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‘We are more than EFL teachers—we are Educators’: Emancipating EFL student-teachers through photovoice

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The prevailing pedagogical orientations of EFL education in Spain oppress learners intellectually in ways that are counterproductive to their learning. As a reaction to this, 129 EFL student-teachers (STs) took part during the 2013-14, 2014-15, and 2015-16 academic years in a workshop which drew on the methodology of participatory action research and on photovoice as a data creating strategy, in order to emancipate these STs intellectually, boost their EFL development, and offer an alternative critical model for their future EFL teaching. The research was assessed collectively through a variety of qualitative strategies. Results showed that the photovoice workshop created a rich and meaningful context for EFL learning, one which enabled the STs to fully actualize their intellectual potential by producing knowledge collectively, setting thereby a memorable educational example for their own future teaching.

Keywords: photovoice; participatory action research; EFL education; pedagogical oppression; intellectual emancipation; critical teacher education

Intellectual oppression and pedagogical emancipation in ELT

It was not so much that theories and practices of ELT were developed in Britain (with a strong European influence) and then exported to the Empire, but rather that the Empire became the crucial context of development of ELT, from where theories and practices were often imported into Britain. [...] this has had profound and often pernicious effects on ELT. (Pennycook, 2007, pp. 16-7)

The colonial origins of English language teaching (ELT) that Pennycook hypothesizes above may explain a phenomenon that I noticed very early on in the course of my research and lecturing on ELT at the University of X (Spain), when I was struck by the

resemblance between the negative educational effects that often oppressed Spanish learners at elementary, secondary and even university levels of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, on the one hand, and those which, on the other, encumbered English as a Second Language (ESL) learners (mainly immigrant or minority language users) who attended mainstream classrooms in societies where English was the majority language. Despite the differences existing between the two social and educational contexts pointed above, it seemed to me that in both cases “students’ learning opportunities, and ultimately their life potentials, [were]wasted by instructional activities and teaching strategies that reveal[ed] the low expectations teachers h[e]ld for them,” a claim originally formulated by Meyer (2007, 217) in relation to the kind of English education received by ESL learners in the US, yet which I believed applied equally well to the experience of EFL students in Spain. In the case of the former, oppression clearly resulted from a foreign family origin, the diverse ethnic culture and low socioeconomic status which often derives from it (Bourne, 2007), and generally speaking, from the lack of effort shown by the institutions in favoring a dialogue among the different languages and cultures living in a given society (Cummins, 2004). I, by contrast, traced EFL oppressive dynamics in Spain to its emphasis on linguistic, native-like competence (of teachers and learners alike) (Canagarajah, 1999) and, especially, to the fact that the usual way to advance towards this goal is through top-down, narrow, and scripted curricula (Banegas, Pavese, Velázquez, & Vélez, 2013), through meaningless, unchallenging, and de-contextualized classroom practices with a focus on decoding, drills, fill-in the gaps, and so on (Van Deusen-Scholl, 2008); through over use of sanitized international textbooks that not only idealize western English-speaking countries (their forms of life and their language) (Moirano, 2012) but offer no possibility whatsoever for learners to showcase their own cultural and linguistic

heritage; through standardized forms of testing (Cumming, 2009) and one-way interactional patterns in the classroom, where transmission-oriented pedagogies are still prevalent, or through all of these at the same time, as is often the case (Banegas & Author, 2016).

Radically different contexts and causes thus accounted for two kinds of educational oppression, socioeconomic on the one hand, and pedagogical on the other. Yet I believed that their resulting effects in the classroom were comparable, that it only took inadequate pedagogical decisions for EFL teachers to reproduce in their classrooms the same negative educational effects that, in other circumstances, were created by profound socioeconomic factors. Clearly, a failed pedagogical approach universalized educational oppression, to the extent that students who had the chance to connect to education in other school contexts and subjects were forced to feel like foreigners in the EFL classroom, migrants in their own school—even colonized subjects (López-Gopar & Sughrua, 2014), oppressed and alienated from their own realities. As described by one of the student-teachers (STs) who participated in this research,

As EFL learners, the activities we were presented with in the EFL class were most often childish and unchallenging, and hardly ever interesting for us. They were always oriented to a test, rather than communicating in the L2. [...] I also felt alienated by the materials in class. [...] It was very difficult to feel engaged in a reading activity about the daily routines of a British middle-school student as it had very little in common with my own life. Furthermore, we were often requested to produce an oral or written text on our own experiences using the same vocabulary and expressions as in that text. How could we do that? We did not eat a sandwich for lunch, or fish and chips for dinner, and we were not given an expression for our *almuerzo* (brunch) or *merienda* (afternoon snack). (Noelia)

Hence my decision to initiate an action research project aimed at emancipating EFL learners. First, I decided to become acquainted with those critical pedagogies that had already proven themselves capable of addressing the effects of socioeconomic,

ethnic, cultural, and educational marginalization of immigrant and minoritized language learners (Villacañas de Castro, 2016); and then I decided to test whether the same kind of strategies could work with mainstream students in EFL classrooms, in order to emancipate learners whose educational oppression was not socioeconomically but mainly pedagogically induced.

Participatory action research

I finally resorted to participatory action research (PAR) as the best way to fulfill this goal. This decision should come as no surprise. Despite the variety of forms of PAR and the many critical traditions that nourish its theory and practice, if one had to define it through one single trait it would be its emancipatory character, which distinguishes it from other forms of participatory research (Santos, 2015). Actually, PAR is a research methodology each of whose steps is oriented by the desire to emancipate a given *collective* from any particular factor that may be oppressing it; in this sense at least, every successful PAR project is also (or should be) a story of emancipation, no matter how modest. This sets specific restrictions to the research practice, which must contribute to emancipation, not the other way around. This implies, firstly, that the investigation should be mainly conducted by the members of the collective concerned (hand in hand with professional experts or researchers), as the only way one can be sure that the positive effects triggered by a PAR project will have long-lasting effects, to the extent that the participants become autonomous and capable of making a sustained effort at transforming their own reality. And secondly, it means that PAR should never relinquish the pedagogical dimension—unlike other academic forms of research, which tend to objectify their subjects (Jordan & Kapoor, 2016)—for its main aim is not so much to understand a given social reality as to make sure that the people implicated

acquire the theoretical and practical tools they need to change it, to alter reality in their own interest (Santoro Franco, 2005; Cammarota & Romero, 2011).

Like other approaches to critical education—learning communities or students’ funds of knowledge (Esteban Guitart & Saubich, 2013)—educational applications of critical PAR have also focused on bridging the oppressive cultural and experiential gap that often separates the learners’ familial and community context from the academic forms of action and thought that formal education requires from them, in the hope that this dialogue will prove empowering. Influenced by Freire’s (2000 [1973]) literacy campaigns as much as by *student-as-researcher* approaches to teaching (Thomson & Gunter, 2009), PAR projects attempt precisely to overcome the aforementioned gap by giving learners the chance to develop research projects in which they produce knowledge around issues that they perceive as being immediately related to their own lives, with the aim of improving the latter in some specific way (McIntyre, 2008). Following from Freire’s Latin-American initiatives, Colombian sociologist and activist Orlando Fals-Borda (1991) summarized four “basic ingredients” to orient PAR practice, emphasizing through them its pedagogical element: “collective research” which must be carried out by all the participants, “critical recovery of history,” “valuing and applying folk culture”, and “production and diffusion of new knowledge” (9). They also apply to the research presented in this article.

Seen from the educational viewpoint, Fals-Borda’s second and third ingredients indicate the need to establish an epistemological life-school connection as a first precondition for PAR. For example, in Cabrini Green (Chicago), “a symbol of the failure of social programs meant to help low-income citizens,” school teacher Brian D. Schultz (2007, 66) encouraged a group of fifth-graders from Richard E. Byrd Community Academy to co-create a curriculum based on their interests, an initiative

that led to a PAR project focused on the deficiencies of the school building and on organizing a campaign to replace it. “The students’ plan guided the curriculum,” wrote Schultz (2007), “allowing it to become both integrated and integral in solving the problem of getting a new Byrd for themselves and their community” (75). Even if the group did not eventually bring a new school to the neighborhood, it did draw enough social attention to the project and to its claims as to get most of the deficiencies in the building and the surroundings solved.

A second precondition for educational PAR is that the same degree of proximity that is maintained between the learners and the topics addressed must also be assured for all the other dimensions, since “participants engage in *all* aspects of the project” (McIntyre, 2008, 12). This means that projects should be accordingly conducted by teachers or researchers who, independently of their affiliation, make sure that none of the participants feels detached, alienated or oppressed by any of the elements included in the PAR—the final aims, the language used, the ideas explored, the methods or research tools, the ways of sharing the resulting knowledge, the activities carried out, the relationships established within the research team—since this would collude with its emancipatory goal. Inspired by de-colonial accounts of epistemology (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), alternative forms of research have accordingly been adopted to welcome participants’ original linguistic and cultural capital and to offer, at the same time, an introduction to scientific and academic forms of research (Wamba, 2010). Films, photovoice, poems, speak-outs, storytelling, new media, “mapping, diagramming, role-playing, drama, music, art and movement” (McIntyre, 2008, 20) have all been used to this aim (Barret, 2011).

Whenever these preconditions have been satisfied, students belonging to minority and/or underprivileged social groups (and who often spoke different languages from the

dominant one) have had the chance to bring their family and community backgrounds and the school contexts closer, through a move that proved enriching for the learners' critical re-positioning in the social and educational realities. "Through PAR," Kemmis and MacTaggart (2005) claimed, "people can come to understand that—and how—their social and educational practices are located in, and are a product of, particular material, social, and historical circumstances that produced them and by which they are reproduced in everyday social interaction in a particular setting" (565). PAR projects respectfully build upon the participants' local (or folk) culture and worldviews and succeed in expanding them into more academic modes of thought and action that, without relinquishing a critical edge and a reflexive turn, should increase the students' chances of academic success and professional achievement. Their emancipation, however, is first and foremost *intellectual*, since the participants end up feeling more confident of their own cultural heritage, of their cognitive potential, and of the linguistic means they have to express it.

It is not surprising that clear examples of literacy improvement often accompany participation in PAR projects, while it is seldom adopted as the main goal, for, as Glassman and Erdem (2014) contend, "the teaching of literacy is a means and not an end in itself" (209). Morell's (2006) meta-analysis of PAR initiatives, for instance, which he assessed with a special focus on how they had impacted on the literacy achievement gap for ethnic minorities, concluded that, "when looking at the various types of reading, writing, and speaking associated with the process of engaging in youth participatory action research, it becomes immediately obvious that the literacy practices parallel, or even exceed what could be considered as desirable practices in a primary or secondary literacy curriculum" (8). In relation to the literacy gap of minority students, his research concluded that "there is good reason to believe that participatory action

research, as a literacy pedagogy and as a process of teacher learning and development can help in confronting and eliminating this gap” (16). Once intellectual and linguistic emancipation is accomplished, social emancipation may more easily ensue.

Photovoice

One creative-based method for generating knowledge that both participant groups engaged in was photovoice—an approach to investigating phenomena in which people utilize photography to raise awareness and make change. [...] Once documented, [participants] crafted texts to accompany their photographs, thus providing outsiders with insiders’ knowledge about aspects of their communities. (McIntyre, 2008, 22)

Since Wang and Burris (1997) developed photovoice as a strand of photograph-research during the 1990s, photovoice has become one of the most interesting data gathering techniques for qualitative research, and for PAR too. “A form of photo-elicitation, to the extent that (respondent-generated) images are used to generate verbal feedback” (Pauwels, 2015, 106), and thus part of the realm of visual research, photovoice has received a warm welcome among social activists and critically-involved educators due to its potential to activate, objectify, and expand individuals’ awareness of the dynamics ruling, for example, issues of race, social class or genre. “Typically used with marginalized groups, photovoice participants identify, document, and represent their community’s strengths and concerns from their own perspective through the use of a specific photographic technique” (Sutton-Brown, 2014, 169).

This critical potential has profitably been transferred to education, where it has been applied to the satisfaction of specific pedagogical aims. Insofar as the participants’ experiential and cultural viewpoints (as expressed by the photographs) are placed from the outset at the heart of the educational and research process, photovoice may very well cater for the constructivist and transformative pedagogical inspirations that also lie

behind PAR methodology. It is also tuned in to PAR's democratic and anti-elitist stand, for the act of taking photographs poses no technical obstacle for the participants' engagement with the practical aspects (although projects may include a camera training workshop during the first phases, if needed). In addition, photovoice places no linguistic or conceptual demands at the start of the research process: during the initial phases, the exploration restricts itself to the images captured by the learners in their photos, so the linguistic and conceptual dimensions are gradually introduced through the ensuing phases, and then only through collective meetings where photographs are shared and discussed as a first step for designing written or oral texts that build organically on the visual responses (Sutton-Brown, 2014).

Context of the research

The context in which I finally put these ideas into practice was a course from the degree in Elementary EFL Education, at the University of X. The underlying motives that inspired this research were not unrelated to the general contents addressed by the module, which offered a perfect context for me to test the hypothesis I had previously formulated, concerning the possibility of using PAR to help future EFL teachers distance and emancipate themselves from their oppressive EFL learners' experiences and, henceforth, start imagining new pedagogical possibilities for their subsequent EFL classes. The module was called "Culture in the teaching of a foreign language: English" and, as described in the academic guide, it hoped to provide future elementary EFL teachers with the theoretical and practical knowledge necessary to handle the cultural variables in the classroom in ways that are empowering for the EFL learners, hence conducive to meaningful learning.

In line with Stenhouse's (1981) model of *teacher as researcher*, I envisaged the subject's curriculum as an educational experiment whose worth would be assessed in terms of its ability to offer three kinds of emancipation:

- *intellectual*, to the extent that the STs would be able to enact high-order thinking skills, engage in abstract and critical reasoning, and exercise their creativity in English;
- *educational*, to the extent that the STs would be given the chance to break with their own oppressive past as EFL learners by taking part in worthwhile educational activities which inducted them into knowledge;
- *pedagogical*, to the extent that they would learn from this participatory experience how to imagine new pedagogical possibilities for their future EFL classes.

The *teaching strategy* (Stenhouse, 1981, 24) that I chose to realize this aim consisted of organizing the curriculum as a PAR project with three workshops, each of which worked as a separate cycle of inquiry that was assessed individually, although conclusions drawn from one were applied to the next, and even passed on from the first academic year to the second and third ones. Insisting on Stenhouse's (1981) epistemological justification for curriculum proposals, I wanted the STs to generate new knowledge collectively about themselves—their own culture, their own society, their own oppressive educational experiences, their own identities.

The first workshop was precisely a photovoice on culture. It was the one most directly inspired by PAR, and also the main focus of this article. The second workshop, in turn, engaged the STs in a sustained reflection on their own educational identities through the creation of audiovisual identity texts (López-Gopar, 2011), while the third one led them through an intercultural project on certain episodes of the history of the United States (mainly black history and the 1960s Movement) and encouraged them to

respond to these specific historical landmarks by writing poems that traced connections between their own histories and experiences and those undergone by other oppressed communities. From a cultural perspective, the curriculum drew a clear and logical transition which began by analyzing and representing culture in the STs' community, fostered awareness of how this culture had translated into their own individual EFL learner and teacher identity, and finally ended up exploring these concepts in relation to a minoritized cultures and struggles in an English-speaking country, by concentrating on the oppressive social, political, and cultural injustices that its members faced.

All three workshops were developed during three consecutive academic years (2013-14, 2014-15, and 2015-16), with three different groups of students (43 one year, 51 in the next, 35 in the last), all of whom were EFL student-teachers (STs), 85.1 percent female, and 71 percent under 23 years old. All of them had certified at least a B2 EFL level (Council of Europe, no date) as a pre-requisite for registering in the EFL teaching program, and came from middle- and upper-class socio-economic backgrounds (which testifies to the growing difficulties that students from less-advantageous socio-economic strata find to access university). Their privileged background had not prevented them from suffering the intellectual oppression that has become universal in EFL teaching, regardless of student SES or EFL level. As yet another student mentioned during the course of the research,

I never quite saw the point in learning English. For some reason nobody could motivate me, make me see English as an interesting and useful subject. I remember an uneasy feeling every time I heard the word "English" because, in a way, I started to understand that it was important but I was completely unconfident about my English, about what I was learning. [...] Even now thinking about those years makes me feel frustrated and ashamed of my little learning and my poor skills in English. Even now I can say I feel unintelligent and I'm not proud about what I did during those years. (Aina)

The photovoice [Here Figure 1]

This article only focuses on the first of the workshops of this innovative and experimental curriculum, in which the STs drew on photovoice to expand and refine their own understanding of culture in their own community. Although I had loosely imagined the progress of the workshop before the sessions started, ample margin was granted for change to ensue from the methodological negotiations of our diverse interests, creativities, and freedoms. As a matter of fact, the phases showed in Figure 1 and which are briefly described next were the collective outcome of our conversations (not my original plan), and they only represent the general course of events, since the STs only needed to justify their alternatives before the rest of the group consented.

Like the phases of Freire's ([1973] 2000) *culture circles*, but also those of other photovoice projects (Wang & Burris, 1997; Sutton-Brown, 2014), we conceived the structure of this workshop as a series of *decodification* and *recodification* moves. From the very first phase of the workshop, in which the students broke down the concept *culture* into four or five generative themes, to the final phase, in which the students finally put up, shared, and discussed their photovoice posters—which included their photographs, an accompanying text, and the earlier generative concepts, as seen in Figure 2—, knowledge was collectively broken down into more basic units (decodification), and then reassembled by the participants into different wholes, in order to produce new meaning (recodification) through the verbal and the visual modes. [Here Figure 2]

In accordance with PAR's participatory spirit, the STs not only did research on culture (which was the subject matter) but also investigated the success or failure of the photovoice at freeing their intelligences while using a foreign language (English), hence providing them (or not) with a non-oppressive experience at various levels. To realize the participatory dimension, democratic channels were opened for the STs to intervene

actively in the research process and carry out assessment tasks, examples of which are given below. Both the STs' research findings on culture, on the one hand, and the emancipatory quality of the workshop, on the other, were addressed in different ways: the former, through the oral and written output that the STs produced; the latter, by directly reflecting on the PAR project. I kept a journal myself, yet not until the last edition of this workshop did I recommend the STs to do so too (with very positive results), not to increase the workload involved in the task (the STs had to keep up with four other modules at the same time). Likewise, the beginning of each session was devoted to analyzing any problem, query or suggestion that they might have concerning either the photovoice research tasks on culture or the methodological dimension that we all intended should remain participatory. We also had a *collective assessment session* in class, right after the end of the photovoice, during which the STs freely spoke their minds by discussing these general questions: *What did we intend to accomplish through this workshop? How did we attempt to do it? Were we successful or not?* And finally, at the very end of the course, two months after the workshop ended—when new facets that might have originally gone unnoticed had already emerged, and spontaneous impressions may have been replaced by more conceptual ones (Shosh & McAteer, 2016)—I held *individual interviews* and *focus-groups* in my office, with those STs who volunteered to comment on the three workshops we had organized during the module, the photovoice included. These were in Spanish and semi-structured around questions that dealt with the STs' experience in the subject, with their cognitive and identity investment in the student-as-researcher pedagogy, how they believed these variables had impacted on their EFL language development, and on the way they envisioned their future teaching. They were analyzed using inductive coding, from which I extracted the main themes for thematic analysis of the qualitative data (Dörnyei, 2007). All of these

sources of evidence have been taken into account in the presentation of the findings below.

Findings on culture

The 129 students involved in the workshop during the 2013-14, 2014-15, and 2015-16 academic years produced 45 photovoice posters in total, all of which answered the question *What is culture for you?* in indirect ways, by focusing their photos, keywords, and texts on different situations, institutions, and events in their surroundings. Well equipped with their cameras or mobile phones, and spurred by a desire to share and explore their interests and experiences in an academic setting that had tended to ignore those same interests and experiences, the STs immortalized scenes from their family and university life, their local neighborhoods or from the wide, more open avenues in our city, where the local and the global intersected, as Figure 3 shows. The STs took advantage of the participatory nature of the workshop to freely explore new and alternative paths to culture that followed naturally from their interests, and in the end this variety contributed to expanding the participants' understanding beyond simplistic, superficial or conventional outlooks. [Here Figure 3]

Building knowledge collectively

Added to the divergent points of view on culture adopted by the different groups was the internal diversity found in much of the oral and written work produced by single groups of STs, which at times presented alternative readings of the same cultural phenomena. I soon became aware of the fact that these contradictions did not involve negative instances of cognitive processing, as I might have thought at first, but necessary transitions in the course to more comprehensive and sophisticated arguments (Vygotsky, 1994). In the following oral intervention in English, for example, which came after Figure 4 was displayed, Elena struggled to connect the egotism which she

identified around her with certain institutions in society. The difficulty in properly articulating these two spheres conceptually, in the form of a political argument, led her to place the blame on the current Spanish government through a possibly simplistic move. She was unable to delineate a clear, practical response to the problem which she had identified:

I think Spanish society is selfish—we are very selfish. I don't know why, maybe because the government... because in the government no one has worried about this kind of thing. I think our politic[ian]s make us... tell us to be the best. So if I'm good right now, then the person who I have next to me doesn't matter at all; and I think that we can translate this fact to people, to nature and to everything around us. I think we need a change, not only in our own person, in our own conscience, but one affecting everybody. (Elena) [Here Figure 4]

Before revealing how her suggestion developed into a more complex and sophisticated understanding of the problem, allow me to add a political note. As often occurs with PAR initiatives that address urgent social concerns (especially so in times of harsh economic crisis, like Spain's), in this case an undercurrent of political reflection accompanied, and profited from, the entire research process. Although there were no overt political discussions, many photos ended up reflecting on the political nature of decisions which had a strong impact on the undemocratic generation and distribution of culture in society among different social classes; also, on the way these decisions failed to represent the STs' interests and those of the majority of the population. Most often, this accusation hinged on the educational institution and the abuse it constantly suffered at the hands of politicians who, according to the STs, only acted on the basis of biased and spurious interests—either by pushing for the centralization and ideologisation of school curricula or by establishing budget cuts and privatization of the school system. [Here Figure 5]

Later on, in the same class discussion, Ana built on Elena's earlier comment and refined it by presenting education as one of the possible ways to improve the situation that she had originally described in terms of an egotistical country. "We have the culture we have because of all the factors that are behind us," Ana concluded.

We have an education that doesn't educate children to treat others equally or with respect.

[...] If we speak about this [topic] in class and make sure our students, just our students—the next generation—know that they have to treat each other with respect [...] then we might have a better country.

During the photovoice display of the 2015-16 course, Luis Mariano insisted on this idea:

I think the key to changing this would be giving hope and giving future generations better democratic culture, democratic education, because they are not prepared. Even today, during my internship at school, I have seen that the teaching methods are still pretty much the opposite of what democratic teaching should be. [...] I think it has to start inside everyone of us but also we, as teachers, can do something about it. We can teach children to take an active part in whatever conflict they can participate in, and they can decide, give their opinion, discuss... respect themselves enough to respect their own opinions and[understand] that power is something that they can share too; it is not something for other people to have.

Complex knowledge was thus slowly generated and nuanced during the photovoice, starting with the photographs and then through intuitions, dialogue, and a sincere desire to take conflicting views on board.

Local cultures and beyond

Most of the time, the posters inquisitively explored predominant habits and behaviors, questioning their necessary status and their naturalization into a cultural commonsense. When dealing with them, the STs preferred to ask questions rather than to answer them; rhetorical questions often marked the key moments of de-centering which illustrated the STs' expanding awareness and internal change, and in their posters

they wanted the reader to experience this too. This figure of speech was central to the following text, which I quote in full and uncorrected, which accompanied Figure 6.

[Here Figure 6]

Think about what culture is for you and then look at the photo. Does it represent what culture is for you? I guess not.

But culture is part of the life of each one of us. It is really hard to define it because it consists of many components. However, let's try to get a glimpse.

What we probably can see in the photo is that those men are immigrants. They look like they are from Latin America. In fact, they are playing a typical instrument which can be found there, the *charango*. But they are not playing it for fun, or in order to earn some money. There are no clues that show this. Maybe they are just having lunch on a bench, during their free time, and playing some music before they continue their work day.

Think about culture again. Can you imagine yourself, in another country, during lunchtime, on a workday, resting on a bench, playing some music? I guess not, again.

Let me think about it louder.

If I ask what culture is for me, and look at the photograph, I can guess we are from different cultures.

I can't imagine myself emigrating to find a job. And if I do it, I wish it was for looking after a better one. But did they?

Does their job allow them to have lunch in a simple bar, with a simple table and two poor chairs? Well, it doesn't.

Did they wish to be separated from their household in order to find a better life by having lunch on a bench? I guess not.

If I were one of them, I would work so hard to get away from this situation that I would probably spend my lunchtime on a bench and turn one of my habits into a medium to earn extra money. Why not by playing the *charango*?

Have you ever wondered how hard it is to be an immigrant?

It is really difficult to live abroad, far away from family and having to rely on oneself. What's more, some of the habits can be incomprehensible for people living in this particular country.

I think we should wonder about all of the disadvantages and advantages of this issue.

Now, let us try to think about culture one more time: What is culture for me? How can I show my culture to other people? Is it hard or easy?

The fact that the photovoice texts opted for unfolding different perspectives rather than for developing a single thread of thought, or for asking questions instead of fully answering them, signaled the epistemological limitations that the research process had to confront at some point. But before coming up against these, the STs made significant advances in the domain of knowledge generation and critical reflection in English.

According to María, who was one of the authors of the text above, the workshop clearly succeeded for her in creating a safe context where all of them could take the first steps towards a critical understanding of culture. “I really liked this workshop, for many reasons,” she told me in Spanish in her interview. “When we took the photo we spent some time talking to the men in the photo and they showed us a reality we weren’t used to, a really harsh one, which made us question some aspects of our own lives that we hadn’t thought about before” (María). This quotation suggests that the STs were even able to overcome habits and mindsets that had been originally set by their comfortable socio-economic background. In this case, María and Paulina (an Erasmus student with whom she created this poster) became interested in and empathized with individuals who lived in the same city but who, in many other ways, remained completely separate from them, living in different worlds.

Participatory dimension

At the beginning, I was a little bit confused and I was very skeptical when I heard you say we would all act as researchers because what I understood research to be was more or less trying to find information that is already there and may be more or less difficult to find, and then organizing it and presenting it in a more or less adequate way—which for me is not interesting, and so I was very scared when I first heard you speak of being researchers. But this is not what we did in this workshop at all. [... However] I am still confused about the students-as-researcher strategy and

what the word “researcher” means in it. I still think it’s confusing even though I liked how it turned out. (Luis Mariano)

This extract, from the 2015-16 assessment session, shows how some participants found it hard to understand the pedagogical strategy enacted through the workshop, which was also the methodological backbone of the research. Accustomed as they were to the elitist forms of knowledge production and consumption that prevail at the university and society, ones which tend to monopolize the idea of what research is or should be, the STs had trouble in understanding that there were alternative (and more democratic) approaches, such as photovoice, that could still be regarded as research; that these allowed participants to act as producers of knowledge; and finally, that these methods could be actually adopted as a pedagogical strategy in university courses. Most of these doubts faded away as the photovoice progressed, even more so as the group completed the other two workshops in the course, which followed a similar orientation. Although Luis Mariano remained unconvinced during the first assessment session, other participants expressed how much they valued the experiences, transitions, and internal changes they had undergone during the photovoice, even though (in some cases, especially because) it wasn’t easy for them. “We weren’t used to this kind of activity in which we have to reflect so deeply,” Alejandro said during his focus group. “Normally our lessons just consisted of the teacher saying, *This is the way things are—period*. So you studied for the exam and that was that. But now we were asked to think, to have an opinion; and at first we felt like... do I have something to say? Are my thoughts interesting enough to share?”

Through comments such as these, the STs rediscovered once again the latent inspiration of PAR that was behind this photovoice: “Now, when I walk down the street, I’m always experiencing reality as if I were a photographer, thinking about possible photos I would take, and also about their significance!” (Ivan). As has been

mentioned, PAR theory and practice is perfectly aware that access to information per se (even when this information is true) brings no long-lasting effects in the learners, while self-directed processes of inquiry like the one we experienced in this workshop immediately set the learners off on a journey of intellectual self-emancipation which can be furthered again and again through reflection, objectification of thought processes, and dialogue, independently of the accuracy of the knowledge learnt at first.

Accordingly, my teaching did not focus on providing a correct answer as much as on aiding the STs to advance (no matter how little or much) in their own production of knowledge, as this would bring them closer to being able, one day, to arrive at more sophisticated answers by themselves. Violeta elucidated this idea wonderfully in English during the collective assessment session:

These posters [she pointed at them, hanging from the classroom walls] have made us reflect on ourselves and our own culture, but they are only the first step. I mean, the work is done, but each one of us can read her poster weeks from now and keep on reflecting on culture and on herself. It's like—I don't know—keeping a diary: you can always go back and reflect on more of these things.

Endings [Here Figure 7]

“As a PAR strategy, photovoice is typically used with marginalized populations that have been silenced in the political arena” (Sutton-Brown, 2014, 169). Let me remind the reader that this research originated from my understanding that the prevailing, barely communicative, pedagogical orientations of EFL education in Spain tended to silence and marginalize learners (even those coming from advantaged socio-economic backgrounds) not in the political but in the educational arena of the classroom, and that photovoice (a technique often drawn on by PAR) might actually help emancipate these learners from the intellectual oppression that was thereby being imposed upon them, and that a group of participants of the 2013-14 academic year

related to the graffiti shown in Figure 7, on one of the external walls of the university library.

The evidence suggests that my original hypothesis was borne out and that my teaching strategy succeeded in its emancipatory aims. As a data creating approach, photovoice helped us materialize in a concrete workshop a student-as-researcher pedagogy through which the STs succeeded in using the foreign language to generate new knowledge. The fact that English was used during the process did not prevent these STs (who were also EFL learners) from acting as and feeling like researchers.

Regarding the linguistic dimension, EFL literacy development was not assessed as an end in itself, in isolation and as a reality that should be broken down into grammatical, lexical, syntactical, and rhetorical aspects, or into four different skills. This would have gone against my own understanding of language and literacy, against my language pedagogy, and against the research aims of this PAR project. For my part, literacy competence cannot be isolated from the macro- and micro-contextual (socio-economic and pedagogical) variables in which literacy is either developed or acquired, variables that in turn translate themselves into the relative meaningfulness and worth of the whole educational experience for the learners who take part in it, into the identities they are allowed to embody and display during the process, and into the attention and effort that they accordingly put into the activities, thereby turning them (or not) into actual opportunities for language learning (Hulstijn, et al., 2014). This is precisely what this research focused on by making sure that the STs underwent an educational experience that empowered them, that reassured them of their own intellectual capacities as much as of the possibility of channeling them through the English language, and that hence made them willing to move on in the never-ending process of improving their EFL skills and teaching them, in the future, through more creative and interesting ways than

those they were exposed to in the past. Precisely because the pedagogical variables were so successful in orchestrating a learning experience that was valuable to them, the oral and written texts that these engaged STs produced were also satisfactory from a purely linguistic side, despite the difficulty of the tasks. “I enjoyed immensely the feeling of doing all this, and doing it in English,” Laura summarized. “Because I had never done anything like this, nor did I know I was capable of researching and discussing at such a high level, and in English.”

In addition to the epistemological and participatory planes of inquiry, this PAR also tapped into the STs’ pedagogical knowledge. This issue merits analysis, since positive effects were also felt in this regard. The STs completed the different phases in the photovoice but they also saw its potential application in their future practice at primary levels of EFL education. One of them even expressed his desire to carry out photovoice research inside schools, either during his next practicum placement period or as an in-service teacher, and thus complete the transition from being a student-as-researcher to becoming a teacher-as-researcher. Other facts also suggested that the STs spontaneously connected their experience during the photovoice with their vocational aspiration to transform elementary EFL education in Spain, a desire that crystallized around the following question: *What does it mean to be an EFL teacher?* In her focus group, for example, Celia commented on the change which, in this regard, she had undergone during the photovoice:

Of course I didn’t like the way EFL is taught in school! But I had no idea of how *I* wanted to teach English myself. But I think this workshop has changed our point of view of EFL education. We didn’t know how to act differently in class from what EFL nowadays implies, from the kind of teaching we had received as learners. So it was like: what can I do to help learners be themselves? But since we have been doing exactly this in class, in this

subject, we now tell ourselves: yes, it is possible. And if it has been possible with us, then in some measure it must be possible with children, too. I think this is very important.

Many other STs shared the opinion that taking part in this photovoice had provided them with a memorable educational experience that would stay with them as a guiding light for their own future teaching, as an example of what EFL educators could actually realize in class. Whenever I encouraged them, during this research, to describe exactly the kind of pedagogical knowledge they had extracted from this workshop and which they wanted to apply in their future EFL elementary classes, then they expressed it in terms of relying and drawing on their learners' cognitive wealth (experiences, interests, memories, cultures) as a way of boosting their language learning, of the need to open EFL education up to ideas and competences from other disciplines and subjects, like research skills, or change the teacher-learner relationship in order to encourage participation (Faltis, 1997). All these ideas were at the base of my original emancipatory proposal for the EFL classroom, and they described what, for me, emancipated EFL learners and teachers would look like. As Violeta vividly expressed it during her interview,

What's necessary is to escape that 'commonsense' approach that says your job is simply to teach English, and that those who can't follow—well, that's their problem. No, your role is a different one. You've got to understand that you are not an English teacher only; you are a Teacher, and Educator. You should even see this as a human process: you are a person, your kids are people too, and together you and they are going to build something.

This is not to say that the STs and I were unaware of the many challenges, obstacles, and pedagogical negotiations that the extension of this emancipatory proposal to elementary levels of EFL education was likely to involve, especially bearing in mind the extended belief that low EFL levels should prevent learners from "receiv[ing] cognitively stimulating and content-level appropriate instruction," as affirmed by Carrasquillo, Kucer, and Abrams (2004, 30). Yet among the many things that the STs

had learned by taking part in this photovoice was that this obstacle could be properly compensated for by drawing on resources and scaffolding strategies that activated the learners' existing cognitive and experiential wealth or that presented alternative, multimodal or multiliterate channels for meaning to be conveyed (New London Group, 1996), such as visual aids—the photographs, in this case. In their most basic form, visual props familiarize EFL learners with the meaning of a given word, by providing its visual rendition, as flashcards do. But in the most interesting cases, visuals fulfill a similar role to the drawings utilized in Freire's cultural circles, or the photos in these photovoice projects: they allow the outer world to enter the language classroom and enrich the cognitive processes that take place inside, even when students' EFL level might be relatively low. Due to their unique ability to transmit self-contained units of complex meaning without recourse to verbal language, images automatically deepen the language classroom with interesting ideas.

By the end of the photovoice workshop, the STs had realized that EFL level on the part of the learners is no excuse for EFL teachers relapsing into the use of top-down, narrow and scripted curricula, or meaningless, unchallenging, and de-contextualized exercises which ended up crystallizing in the specific form of intellectual oppression that, during this workshop, we had successfully been able to counteract. [Here Figure 8]

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FIGURES

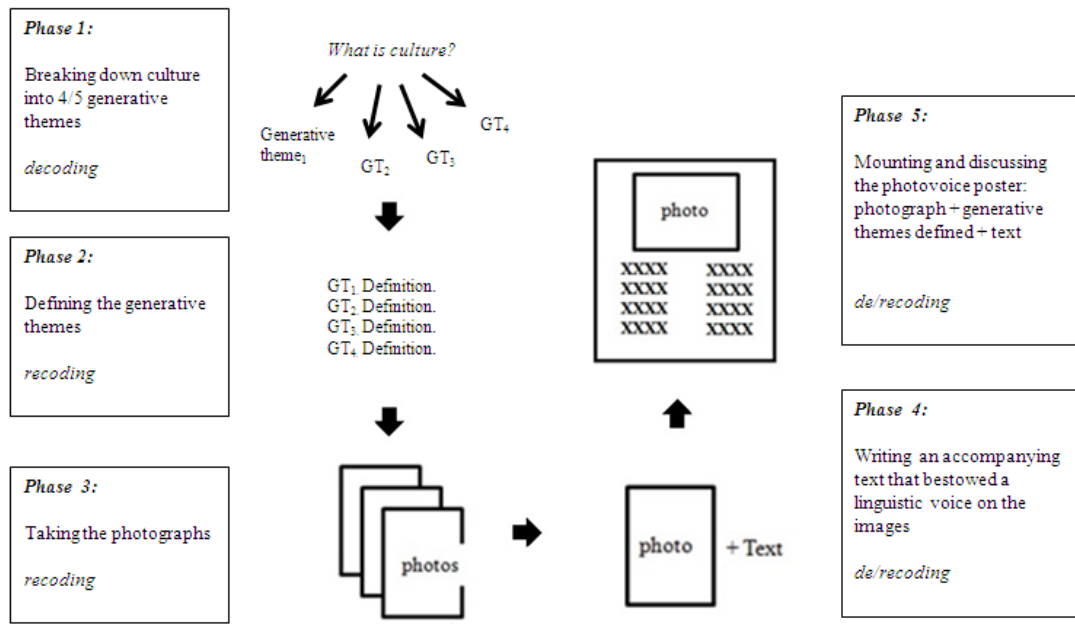


Figure 1



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8