My professor [in Korea] said Tanzania is uh, usually speak English. But I went to Tanzania. Tanzania usually speaking Swahili. I—I want to learn English, but just Swahili. It's terrible. My professor is terrible!

As Lulu's statement indicates, Tanzania's language situation is more accurately described as largely *Swahiliphone* (Thomas, forthcoming). In fact, the rarity of informal,

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public English use in Dar es Salaam—alongside the prescribed (and idealized) English monolingualism of Tanzanian secondary and tertiary education—is indicative of both the continued importance of Indigenous African languages and the colonial legacies that persistently impose European languages on local African life (Qorro, 2017).

Moreover, Lulu's initial expectation that people in Tanzania "usually speak English" illustrates how linguistic imperialism obscures the prolific multilingualism common to African contexts, elevating only the ex-colonial language(s) having external, global socio-oeconomic value. The persistent ideological characterization of Tanzania as "Anglophone" and expectations of near-monolingualism in English circulate in beliefs that associate English with notions of modernity and internationalization in education, economy, and national identity (Piller & Cho, 2013; Shumbusho, 2020; Thomas, 2020).

I follow up by asking Habiba, Lulu, and Ndoto how their friends and families in South Korea feel about their choice of study abroad. This segment of our interview reveals how the learners reconcile racialized language attitudes from home.

"What was their reaction?" I ask.

Lulu replies with some nervous laughter. "My older sister, 'Why? Why going to Tanzania?'"

"'Danger—dangerous,'" Habiba emphasizes, seeming to quote other Koreans.

"Uh," Lulu says, again animating her sister's voice, "'Tanzania is very dangerous.'"

"Mhmm," I say.

"But," Lulu reiterates, "Korean usually, don't—don't know—doesn't know Swahili."

Habiba agrees. "스와힐리 자체를 모르지. [*seuwahilli jacheleul moleuji.*] (They don't know Swahili itself.)"

"Swahili…uh huh," Lulu says, echoing Habiba. Then, laughing awkwardly, she quotes another phrase she heard before arriving in Tanzania. " '시간 낭비.' [*sigan nangbi.*]"

Then, Lulu turns to Ndoto, "가 영어로 뭐지? [*ga yeong-eolo mwoji?*] (What is it in English?)"

"'Waste of time,'" translates Ndoto.

Here, the group setting of the interview is pivotal, because it enables Lulu to leverage her varying abilities in English and Korean. Regardless of whether their families can see the value of Swahili, the learners know its importance.

"So, which do you want to learn more?" I ask.

"More English," says Lulu. "I want."

"Okay," I respond. "Same for everybody?"

"Hmm, maybe," Ndoto offers. "But we live in Tanzania. To survive, we can't!" She laughs a bit. "Learn Sw—"

"—Swahili," Habiba finishes.

"Yeah," Ndoto concludes. "We should learn Swahili."

Even as there existed tensions between language priorities, the learners described how their investment in learning English had already expanded to include Swahili. Though they had arrived in the host country with one target language in mind, they had ended up with two: English was ideal, and Swahili was essential.

Conclusion: Centering Multilingualism as We Fish for Alternatives

There is a popular, fish-related Swahili proverb that goes: *Samaki umkunje angali mbichi,* or "Bend the fish while it's still fresh." The phrase parallels the American saying, "Strike while the iron is hot." On a related note, this essay advocates urgent

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transformation, particularly in the face of ongoing linguistic marginalization. A lot of what we are taught, teach, and enact in the Western-dominated fields of linguistics and applied linguistics places emphasis on language as a discrete entity. This often facilitates epistemological racism, or a latent and default impulse toward accepting "white [Eurocentric] assumptions as legitimate knowledge" (Kubota, 2019, p. 7).

Eurocentric knowledge and approaches to knowledge production are, for example, readily reproduced and institutionalized through courses in "field methods," as taught in U.S. colleges and universities. These courses often consist of class sessions during which students query an individual language consultant in English. My research encounter in Pohnpei, Micronesia, as part of a mostly white research team, illustrates how students trained in this practice are encouraged to expand its use in real-world contexts—such as formal documentation and description of the Nukuoro language—without critical attention to the contours of their question-making and engagement.

However, in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, my solo ethnography of language learning in study abroad presented a contrasting interview opportunity with South Korean learners. By choosing to affirm multilingualism throughout this group interview, I helped to cultivate a more dynamic and supportive communicative experience. This encouraging result led me to create space for use of Twi, Ewe, and Mandarin, in concert with Swahili, in subsequent interviews with learners in Tanzania from Ghana and China (Thomas, 2021). For these reasons, I encourage other researchers to meaningfully and functionally engage the linguistic repertoires of stakeholders. This will provide an opportunity to reflect on their own use of language in interviewing and consider further culturally appropriate ways of deprioritizing English and other colonizing languages in data-gathering.

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