Teaching English as a non-imperial language in a underprivileged public school in Spain

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Abstract. This article summarizes the processes and findings of a two-year collaborative action research (CAR) project that was aimed at analyzing and counteracting some of the most negative educational effects of *English linguistic imperialism* in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) and, more concretely, in the context of English as a Foreign Language education in Spain. The CAR investigated the ramifications of this phenomenon in a primary school located in one of the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in the city of Valencia (Spain). The pedagogical alternative it embraced in order to reverse the underlying tenets of ELT under present-day neoliberal imperialism consisted in combining art and multimodality through a series of projects, and a variety of qualitative strategies were used to assess its effects. Evidence showed that the three projects developed during the CAR succeeded in offering a valuable alternative to mainstream ELT and brought about a change in the way the underprivileged students related to the English language.

Introduction

This article summarizes the processes and findings of a collaborative action research (CAR) project (Mitchell, Reilly, & Logue, 2009) that lasted through the 2015/16 and 2016/17 academic years, and that was designed to analyze and counteract some of the most negative

educational effects of *English linguistic imperialism* (Phillipson, [1992] 2007) in the field of English language teaching (ELT) and, more concretely, in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) primary education in Spain. The main topic around which the CAR revolved was the fact that, as in many other countries in the world, ELT in Spain is a "signifier of social class privilege and access" (Vandrick, 2014, p. 88), meaning that students from low and/or marginalized social, economic, and cultural contexts find it harder to connect their own identities and cultural capital to the English subject, and consistently obtain lower results in it than in any other subject (Anghel, Cabrales, & Carro, 2016). The CAR investigated this reality in a public school in Nazaret, which is one of the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in the city of Valencia (Spain). It also tried to devise pedagogical orientations to reverse these effects. Rather than to improve directly the students' grades, the aim of the CAR was to act on the engagement variable by helping the students experience the process of learning English as something that was valuable and worthwhile in itself.

The CAR included three members: Luis, Ana, and Violeta. They had first met in an ELT module that Luis taught in the Language and Literature Education department at the University of Valencia, during the 2014/15 academic year, and in which Ana and Violeta took part as students. In fact, a workshop developed in this course around teacher identity became the key experience that mobilized the members' interests around English linguistic imperialism and prompted them to initiate this CAR project (Author1, 2017). During the next two academic years, the CAR took root in a disadvantaged public primary school in Valencia; first, in the context of Ana's and Violeta's four-month practicum placement, which Luis supervised as the university tutor; next, during the next 2016/17 academic year, when their collaboration with this school became completely independent from the university context, since by then Ana and Violeta were already novice teachers who had completed their Degree in EFL primary education and had been hired by the school to organize a weekly, after-school

EFL workshop. Every Thursday, from 3.30 to 5.30pm, Luis left the university and also joined them as a volunteer school teacher.

Linguistic imperialism

In order to better understand the aims of this CAR —developing a critical alternative to ELT *commonsense* (Gitlin, 2008) that was grounded on a theory of English linguistic imperialism— English linguistic imperialism must be analyzed first. As Phillipson ([1992] 2007; 2011; 2009), Canagarajah (1999), Kumaravadivelu (2006), or Pennycook (1998; 2007), have argued, the term *linguistic imperialism* encompasses socio-economic as well as cultural and educational dynamics, the effects of which extend both globally and locally. This term points at the way an existing empire manages its own language inside and outside its frontiers. It thus hypothesizes a connection between the way an empire conceives of itself and behaves in relation to other countries, on the one hand, and the way it conceives of its own language and behaves in relation to other languages, on the other. In this regard, Phillipson (2009) has characterized English linguistic imperialism (like the French one in the past) by its *linguisticism*, i.e., by its set of "ideologies, structures and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, regulate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resource (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language" (p. 23).

While the UK gradually lost direct territorial control over its colonies after 1945, the imperialist traits of the ideologies that English displayed during the British empire remained as the United States of America emerged as the new hegemonic power, committed to a neo-imperialist agenda (Harvey, [2003] 2005) that the UK —incidentally— never failed to endorse. In accordance with the US' privileged position, English soon became the all-dominant language of science, culture, policy, and education worldwide, and was capable of realizing thus its past ideological aspirations in the midst of contemporary "corporate empire", to an extent never dreamt of during British direct colonial rule (Phillipson, 2011).

The colonial dreams, we could say, were fully realized only in the post-colonial world, not only in terms of the intensity of English prevalence but of the global extension reached by it. Pennycook (1998), for example, stated that "the effects of Macaulay's Minute [from 1835] and colonial Anglicist discourse were far less significant within colonial language policy than they are today within global institutions of support for English" (p. 94), and according to Phillipson ([1992] 2007) the major global institutions that render and help manage today's US-dominated world (the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, NAFTA, etc.) have adhered to the imperialist principles originally set at the Makere Conference of 1961, and hence have extended "the language policies of the colonial period till the present" (Phillipson, 2011, p. 447).

The neoliberal turn

As stated by Vandrick (2014), "the neoliberal use and promotion of English as an international language builds on the earlier colonial spread of English throughout India, parts of Africa" (p. 88). Indeed, from the 1970s onwards an ideological shift unfolded, whose effects were soon noted on the specific plane of the ideologies of English and ELT. As *neoliberalism* became the background belief-system or dominant ideology of US neo-imperialism (Block, Gray, & Holborow, 2012), the processes and aims that regulated ELT also became translated into the key anthropological concepts of neo-liberalism (Shin & Park, 2016; Holborow, 2006). Thus, if neoliberalism has been defined as "a theory of political and economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework of strong private property rights, free markets and free trade" (Harvey, 2005, p. 2), as cited in Block, Gray, & Holborow, 2012, p. 15), soon English was *marketed* —for marketed it is, also today, as its industry encroaches upon education systems (Phillipson, 2003)— as the essential skill needed by the neoliberal worker, and hence as a key resource to help him or her attain

prosperity and a life worth living. It was thus no longer a question of English being the most "manly," "adaptable," "civilized" or "extensive" tongue to have ever existed, nor about it being the true "tongue of God" (Pennycook, 1998), as it was described during the colonial past. What is primarily emphasized today is its global scope, i.e., its being the perfect international and intercultural means of communication, a global *lingua franca* whose communicational potential remains miraculously intact even as one uses it across diverse national and social settings—something which has strongly been contested, of course (Park, 2016; Block, Gray, & Holborow, 2012, p. 98).

Secondly, regardless of the many times this pretense has also been belied, English is also presented today by certain media, popular culture, and even part of the ELT field, as a "condensation symbol of wealth, individualism and extraordinary professional success" (Block, Gray, & Holborow, 2012, p. 11). By contrast, the unjust consequences of English becoming a compulsory professional language at the very moment when public education suffers the severest blows of neoliberal urge towards privatization (Hill & Kumar, 2009) are conveniently silenced down. "As different levels of access to English persist," claims Tollefson (2007) , "English is increasingly becoming a source of economic inequality" (p. 33). The concern persists, therefore, that "the learning of English in many parts of the world has become implicated in the reproduction of social classes" (Kanno, 2014, p. 118).

Thirdly, as mentioned above, neoliberal discourse has rendered mainstream ELT pedagogies to make them apt for individual consumption under commodity form. "The shift from pedagogical to market values," as Block, Gray, and Holborrow (2012) have suggested, "has […] involve[d] a fundamental shift in educational philosophy: the abandonment of the social and cooperative ethic in favour of individualist and competitive business models" (p. 6). If neoliberal ideology attributes worth to individuals depending on their ability to self-manage (through discipline and half work) their own "human capital" in ways that maximize

its market worth, then access to and proficiency in English has also come to be explained as a matter of individual effort, not of the range of enabling conditions (socio-economic, cultural and educational) that might allow that effort or interest to arise in the first place and effectively translate into learning. This means that, as far as pedagogy is concerned, today's ELT imperialism is no longer defined only by the principles set at the Makerere Conference of 1961, with their exclusive emphasis on the quantitative —not qualitative or pedagogical— aspects of the teaching and learning process (Phillipson, [1992] 2007, p. 185). All of these principles are maintained today, but they are complemented by a neoliberal understanding of the learning process which portraits it as an individual endeavor —hence purely *cognitive*— that advances independently of micro and macro-contextual variables around the teacher, the students, and the society in which the educational act takes place. The language learning process is pictured in terms of learners who advance through pre-designed, easily marketable packages of (online) course books, tests, and DVDs. And whether English language teachers create, or fail to create, an interesting context where the new language can be learnt meaningfully; or whether learners' local languages, identities, and cultures are validated or not during the process by teachers, curricula, and resources (Cummins & Early, 2011); or, lastly, whether the learning situation presents intellectually challenging activities or, on the contrary, just childish, dumbed-down, and repetitive activities (Gibbons, 2009), all these questions end up being pushed to the background of ELT's pedagogical concerns.

Finally, as the ELT field becomes more and educational more dominated by standardized course books and tests engineered by multimillionaire industries that market their products globally, teachers tend to suffer more and more severe deskilling and deprofessionalization in their working places. They are treated as technicians who, regardless of their local context, must apply pre-designed packages, hence demanding from them no autonomous pedagogical judgment (Guerrero, 2010; Block & Gray, 2016).

As ubiquitous as the Anglo-American, neoliberal endeavor they are necessary connected to, these defining traits meet no temporal or spatial border in the global realm of ELT: they affect *periphery* as much as *center* countries (Phillipson, [1992] 2007); *inner* and *outer* countries as much as *expanding circle* ones (Kachru, 1990); ESL as much as EFL contexts, disregarding of the contextual differences that might be found among them.

Teaching English as a non-imperial language: a CAR project

Through a two-year CAR project, Violeta, Ana and Luis gradually deconstructed the above assumptions, which regulate mainstream ELT practice, and built a new commonsense for themselves. This was a slow process which had nothing to do with voiding ELT of spurious, neoliberal elements until a pure, essential version of ELT was devised. Actually, in the same way as many of the problems addressed in the previous sections have already been tackled in the past from other perspectives, this CAR involved a high degree of theoretical *eclecticism* (Kumaravadivelu, 1994), and it drew on a variety of previous work by scholars and practitioners espousing critical and socio-cultural approaches to language education, although these, for the most part, had remained disconnected from an analysis of linguistic imperialism.

In order to fulfill their goal, Ana, Luis, and Violeta decided to reverse, one by one, all the traits that defined mainstream ELT under neoliberalism, so their model for teaching English as a non-imperial language can be summarized through the following points: (1) If mainstream ELT is characterized, under neoliberalism, by deprofessionalizing teachers who are turned into technicians by neutralizing their knowledge base, the CAR members decided, by contrast, to firmly draw on their own pedagogical knowledge and spare with mainstream learning resources and materials altogether. (2) If ELT has indeed experimented a "shift from pedagogical to market values" (Block, Gray, & Holborow, 2012, p. 6), Ana, Violeta and Luis took the opposite road and decided to ground their decisions directly on meaningful names of

a critical pedagogical tradition that ranged from Lev Vygotsky to John Dewey and Paulo Freire, but that also included language-oriented scholars like Jim Cummins, Suresh Canagarajah, or the members of the New London Group. (3) If ELT under neoliberalism tended also to ignore teachers' and students' local identities, languages, and cultures under a drift towards "native speakerism" (Holliday, 2006), Ana, Luis and Violeta made sure to build on their own and the primary education learners' local identities, languages, and cultures as valuable resources for the EFL class. (4) If mainstream ELT conceived language learning as taking place in a cognitive limbo that was, somehow, disconnected from the same educational and socio-economic contexts that neoliberalism was altering at a terribly high speed, the CAR members remained fully attentive to all of these levels, and made sure that the educational projects they designed for the EFL classroom drew connections with the students' communities and that these, when possible, triggered critical reflections. And finally, (5) if ELT commonsense places all its motivational stock by the future professional benefits that might accrue to the adult English learner, the CAR members preferred to speak in the present tense, i.e., to concentrate on the present moment, on designing academic experiences in the EFL classroom that were worthwhile in themselves, not on account of the dubious preparation they offered for the future but of the quality of the educational experience they afforded. "Whatever you do in the classroom," Violeta summarized at one point of the first research cycle, "do it because it is worthwhile, not because you want your students to get to high school, university, etc., but because it is something valuable for us to do here and now" (Violeta, CAR assessment session, 30 May 2016, First research cycle).

Although this model could have resulted in a variety of concrete proposals, it ended up actualizing itself around two main elements: *art* and *multimodality*. Firstly, the CAR relied on art to raise the intrinsic worth and cognitive level of the EFL projects, precisely by including aesthetic pleasure in them. Every research cycle was based on or inspired by concrete artistic

compositions carried out by a contemporary visual artist. At the beginning of the first research cycle, Ana had identified the potential of including non-verbal artistic forms:

> What I keep asking myself is: Art being another form of expression, another form of language (and a valuable one at that), why doesn't this school encourage it more? It is something valuable and attractive, especially for these students. By insisting on it, we'd be saying: 'I know you have this talent, so exploit it!' And then, little by little, we could start introducing the more academic skills and forms of expression. (Ana, Journal entry, 5 April 2016, 1st research cycle)

At the same time, the CAR members expected that their inclusion of non-verbal artistic resources in the projects would help them navigate the main problem that they expected to find, precisely by trying to raise the cognitive level in the EFL class (especially with learners who, like these, had such a low English level): namely, the fact that, unless other languages and literacies were welcome in the EFL lessons, the students would fulfill this heightened cognitive demand through their own native language, since they didn't have enough resources in English to express their thoughts. This was the main purpose of multimodality. Instead of lowering the cognitive level of English-only activities much below what the EFL learners were able to express in their own language (as is normally done), the option was rather to

> reflect on the nature of the scaffolding that is being provided for learners to carry out that task. It is the nature of the support —support that is responsive to the particular demands made on the children learning through the medium of a new language— that is critical for success. (Gibbons, 2009, p. 18)

Accordingly, visual art played a double role: as content and support. On the one hand, art enhanced the cognitive level of the EFL classroom by welcoming interesting ideas and aesthetic experiences through alternative, non-verbal modes. But, on the other, it also provided the necessary multimodal scaffolding for students to learn English in a rich,

meaningful, and interesting context. As the reader will have the chance to see in the three projects described below, photographs and drawings (among other resources) allowed the outer world to enter the language classroom and enrich the cognitive processes that took place inside, even when students' EFL level barely reached an A1. Because of their unique ability to transmit self-contained units of complex meaning without resource to verbal language, visual art automatically deepened the language classroom with interesting ideas without having to resort, always, to the students' native Spanish.

Following suit from the New London Group (1996) and Giampapa's (2010) characterization of *multiliteracies pedagogy* as one able to "connect multilingual practices, identities (of teachers and students), and the multimodal forms of meaning-making that students are engaged in across diverse spaces" (p. 412), the team designed three projects in which aesthetic enjoyment and artistic production did not take place *only* through the English language (for other non-verbal languages and literacies were included), but from which English was not excluded, either. In other words: the artistic experiences set the context for meaningful learning at the same time as the non-verbal, multimodal resources provided the necessary scaffolding for English to be learnt more easily.

Context

From the moment Ana and Violeta stepped into the public school CEIP Àusias March where they would conduct their four-month practicum, they knew that these primary school learners would be the main protagonists of the CAR. As a result of inadequate political decisions taken by the city council, the neighborhood in Nazaret had been forsaken for more than twenty years, which had contributed to many of the 6000 people living there suffering severe cultural and economic deprivation. Above all, the neighborhood grieved for a disastrous urban planning that had isolated it from the rest of the city and which had even transformed its sandy beach into a large national port, erasing one of its main attractions. Major housing

degradation was apparent at the time of the research (and still is), and as a result Nazaret had the lowest rental rates in the city of Valencia. Access to cheap (but deteriorated) housing had acted as a call effect for newly arrived immigrants, so the neighborhood had the highest immigrant ratio in Valencia (17'7 % in 2016), among whom 44% came originally from the eastern countries in the European Union, 25% from Africa, 18% from Latin America, and 5% from non-EU European countries, according to the 2015 city census (Ayuntamiento de Valencia, 2015). In addition, Nazaret had traditionally been home to one of the largest native gypsy communities in Valencia, which added to a multicultural and multiracial reality that, under more favorable circumstances, could have turned this neighborhood into the rich and attractive cultural melting pot that it deserves to be. Dragged down by the effects of the economic crisis, however, the reality was a different one. Nazaret —and the public school this research was based in— suffered many of the disadvantages of the "inner-city" (Yeo, 2013): according to the city census, 40% of the population over 16 years old in the neighborhood were either unemployed or worked on precarious, unregulated jobs such as collecting scrap, peddling, or even prostitution and drug traffic, and 47% of its adult population had not completed a basic education, either in Spain or in their countries of origin.

Regarding the school in which the CAR was based, the neoliberal educational policy espoused by the previous conservative government during the last decade had turned Nazaret's public school CEIP Àusias March into an educational ghetto, precisely by making it easier than ever for parents to choose which schools they wanted to send their children to (Holme, 2002). Together with the fact that 25'8% of Spain's primary and high school learners attend charter schools (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2016, p. 4), this *free school choice* policy set the context for only the most disadvantaged families living in Nazaret sending their children to this public school. Within its walls, certain cultural and socio-economic realities were accordingly overrepresented, even in relation to the neighborhood

population (let alone the rest of the city of Valencia): at the time of the research, 50% of students were gypsies, 20% Nigerian, 20% eastern European or Latin American, and 10% white. The school had been granted a special status by the regional administration —CAES, which in Spanish stands for a Center that provides Singularized Educational Attention—, which is conceded whenever 30% or more of student school population requires educational compensation on account of socio-economic deprivation, immigration processes, belonging to a linguistic and cultural minority, etc. (a figure that raised to an astonishing 98% in the CEIP Àusias March). Under socio-economic and educational conditions as harsh as these, the staff of committed educators found it really hard to educate these children.

Considering this scenario, we could say that most of the students who attended this school, as well as their families, had received from global neoliberalism only its darkest side: poverty and marginalization. In addition, insofar as the growing marketization of culture under capitalism makes it harder for poor families to access the cultural market and participate in the inertias that model it and the rest of society, their geographical and cultural marginalization revealed a cognitive counterpart which was deeply felt inside the school. One trait was especially relevant for this CAR research: namely, the fact that in a globalized world that privileged English and Anglo-American culture, these two lacked any appeal to these learners and their families. Actually, the latter were completely immune to the discourses presenting English as a necessary competence for the present professional world, essential for "getting a good/better job and moving towards self-sufficiency" (Warriner, 2016, p. 499). Instead, they remained fiercely (at times ambivalently) attached to their local and restricted cultures and traditions. For, despite being aware of their limitations, they regarded them as the source of everything that was worthwhile and valuable in their lives. This had significant educational consequences: on the one hand, the affective and cultural distancing they felt towards the main tenets of neoliberal ideology (including the overwhelming presence of

English) made it harder for these learners and their families to find a purpose in learning this foreign language, and hence much harder for the EFL teachers to do their job. But, on the other hand, it also allowed the CAR team to embrace precisely the kind of approach that they were so interested in developing —teaching English as a non-imperial language—, in full confidence of its possibilities.

Methods for data collection and analysis

The CAR project covered three research cycles in a period of two academic years, as summarized in Table 1. The groups in which the interventions were carried out included up to thirteen students, aged 10 to 12. Apart from the documents and artifacts that Ana and Violeta produced as university student-teachers during the first research cycle, the team drew on further qualitative data such as CAR members' journal entries, bi-weekly CAR meetings, end-of-cycle assessment sessions (which were sound-recorded), individual and group interviews with selected students (which were also sound-recorded), sound or video recordings from key school sessions, and the analysis of the students' work. Photographs were also taken at significant moments of the project to immortalize the key experiences. All of these data passed through two phases of analysis: first, a deductive one, which focused on the ways in which the CAR had been able to engage the learners in the EFL educational proposal, precisely by identifying in the learners' classroom work, actions, and conversations evidences of this engagement: Did they put effort and passion into their texts and artwork? Did they feel that they had done something interesting, worthwhile, and unique, that expressed who they were and, thus, that no other student would have done in the same way? How did art and multimodality contribute to this, or rather become an obstacle? These were the three basic questions that guided the first phase of analysis. The second one, on the other hand, employed inductive coding to extract additional themes for thematic analysis of the qualitative data (Dörney, 2007).

Table 1. CAR structure

Research cycles	Academic year	Context	Name of the project	Members' role
1st	2015/16	Practicum placement in CEIP Àusies March January to May 2016	"Multimodal identities"	Luis: university teacher as researcher Ana: student-teacher as researcher Violeta: student-teacher as researcher
2nd	2016/17	Weekly EFL session in CEIP Àusies March October 2016 to January 2017	"Drawing songs, writing images"	Luis: university and school teacher as researcher Ana: school teacher as researcher Violeta: school teacher as researcher
3rd	2016/17	Weekly EFL session in CEIP Àusies March February 2017 to May 2017	"If I were a giant in Nazaret"	

Findings

Since it is in the very nature of a CAR project that the teachers and/or researchers involved refine and better translate their original ideas into their pedagogical practice with the passing cycles, it is but natural that this section should focus mainly on the third and last project, which produced the most significant evidences in relation to the CAR's goals. Before, however, two additional projects were completed. Their results were positive, if less persuasive, yet they will also be summarized as preliminary proposals that helped the CAR team design, during the last research cycle, its most mature proposal.

"My most urgent concern," wrote Violeta, recalling the first day of her 2015/16 practicum placement,

> was to find a way to improve daily coexistence in the EFL class, since the students' rejection of the English subject forced the teacher to adopt an imposing style which did but intensify the existing confrontation and turn the time I spent with these children into an intolerable and uncomfortable situation, where no learning could take place.
>
> (Violeta, Practicum report, 1st research cycle, June 2016)

In order to fulfill this goal, the first project, "Multimodal identities in the EFL classroom," encouraged the learners to create multimodal self-portraits that included their most salient identity traits. For its design, the team drew inspiration from an activity originally described in Truax (2012) around a self-portrait by painter Maya Christina González. In this project, the whole process was scaffolded by means of bilingual *I am journals* in which the learners explored their self-perceived identity traits by making significant circles and learned, also, the English words they needed in order to include this information in their final outcome, as shown in Figure 1.

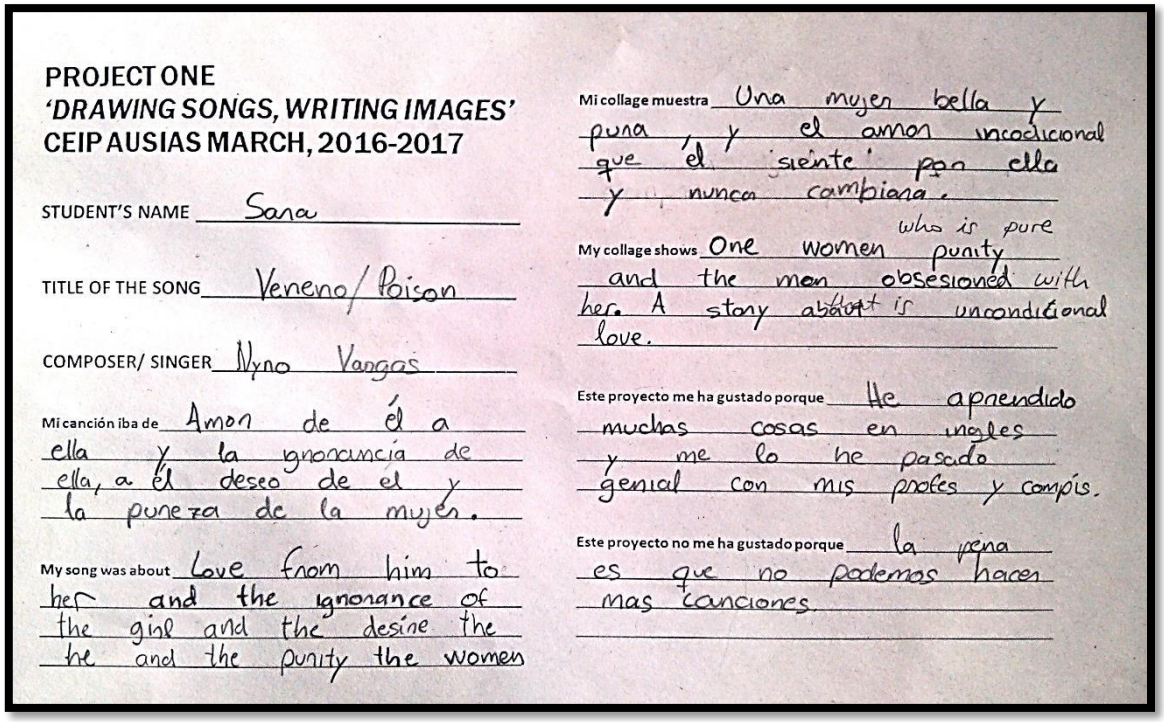
Figure 1. Antonio's multimodal self-portrait

The second research cycle insisted on tapping into the learners' youth cultures and identities. It was called "Drawing songs, writing images" and on this occasion multimodality was approached from the angle of *inter-semiotic translation* —when "the one or more channels of communication used in the translated text differ(s) from the channel(s) used in the original text" (Gottlieb, 2005, p. 35). Inter-semiotic translation was realized through the following steps: the children chose their favorite song and video clip on YouTube, showed them to the rest of the class, copied a fragment of the lyrics in their notebooks, read it out loud, discussed its meaning collectively, and identified the most important *generative themes* (Freire, [1973] 2013) —love, sports, friendship, drugs, and violence, mainly. Then, compositions by Dutch collage-artist Tim Roeloff were presented as examples to familiarize them with the collage genre, and the students composed their own to represent their song and its generative themes, which they inserted as tags in the collage. Finally, they also wrote a bilingual summary (in English and Spanish) about the song's lyrics and about how the collage

had tried to represent them. Sara's final collage and her accompanying text are shown in Figures 2 and 3.

Figure 2. Sara's collage

Figure 3. Sara's summary of the second project



PROJECT ONE
'DRAWING SONGS, WRITING IMAGES'
CEIP AUSIAS MARCH, 2016-2017

STUDENT'S NAME Sara

TITLE OF THE SONG Veneno / Poison

COMPOSER/ SINGER Nyno Vargas

Mi canción iba de Amor de él a ella y la ignorancia de ella, a él deseo de él y la pureza de la mujer.

My song was about Love from him to her and the ignorance of the girl and the desire the he and the purity the women

Mi collage muestra Una mujer bella y pura, y el amor incodicional que el siente por ella y nunca cambiara.

My collage shows One women purity who is pure and the man obsesioned with her. A story about is unconditional love.

Este proyecto me ha gustado porque He aprendido muchas cosas en ingles y me lo he pasado genial con mis profes y compis.

Este proyecto no me ha gustado porque la pena es que no podemos hacer mas canciones.

By the end of these two research cycles, Ana, Luis and Violeta realized that the artwork needed to be less abstract if these learners were really to find beauty in what they were doing. Indeed, while collage was a suitable genre to explore art and multimodality, the problem with the second project was that the students' pieces ended up representing not the songs' narratives but rather the generative concepts that they had abstracted from them during the sessions. This made the creative process less interesting and valuable for them. The collages were too static; they were symbolic in manner rather than narrative. In Sara's artwork, for example, in Figure 2, neither the song's story nor the critical reflections developed around it could be deciphered. "In the end," Luis wrote in his research journal, "the compositions brought together isolated elements that functioned as symbols of the song but which showed no relationship with each other. The connection with the song […] wasn't evident enough" (Luis, Journal entry, 20 December 2016, 2nd cycle).

The same problem was felt in the first project, "Multimodal identities in the EFL classroom," whose resulting portraits —as can be seen in Figure 1— remained somewhat disconnected from the identity traits that the students had to add on the borders in English.

Both projects found it quite hard to articulate multimodality adequately to make sure that the different modes in play enriched and spoke with each other.

And yet, despite this shortcoming, the students appeared to be much more engaged in what they were doing than they were in their regular EFL morning classes. They justified this upon two reasons: first, unlike what often occurred in the EFL class, this time they had felt "invited" to speak and work on their own youth cultures and identities. And secondly —but connected to the latter— they appreciated that Violeta, Ana, and Luis had avoided insisting on the use of English at the expense of intelligibility, something they were used to seeing and that they denounced in the following excerpt from the focus group:

Julianna I thought that the English workshop was going to be a bore.

Arantxa. Yeah, I also thought that.

Julianna. Listen up, teacher: I thought that you were going to sit down all day and go bla bla bla… speaking all the time in English, without telling us what it meant. But then I saw that it was far better than the English classes we normally had.

Luis. So you prefer everything not to be in English, that there's some Spanish too?

Julianna. That there are things that are ours!

Violeta. 'Things that are ours' —what do you mean, Julianna? That they are in Spanish, or that you like them?

Julianna. Both. That we like them, too.

Luis. [to Kevin] How did you think this English workshop was going be?

Kevin. Like always!

Luis. What do you mean?

Julianna. He means what I've said!

Luis. So: with a course book, everything in English, learning words…

All of them. Yeah!

Boni. But it wasn't like that.

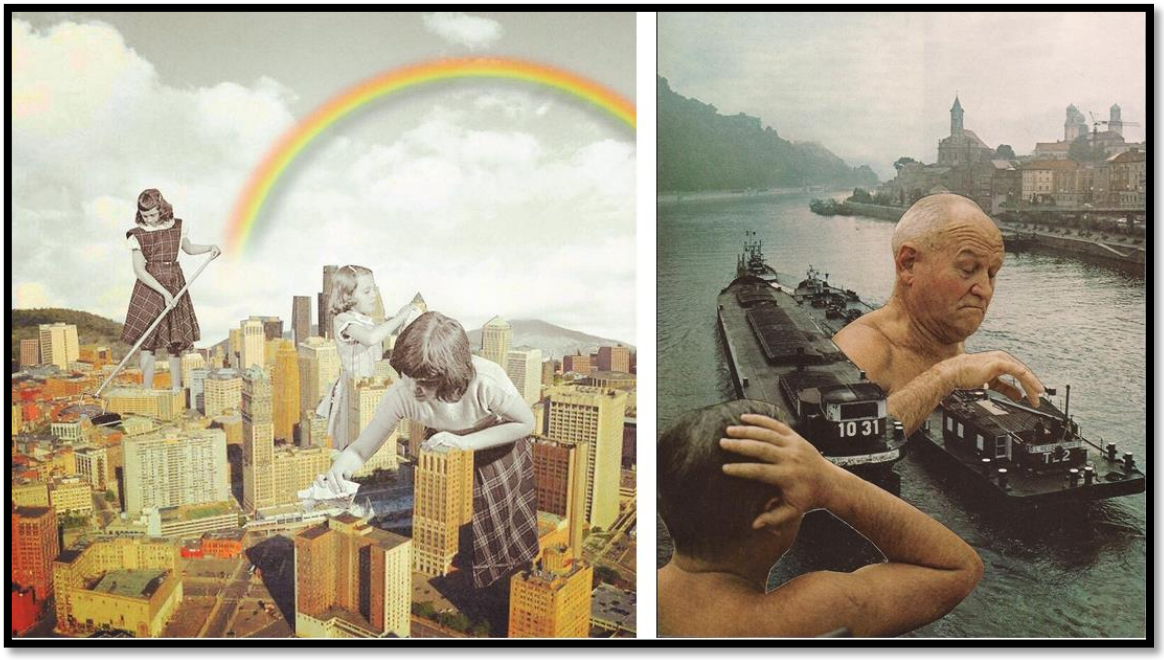
Luis. It wasn't?

Boni. No. (Focus group with learners, 2 February 2017, 2nd cycle)

'If I were a giant in Nazaret'

Considering the drawbacks and the successes experienced during the first two research cycles, the CAR team started to plan and design the third project. Although they kept *collage* as the main artistic genre, this time they wanted to make sure that the students would feel emotionally and cognitively attached to the final product. With these aim in mind, they started looking for more examples of collages on internet Pinterest platform; scanning through the latter, Violeta felt attracted to a series that showed gigantic people —children mainly— who interacted with the natural and urban landscapes as if the latter were playthings for them, tools that helped them in their daily activities. Two such compositions can be seen in Figure 4, by collage artists qta3 (2016) and Pasaje (2013), from left to right.

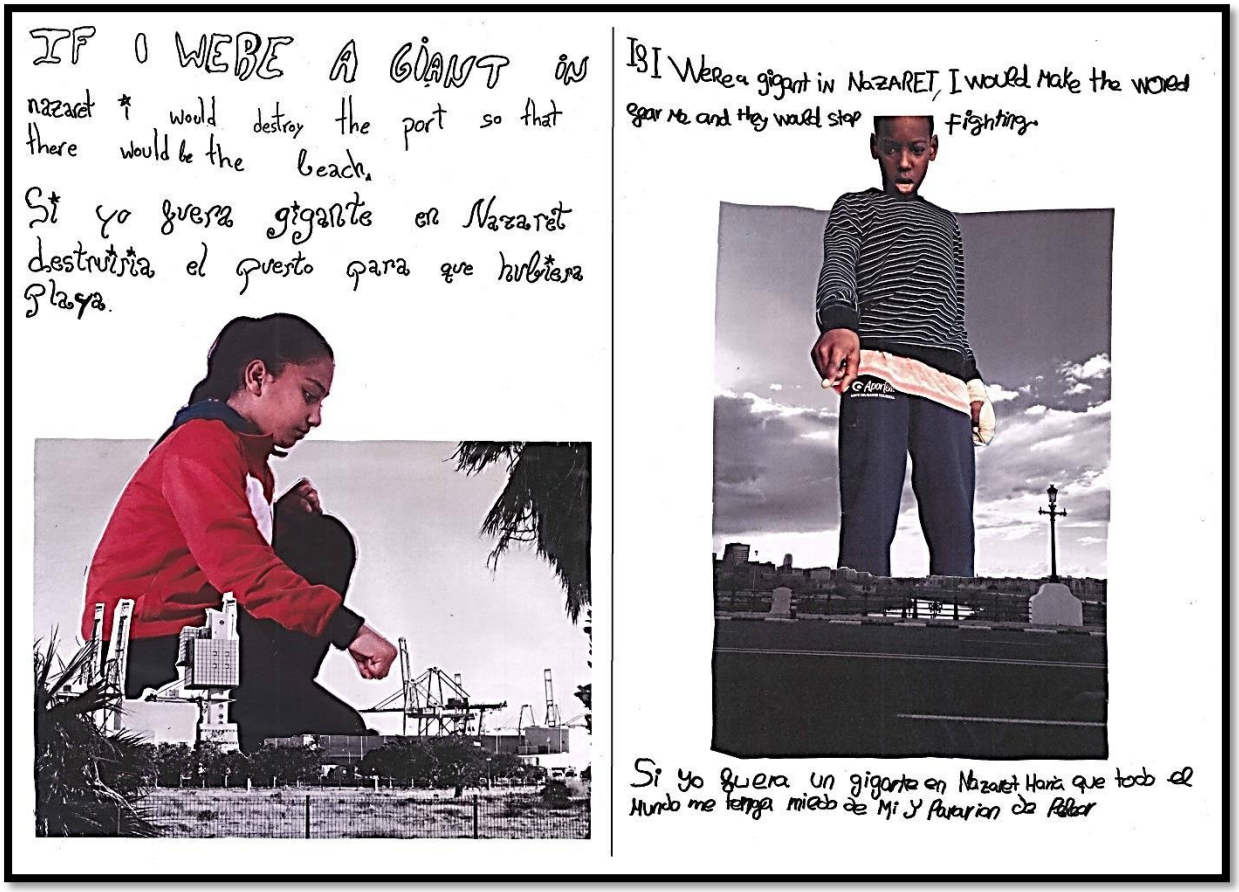
Figure 4. Collages by qta3 and Pasaje



Around these and similar examples by other collage artists, Luis, Ana, and Violeta got together on 8 February 2017 and came up with the idea for the project *If I were a giant in*

Nazaret, which extended from February to June 2017. The EFL learners were to imagine the changes they would bring to their neighbourhood if they were giants and had the power to transform their environment at will, and next they would create multimodal and multilingual collages that represented their wish. "Those who threatened me when I was little, I would crush them!" shouted Junior once the topic was proposed to them (Junior, primary-education student, 9 February 2017, 3rd cycle). "I would go for a walk, and when I saw a house belonging to a rich family, I would eat them up and start living there," said Kevin (primary-education student, 9 February 2017, 3rd cycle), with a serious look on his face. Little by little, however, as Ana, Luis and Violeta created spaces for them to reflect and discuss their ideas collectively, the students also moved beyond revengeful fantasies and started to embrace a more constructive tone, involving an improvement in their neighbourhood, as the project demanded. After a couple of sessions, for example, Junior ended up changing his idea to "mak[ing] the world fear me and they would stop fighting," as can be seen in Figure 5 (right). And, in the same manner, Pasaje's (2013) collage in Figure 4 reminded the students that Nazaret had once had a beach, so Trini connected her artwork to this part of her neighbourhood's history and struggle (Molins, 2015) by picking up this motive in her final collage, as shown in Figure 5 (left).

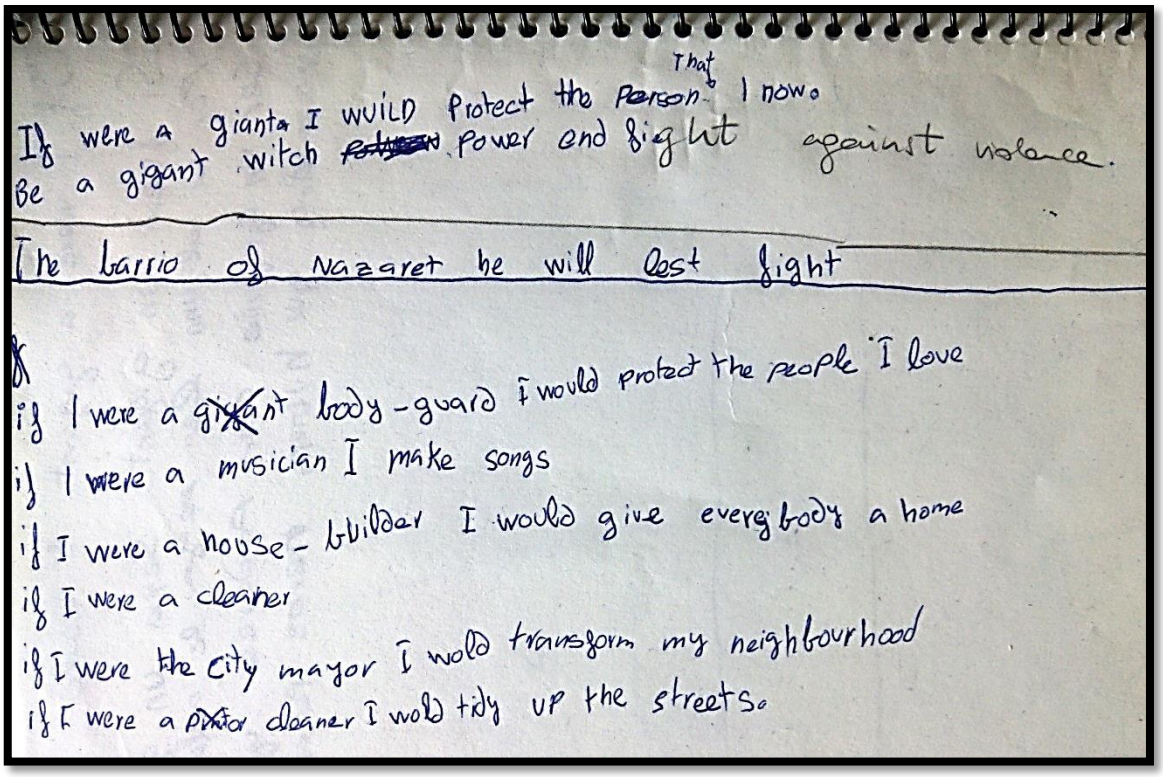
Figure 5. Trini's and Junior's final collages



As they became acquainted with the expression 'If I …, I would …', and learnt to convey their own wishes in English, and also the vocabulary they needed to practice this construction with different professions, places, and problems in their neighbourhood (as shown in Figure 6), the students also started planning their final designs. For there were many stages involved, many things to bear in mind: the places they wished to include at the collage background, the action they would be performing in their portraits, how the latter would interact with the background landscape to make sure their idea was conveyed properly, etc. Many of them drew sketches of their compositions to start picturing them in their minds and scaffold the initial steps of the project. During the process, English was used whenever communication among students and teachers was not compromised. Normally Spanish was chosen to set the context but once the meaning and the purpose were clear, the English vocabulary and grammar necessary to complete the activity were introduced, as showed in

Figure 6, from Junior's notebook. At any rate, language learning always took place inscribed and connected to the wider project.

Figure 6. Junior's notebook



Meanwhile, Luis, Violeta, and Ana had to stay one afternoon, after a session, to take photographs of the spots in Nazaret that would appear at the background, because not all of the parental permissions for the children to leave the building during school hours had arrived in time. It was the children's full responsibility, however, to take each other's portraits during one session. Once all of these activities were finished, background landscapes and portraits were printed and combined on an A3 cardboard by gluing the landscape image first, cutting out their body portrait, and sticking it to conveniently create an illusion of depth. They also added to the composition any other element that would strengthen the message or would make the collage funnier or more beautiful. Finally they wrote the sentences they had practiced in English and Spanish, and some students even included —when the option was suggested— a third home language, mainly Romanian and Romany (which is the traditional Gypsy

language). Figure 7 shows different steps in Mijail's working process, from the initial sketch to his final, trilingual collage.

Figure 7. Different steps in Mijail's progress

During the CAR meeting held on 8 February 2017, when the CAR team first came up with the idea for the this project, Violeta had expressed the following desire: "If the reason why children's voices, while they are kids, aren't ever listened to is because they are so small, then we are going to make them larger! Gigantic!" (Violeta, CAR meeting, 8 February 2017, 3rd cycle). Indeed, these "giant children" were the symbol to which the CAR connected its critical and emancipatory aims; they were a metaphor for the feeling of empowerment that Violeta, Ana, and Luis wished to instil in these disadvantaged children in relation to two key aspects that defined their lives inside and outside school lives, and which the CAR had interpreted in the light of a world shaped by neoliberal, Anglo-American imperialism. Firstly,

as English learners, the project had helped them feel intelligent, creative, and capable — possibly for the first time in their lives— while they were learning a language (English) that was much more foreign to them than to most other children. "The things we have done," claimed Paige during the individual interview that Luis conducted on her, "are important. They deal with important problems, like poverty. It is something serious. Everyone should think about it and do something to help" (Paige, primary-education student, Individual interview, 18 may 2017, 3rd cycle). In the other individualized interviews, all of them said that they had "loved", "enjoyed", been "thrilled" by this project (also for all its cutting, gluing, coloring, etc.), that they thought that their collages were "beautiful" and that they felt proud of sharing them with the rest of their mates, their neighborhood, and above all with their parents.

Secondly —this time in relation to how much their public voices were heard and respected— the CAR team had realized early on in the project that they had to help the students bring their transformative energy from the world of fantasy (as conveyed in the collage) back to the plane of reality, to explore paths for the project to have a real impact on Nazaret, no matter how modest. And they decided to do so by making sure the outcomes were made public and shared in multiple ways. As shown in Figure 8, the collages (covered in a plastic coating) were hung from the school walls, facing the sidewalk, for all the parents to see, read, and feel proud of what the children had accomplished in different languages. Additionally, a walk was organized in nearby streets on 26 may 2017 for the students to distribute and hung copies of their collages in bars and shops, together with a letter which explained (in Spanish and in English) the wish they had wanted to convey with it. Finally, larger copies of the learners' collages and letters were sent by post mail to Valencia's city major. Luis, Ana, and Violeta also included their own letter with the rest of them, requesting him not to forsake this neighbourhood and pay heed to these students' desires and concerns, who, "with these collages, ask that their voices be taken into account by people who, like

yourself, can make a deep change in their lives and their world' (Luis, Violeta, and Ana, Letter to València's Major Joan Ribò, 18 May 2017, 3rd cycle).

Figure 8. Julianna, Luis, and Boni hang the collages from the school walls

The school received a kind reply from the city major just in time for the students to proudly read it before their summer holidays. It was the icing on the cake of the CAR project. By then, it was clear that the "If I were a giant in Nazaret" project had retained the virtues evinced during the previous cycles but also improved the drawbacks detected earlier. Of course, there were still aspects that could be improved, especially regarding the amount of classroom talk that could actually be carried out in English —but this was an incardinated problem in this school to which the CAR team will try to find a solution in the future 2017/18 cycle. As regards the CAR's specific aims, not only had the artwork succeeded in articulating multimodality in appropriate ways (in the final collages, the visual text complemented the verbal text to strengthen and nuance its meaning) but it had also raised the intrinsic quality of

the project by introducing an aesthetic dimension that turned the learning process into something valuable in itself. Thanks to it, the students had proven that they were capable of producing quality work —also in English. "We are beginning to reap the fruits of having made art be at the backbone of this project," Luis noted in his journal, after a couple of lessons had gone by:

> The children have felt motivated by the collages that we showed them. They have considered the compositions interesting, beautiful, motivating, and something they wanted to produce themselves. […] They saw the collages and they wanted to make theirs. And they were willing to accept English as part of the process. In this sense, our initial thesis is starting to prove itself right. (Luis, Journal entry, 16 February 2017, 3rd cycle)

Apart from these direct outcomes, the thematic analysis of the data revealed that new images of educational life had also begun to spring during the third cycle. Indeed, one of the most interesting aspects revealed by the second, inductive phase of the data analysis was precisely the fact that the socialization processes —behaviors and conversations— that developed in this EFL classroom actually differed from those promoted by ELT neoliberal discourse and neoliberalism in general. Ana claimed that she had witnessed

> a different kind of relationship growing between students and teachers, and a different approach to work, one that was no longer synonymous with boredom or being forced to do something (which is what they are used to) but rather one in which work seems to be linked to a common good.
>
> Luis. Yes, and a valuable one. The children were there and wanted to make something. And in making it, art was involved, and language was involved, and humor was involved too. So there was a different kind of combination among these elements; they were not separate from each other, as is often seen in school life, where humor goes one

way, and language goes another, and art goes another. (CAR assessment session, 31 May 2017, 3rd cycle.

A glimpse of this revalorization and transformation of school work, so in line with John Dewey's ([1916]2012) educational philosophy, is what the photograph in Figure 9 succeeded to capture and convey. Connected to this transformation was the understanding that English had become an adequate foundation to create a feeling of collective belonging among the CAR teachers and the students. This was a remarkable success, bearing in mind that English was completely foreign to this group of students and how badly they had reacted against it at the beginning. This collective feeling proved that, through its pedagogical decisions, the CAR had exerted a shift in the students' relation to the English language, one that might encourage them to keep on learning it in the future and take advantage of the possibilities that education was yet to offer them as they moved to High school (as most of them were by the end of the school year). At the same time as they learnt English and created valuable and interesting things around it, they had bred a sense of collective belonging that was strong enough to overcome their initial resistance to the English language and also the socio-cultural differences that separated them from Ana, Luis, and Violeta, the CAR teachers in charge of the project. In this sense, by stressing so much the importance of the present moment, the CAR project had actually opened up new possibilities for the future. The hope remained that the effects of the emancipatory experience they had undergone during this project was able to extend some of its effects from the educational plane to the social one.

Figure 9. Sara, Saúl and Kevin listen to Violeta

Conclusion

What does it mean to teach English as a non-imperial language? This article has shown that it has nothing to do with explicitly teaching theories of English linguistic imperialism and neoliberalism, or with pouring down on students historical evidences on the existence of these two phenomena. Rather, teaching English as a non-imperial language involved a constant effort to subtract all that was "imperial" and "neoliberal" from the way English is normally taught today. The basic premise on which this CAR was based was precisely that only by cutting off the "imperial" from ELT could the "teaching" dimension remerge and teachers be able to take over the set of responsibilities that, in theory, shaped their profession: namely, the right —but also the obligation— to exercise their pedagogical knowledge and imagination in order to present situations, resources, and ideas that are capable of seducing learners to engage in them, to the extent that they are appealing and well adapted to their cultural realities (Canagarajah S. , 2016). This essential responsibility —that is, the duty but also the joy one feels at doing the job one has been prepared for— is precisely what neoliberalism is taking

away, not only from ELT educators but from many other professionals working in other spheres of society. And yet, this was exactly what Luis, Ana, and Violeta were able to experience during this CAR project. Through an effort that was synonymous with fully becoming teachers *and* researchers (Stenhouse, 1975), they first identified the remnants of neoliberal ideology in the way English was normally taught in Spain and, then, they replaced them with critical alternatives that satisfied their autonomous pedagogical criteria and which, in this case, involved drawing on art and multimodality as basic strategies to raise the intrinsic quality of the academic experience they would offer to this group of EFL students. As this article has shown, this approach was able to liberate a whole wealth of artistic and cognitive resources that had lain dormant in the CAR members and the students, handcuffed by ELT commonsense. However, since this pedagogical model was developed in the context of an after-school activity, the challenge remains of adapting it to the curricular demands of a regular group with a larger number of students.

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