



## Empowering Students in the English Language Classroom: Strategies for Teacher Trainees

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- The experience described here is a useful tool for the empowerment of English language learners.
- Students' perceptions of language use are generally firmly established and, therefore, difficult to destabilise.
- Students' critical and analytical skills are not sufficiently developed, and so more work on critical discourse analysis is needed.
- A critical component must be included in teacher training programmes in order to ensure that English language learning in fact contributes to learner empowerment.

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### ABSTRACT

Taking Critical Language Awareness as a theoretical frame of reference, this article presents the results of a study carried out with a group of teacher trainees in the final year of the Degree in Primary Education (English) at the University of Sevilla. The final aim of the experience is to provide them with effective strategies to empower students in the English language classroom. The experience is comprised of a diagnostic test to assess participants' level of critical language awareness; a tailored seminar to discuss issues related to language, identity and power; and a workshop to provide teacher trainees with classroom strategies to empower students. The experience shows that a critical component must be included in teacher training programmes in order to ensure that English language learning in fact contributes to learner empowerment.

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### 1. Introduction

English is one of the most powerful languages in the world, economically, politically, socially and culturally. It is a lingua franca used by large numbers of speakers in a variety of contexts (Jenkins 2007; McKenzie 1992): economic and commercial transactions, technology, international politics, intercultural encounters, academic production and education. The premise underlying the expansion of English language teaching across the world is that more people will have access to more information and services, contributing to a democratisation of these, and therefore a redistribution of power. The question is whether communicative competence in the language, as it is currently theorised and trained in the classroom, is really contributing to this democratising process, a question already posed in 1992 by Robert Phillipson. More recently, other theorists have agreed that, instead of contributing to a redistribution of power, the expansion of English in the world is actually intensifying power asymmetries among different groups of English speakers (Macedo, Dendrinos and Gounari 2003, pp. 52, 111).

In this study it was observed that students with a functional level of English are, quite often, too self-conscious in their use of the language, being excessively concerned with the use of a norm that is accepted by the native community, and unable to transfer what they learn in the classroom to communication in real contexts. They also tend to ridicule, rather than empathise with, other speakers of English as a foreign language. This has grave consequences for their self-esteem and views of themselves as members of the English-speaking community. Finally, they are unaware of the power asymmetries that affect the communicative interactions in which they participate or, if they are aware, they are incapable of tackling them. Ultimately, they aspire to attain power (in the form of linguistic competence) at some point of their learning process so they can exert it once they gain access to the privileged community. It seems plausible that these teacher trainees' ideas on the relationship between language, power and identity will be transferred, once they become teachers themselves, to their students (Giroux and Purpel 1983). In order to avoid this, it is contended, a series of strategies are needed to empower students in the English language classroom.

This article presents the results of a piece of experimental research carried out with a voluntary group of teacher trainees, all of them final-year students in the Degree in

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Primary Education (English) at the University of Seville (Spain). The aims of this experience are:

1. To explore the nature of the relationship between communicative competence and learner empowerment in this group of teacher trainees.
2. To help them adopt a critical and reflective attitude when considering the relationship between language, power and identity.
3. To provide them with effective strategies to empower students in the English language classroom.

## 2. Theoretical framework

In order to answer the question of why English language learning is not empowering students, four main issues need to be addressed:

- a) The way language and communication are theorised.
- b) The way communicative competence is discursively built.
- c) The way identity factors affect successful communication and learner empowerment.
- d) The way English is taught.

### 2.1. The way language and communication are theorised

According to Ferdinand de Saussure, language is a system of signs (Saussure 2013, p. 18). Each sign has two elements, like two sides of the same coin: a signifier (a string of sounds or letters) and a signified (the meaning that is conventionally attached to that signifier). Furthermore, this relationship is arbitrary, that is, there is no relationship between the word "table" (either as a string of sounds or letters) and the actual table. This structuralist view of language is an abstract and idealised one, which is useful for studying language as a system and creating dictionaries. However, in this system, meanings are understood to be objectively and unquestionably there, waiting to be learned, stored, checked and used by speakers. This is because, in this structuralist view, the conventions of language (meanings among them) are also presented as naturalised: "Meanings seem to be natural and inevitable, the only meanings possible. Because meaning is treated as absolute and given, the possibility of meaning shifts becomes disguised and opaque" (McKenzie 1992, p. 226).

However, the signified (i.e. the mental image we have) of words like "girl", "they", "retarded" or "foreigner" differs greatly from the use assigned to them in social interaction in sentences like: "he runs like a girl", "they lived happily ever after", "my brother is retarded" or "foreigner, go to your country." In these sentences, "girl" is used as an insult, for both the person being talked about and the group of people identified as having feminine traits; "they" points exclusively to referents identified as a couple composed of a heterosexual man and a heterosexual woman; "retarded" and "foreigner" are, very much like "girl", an insult for both the person being talked about and the group of people identified as having a disability and not being from the place in which the sentence is uttered, respectively. From this, two main conclusions may be drawn: on the one hand, the signified is an abstract and apparently neutral construct that is very far from people's

real use of language in context; and language does not exist outside particular use in a specific social and historical context. Therefore, the structuralist view of language does not help us understand certain linguistic facts and events. All these examples show that meaning is not inherent, but rather it is socially constructed: it is not only in the word, the text or the speaker's intentions, but it emanates from "the social relations in which it is embedded" (Janks and Ivanić 1992, p. 307). When you use a word, it is loaded with the meanings that other people have given to it throughout history, according to their own views of the world. At the same time, meanings do not represent reality in an objective and neutral way: they only present one view of the world. This view is what is known as ideology (Althusser 1969, p. 233). Indeed, the words and expressions mentioned above uphold the very specific ideologies of those in a more powerful position in society: those who are not women, gay, disabled and foreigners. In these common expressions, and many others that crowd our daily speech, the world is seen from the perspective of a dominant group (mainly, white Western heterosexual men). Therefore, language is very closely connected with ideology and language use is very much determined by dominant views of the world. In Bakhtin's words, "Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated - overpopulated - with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process" (Bakhtin 1981, p. 294).

The logical, normal and commonsensical meanings in a given society support and are supported by the socio-economic, political and, in many cases, legal structures of such a society: being a "family" or being in a "marriage" gives you socio-economic, political and legal power. Trying to change the meanings of these words (to incorporate, for example same-sex couples), even though it is very difficult, helps destabilise those power structures: gay people now have access to socio-economic, political and legal power they did not have before. That is why these debates on the meanings of words are as political as they are linguistic. Resistance to language change (because this is the normal, logical, most common reality) amounts to reluctance to subvert power asymmetries: "common sense in the service of sustaining unequal power relations" (Fairclough 1989, p.70).

Post-structuralist theories establish that meaning is not there to be transferred (Lévinas 2006; Barthes 1977; Derrida 1978). Rather, it is constructed in communication. Meaningful communication is not the sum of independent and autonomous interventions: I say + you say + I say + you say ≠ communication. Rather, meaning is constantly negotiated, destroyed, rebuilt, clarified, rectified and co-constructed. It is a chain in which what speakers say affects the meaning of what the interlocutor has said and will say.

Real-life interactions generally occur in clearly established social situations in which speakers occupy different power positions. They deal with these in different ways. When both interlocutors assume the meaning of that situation as a given (this is the way it is and there is nothing I can do to change it), communication is not successful: either

there is no communication at all or interlocutors achieve their communicative aims by maintaining and reinforcing power relations. Contrariwise, successful communication occurs when both interlocutors construct meaning together. In our view, this co-construction of meaning is only possible if interlocutors:

- a) acknowledge the social situation in which they are involved;
- b) are aware of the power dynamics at work in this situation;
- c) strive to deconstruct and reconstruct the meaning of the situation;
- d) endeavour to reduce power asymmetries in the interaction.

This is the model of communication that should be used in the English language classroom so that students may develop the skills to become aware of power asymmetries in real communicative interactions and tackle them by linguistic means.

### 2.2. *The way communicative competence is discursively built*

The CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) establishes that “the aim of language teaching is to make learners competent and proficient in the language concerned” (Council of Europe 2001, p. 6). In the CEFR, communicative language competence is made up of three sub-competences: linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic sub-competences. This means that, in order to be communicatively competent, speakers have to be linguistically, sociolinguistically and pragmatically competent. Also, linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic competences may be enough for our students to be competent speakers, but they are certainly not enough to empower them as speakers. We need to be aware that the CEFR’s take on competence is (as we saw with the meaning of several words at the beginning) only one way of looking at things. Furthermore, uncritically accepting the CEFR’s definition of communicative competence contributes to reinforcing power asymmetries: you know what is appropriate in a certain context (for example, teacher-student interaction), and you have to assume and accept that that’s the way it is. If you don’t (for example, if you don’t comply with those rules of appropriacy), then you are not competent. Being competent necessarily implies that you accept the status quo (authority remains unchanged).

As has already been stated, successful communication requires critical engagement in the interaction, awareness of the social situation and power relations between interlocutors, and a capacity to reduce those power asymmetries by linguistic means. Therefore, the very way in which communicative competence is discursively built directly affects language learning and learner empowerment in the English language classroom.

### 2.3. *The way identity factors affect successful communication and learner empowerment*

In many cases, we are not aware of the power asymmetries that are at work in communicative interactions, mainly because we are uncritical of social structures or assume that there is nothing we can do to change them. Because

of the impact that these asymmetries have on communication, as we have seen, awareness of these and a capacity to subvert them is something we need to incorporate in our classes in order to ensure that our students will be able to communicate successfully. In the context of English language teaching, we tend to set a framework in which students communicate on a par with others, in which they are at the same level as their interlocutors: in listening activities, in dialogues and roleplays, students are not made aware of the power asymmetries at work in these interactions. This accounts for much of the frustration that learners later experience when communicating with others in English in real contexts.

The main extralinguistic factors that contribute to the creation of these power asymmetries are identity factors such as age, academic status, professional status, social class, social status, gender, religious beliefs, ethnicity/origin, sexual orientation, disability, etc. Regarding these, it has been demonstrated that children develop race, class, gender and disability stereotypes between the ages of 2 and 5; that these become firmly settled, turned into prejudice and discrimination between the ages of 5 and 11; and that these biases can be disempowering both for themselves and others, leading to underachievement in school, low self-esteem, discrimination and prevention from access to some services (Liben, Bigler and Krogh 2001; Martin and Ruble 2009; McCrory Calarco 2011; McKown and Strambler 2009; Miller, Lurye, Zosuls and Ruble 2009; Sino and Killen 2009; Teig and Susskind 2008).

All these studies either explicitly or implicitly point to the crucial role that language plays in the shaping and perpetuating of these biases. If language is not neutral, how can we teach language neutrally? If all these factors contribute to power asymmetries that have a direct impact on successful communication, then how can we teach our students to communicate in English without making them aware of such factors, without helping them develop the skills and use the tools to subvert them? By teaching language in a purportedly neutral way, we are dooming our students to the powerless position they are made to occupy, and we contribute to perpetuating power asymmetries and unequal power relations in the world. This does not mean that none of them will be able to rise above this powerless position, some certainly will, but not because of us.

### 2.4. *The way English is taught*

These identity factors rarely enter the English language classroom. However, it has been widely acknowledged that education is a political act (Mayo 1999; Borg, Cardona and Caruana 2009; Borg and Mayo 2006); and that language teaching is a political act (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson 2013; Reagan and Osborn 2002; Said and Zhang 2014). Furthermore, for Freire, education is a process of “locating and dislocating oppression” (Freire 1973). In order to be able to carry out this process in the language classroom, Critical Language Awareness emerged in the early 1980s “to refer specifically to the advocacy by a group of language teachers, educationalists and applied linguists of a new language awareness element in the school curriculum, at the top end of primary school or in the early years of secondary school” (Fairclough 1992, p. 1). It is a critical

approximation to language teaching, learning and use. It is “critical” because it not only seeks to describe the relationship between language, society, power and ideology, but to understand why linguistic facts and conventions happen (socio-economic, political factors that influence language use and linguistic interactions), how they contribute to the oppression of certain groups (including foreign language students) and what can be done to change this (how language can be taught, learned and used in order to balance those power relations). It uses the term “awareness” because awareness is seen as the first step to action: when introducing Critical Language Awareness, students are guided in a process that leads them to question and challenge the rules of language that perpetuate power asymmetries; to reject the place of ideal listener/reader; to use language to contest the views with which they are presented; to express their resistance to the position they are made to occupy; to use language to defend their position and the position of other oppressed subjects: “A critical awareness of the world (and language is part of it), and of the possibilities for changing it, ought to be the main objective of all education, including language education” (Fairclough 1992, p. 7).

In the context of English language teaching, we tend to set a neutral framework in which students communicate with one another at the same level. From a pragmatic point of view, all communications in which students are involved are ideally cooperative, something which is far from what happens in real communicative interactions. In the language classroom, Fairclough states:

Cooperative interaction between equals is elevated into a prototype for social interaction in general, rather than being seen as a form of interaction whose occurrence is limited and socially constrained. The result is an idealized and utopian image of verbal interaction which is in stark contrast with the image offered by C[ritical] L[anguage] S[tudy] of a sociolinguistic order moulded in social struggles and riven with inequalities of power. (Fairclough 1989, p. 10)

Furthermore, when we introduce sociolinguistics in the classroom, students are taught what is appropriate for a given social situation, and to accept it, but not how or why this social situation came to be, who makes those linguistic decisions, or how language can be used to change it. In this way, our teaching is condemning our students to the powerless position they are made to occupy, and we contribute to reinforcing power asymmetries and unequal power relations in the world. It is therefore necessary to introduce a Critical Language Awareness element in English teaching: “A linguistics which contents itself with describing language practices without trying to explain them, and relate them to the social and power relations which underlie them, seems to be missing an important point. And a language education focused upon training in language skills, without a critical component, would seem to be failing in its responsibility to learners” (Fairclough 1992 p. 6).

Only by doing so will we really contribute to a fairer redistribution of power, preparing our students to become critical, active and autonomous citizens capable of tackling the power asymmetries which they encounter in intercultural interactions in a global world: “Critical Language Awareness is, I believe, coming to be a prerequisite for effective democratic citizenship, and should therefore

be seen as an entitlement for citizens, especially children developing towards citizenship in the educational system” (Fairclough 1992, p. 3).

### 3. Methods

This research belongs in the tradition of the critical school, which is based on a view of reality (in this case, of language), as shaped by power structures supported by both institutional practices and discourses, and seeks to unveil and correct forms of discrimination and social injustice (Troudi 2015, p. 90). It is a piece of experimental research in which both quantitative and qualitative data have been collected, analysed and interpreted. Data collection was carried out in three different stages using a variety of techniques:

1. Diagnostic test: a diagnostic test composed of 5 items was administered to students to probe their perceptions on language use; their competence in the target language; their views on themselves and others as English speakers; their capacity to transfer classroom knowledge and skills to real-life situations; and their capacity to perceive power relations in communicative interactions.
2. Discussion group: in this discussion group, identity issues, as well as the relationship between language, identity and power, were explored from a theoretical perspective. Data collection at this stage was carried out using a checklist made up of a total of 18 items grouped into the four different categories seen in the theoretical framework: the way language and communication are theorised; the way communicative competence is discursively built; the way identity factors affect successful communication and learner empowerment; the way English is taught. The following items were included in the checklist:
  - “A language is a neutral vehicle for people to express themselves. It is the people who are not neutral that use the language as a means of oppression”: discuss this statement. Do you think it is true? How do you experience language in your everyday lives? Do you feel oppressed by language? When? How? Do you think other people might feel oppressed by language? When? How? Why do you think this happens?
  - Have a look at the following sentences: “He runs like a girl”; “They lived happily ever after”; “My brother is retarded”; “Foreigner, go to your country.” What do they mean? How do these meanings differ from those you find in dictionaries? Why do think this happens? Who decides on what words mean? Can meanings be objective? Can they be ideological? What kind of ideologies do these words and expressions uphold?
  - What do the words “family” and “marriage” mean? What kinds of images come to mind when you hear these words? What kinds of families and marriages? Are these meanings normal, logical and natural? Are these meanings the result of a social or cultural norm? Do you think it is ok to use the term “family” to represent a mum and her daughter, two dads and an adopted daughter?

- ter? Why? Do you think it is ok to use the term “marriage” to refer to two women, or to refer to three people? Why? Do these meanings contribute to equality or inequality? How?
- What is language change? How does it happen? Who authorises it? Is there social resistance or tolerance to language change? Why?
  - What do you think is more powerful, the image or the word? Do you believe that one picture is worth a thousand words? Can language create reality? How? Do you know of any examples?
  - How do you think all this may be relevant for language teaching? And for English language teaching? How may this affect your practice as teachers?
  - What are your motivations for learning English? What do you think are your students’ motivations for learning English?
  - What does one gain from learning English?
  - What have you gained from learning English?
  - Do you feel empowered when you speak English? How?
  - Are Spanish people more powerful since English is taught in schools? How?
  - Are Spanish people more influential because they can speak English? Are they richer? More cosmopolitan? Have stereotypes disappeared? Do they have any political, economic or cultural influence?
  - Students are presented with videos of Spanish people speaking in English, and English people speaking Spanish. What are your reactions to these videos? What motivates these reactions? What is their level of English like? Who are more powerful? Think of it in terms of: first language, nationality/origin, profession, gender. Who do you identify with? Why? What might be the consequences of this for your own interactions in English? Who are you giving power to? Does this empower or disempower you? How?
  - What is communication? What do you need to communicate successfully? Which elements intervene in communication? How is meaning constructed in communicative interactions? Which factors do you think intervene in successful communication?
  - The CEFR establishes that “the aim of language teaching is to make learners competent and proficient in the language concerned” (Council of Europe 2001, p. 6). Do you agree with this statement? Why? Is this the sole aim of language teaching? Is this your aim as language teachers? If not, what is your aim as language teachers?
  - Think of a situation in which you felt you were not in a powerful position, a situation in which communication was not successful. What happened? How did you feel? Which obstacles did you find? What role does language play in this situation? Which other factors do you think influenced this situation? Were you aware of these factors back then? What did you do? What would you do differently now?
- Can language be taught neutrally? Is language teaching always an ideological or political act? How? Think of examples in which you were taught English in a neutral way? What did you learn? Does this affect the way you communicate in real-life interactions? How?
  - What is learner empowerment? Is it your responsibility as English language teachers to empower students? How can this be done?
3. Workshop: a series of activities to empower students in the English language classroom were tried out by participants. The workshop is divided into three parts focusing on the identity factors that intervene in successful communication and learner empowerment. In the first part, participants’ perceptions of and attitudes to the target language (English) and its speakers are probed through an activity in which they have to draw an “English speaker” and identify English speakers from a set of pictures of people from different backgrounds. The second part is devoted to strategies that are useful in building learner confidence, with special focus on gender issues, through the critical analysis of two videos with songs about professions commonly used in the English language classroom<sup>1</sup>. Finally, the third part is geared towards developing empathy in the English language classroom. For this part, participants are asked to complete a dialogue that reproduces a typical situation in which English language learners find themselves when trying to access services in the target language country. In these dialogues there is some kind of misunderstanding or conflict that emerges from the fact that both interlocutors do not share the same degree of linguistic competence. The last intervention of the interlocutor with the lowest degree of linguistic competence is blank, and students are asked to complete it. Then, participants create a storyboard based on Brené Brown’s video on empathy<sup>2</sup>. Once they have the storyboard, we move on to a critical analysis of the story by constructing its meaning collaboratively, interpreting the symbols (for example, the meaning of the raining cloud, the dark deep hole and the heart) and relating it to students’ own experiences. Finally, they are taken to the Empathy Museum, an idea taken from the actual Empathy Museum, an itinerant shoe museum where visitors are invited walk a mile in someone else’s shoes. When visitors pick a pair of shoes, they are given an audio guide where they can listen to the life story of the shoes’ owner<sup>3</sup>. Once the visit is completed, they are given the opportunity to go back to the dialogue of the previous activity and change their answers if they find it appropriate.

1 The videos used can be found on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JBX-aupIJHr8> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ORGLQuvMWE>. However, many other videos can be used, as many professions songs used for teaching English tend to perpetuate gender stereotypes.

2 The video can be found on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ewv-gu369Jw>

3 More information about the Empathy Museum can be found on: More information about the Empathy Museum can be found on: <http://www.empathymuseum.com/>

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1. Diagnostic test

The following results were obtained in the diagnostic test:

1. When asked if they feel comfortable when they speak English in general, 71% state that they feel neutral about the situation, whereas 29% confirm that they mostly agree with the statement. However, when the statement is qualified, and the interlocutor is made to adopt an identity, their answers change. When asked if they feel comfortable when they speak English with native speakers, 43% remain neutral, 29% confirm that they mostly agree, and up to 28% of participants state that they do not quite agree with the assertion. Contrariwise, when asked if they feel comfortable when they speak English with non-native speakers, their answers vary too: 29% of them are neutral; 57% mostly agree with this statement; and 14% completely agree with it. This shows that, whereas speaking in English is not per se an intimidating activity for students, their level of comfort decreases notably if the interlocutor is a native speaker.
2. When asked what they consider their level of English to be, 86% of students are conservative in their answers, showing neutrality, while 14% consider that their level of English is good. This somewhat contradicts their answers when asked about their certified level of English: 57% of them have a B2 level; 15% have a B1; 14% a C1; and 14% do not have an official certificate. So, the majority are in the B levels, which are described as "independent user" levels (Council of Europe 2001: 32). This shows that their own perceptions about their level of English do not match the reality of their qualifications, showing that they are critical when considering their own proficiency in English.
3. Fig. 1 shows interesting data regarding students' views on who is part of the community of English speakers:

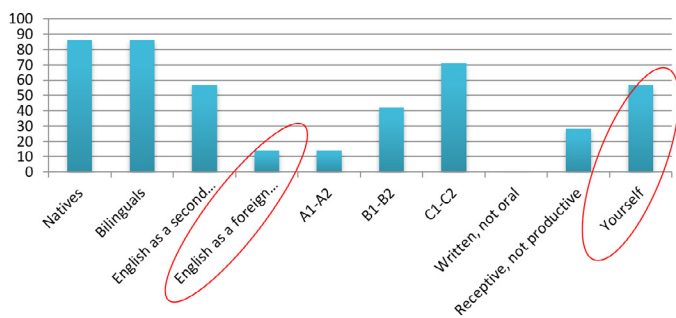


Fig. 1. Graph showing students' views on who is part of the community of English speakers.

Native speakers and bilinguals rank highly as members of the community of English speakers. Speakers of English as a second language and those in the C levels are also considered part of this community by a high percentage of the students. There is, however, an interesting mismatch when considering speakers of English as a foreign language and students themselves: here, it can be seen that over half

of the respondents consider themselves to be part of the community of English speakers. Nevertheless, only 14% of students consider speakers of English as a foreign language part of this community, unaware of the fact that they are themselves part of this group.

4. The following item in the test requires participants to read a text message and reply to it:

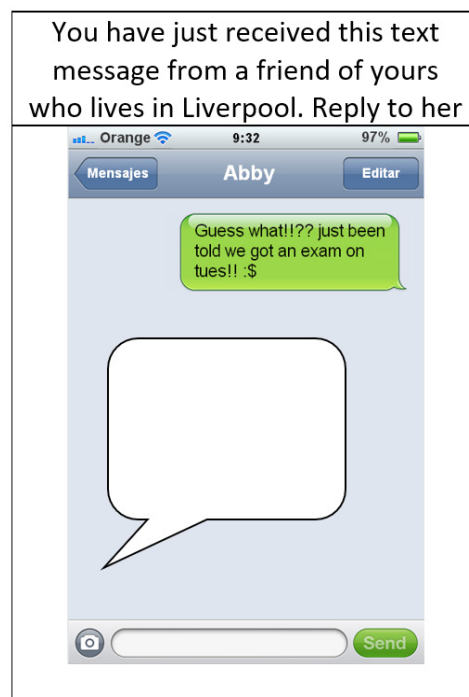


Fig. 2. Activity to check students' ability to transfer knowledge and skills from the English language classroom to real-life interaction.

In 14% of the cases, students demonstrate inability to understand the language in the text message. That is, their reading comprehension is affected by their lack of linguistic competence. 72% of participants show that they can understand the language in the text; however, they fail to understand the communicative situation. In these cases, what students lack is not linguistic competence, but rather pragmatic competence: they are unable to analyse the communicative situation and understand the text's coherence in a specific communicative context (i.e. elements such as who, to whom, where, when and/or for what). In these instances, most of students' answers demonstrate that they think they are included in the pronoun "we" that appears in the text, and fail to understand that they and the interlocutor are not in the same country: their replies include, for example, references to not having enough time to revise for the exam. Finally, only 14% of students are able to understand both the language and the communicative situation, and respond accordingly. These results evidence students' inability to transfer their knowledge of the language and their communicative competence to real-life contexts.

5. The last item in the test requires students to read a dialogue and indicate who is a more powerful speaker:

In the following conversation, who do you think is more powerful? Why?
A: Next!
B: Hello, I would like a bus ticket to Edinburgh, please.
A: One way or return?
B: One way, please.
A: It's 35 pounds.
B: OK, here you are.
A: And here's your ticket.
B: Thanks a lot.
A: That's OK.

Fig. 3. Activity to check students' capacity to identify power relations in communicative interactions.

On the one hand, 57% of students consider that Speaker B is more powerful. In most answers, power is associated with politeness: Speaker B is seen as more powerful because she is more polite, although the dialogue is rather neutral in that sense. One student associates power with knowing "exactly what he needs" and being able to "explain his needs perfectly." On the other hand, 29% of respondents consider Speaker A to be more powerful. In this case, power is mostly associated with originality: Speaker A is seen as more powerful because she is more creative in her use of the language (Speaker B only repeats after what Speaker A says), another aspect that is fairly neutral in the dialogue. Finally, 14% state that both speakers are equally powerful, but none of them associate power with the social position of the speakers in the interaction (for example, Speaker A having something that Speaker B needs, or Speaker A being an employee). Also, no reference is made to issues related to gender, race, class, education, socio-economic position, age, etc., which are deliberately obfuscated in the interaction, even if an open answer option is given so that students can discuss these issues. From this, it may be concluded that students are unaware of the influence that power relations and power asymmetries have on everyday interactions. Failing to recognise these prevents them from tackling and neutralising them.

As has been shown, the results from the diagnostic test confirm that our students have a good level of English (that is, they are competent users of the language according to the criteria established in the CEFR), but:

1. They do not feel confident when using the language, especially with native speakers.
2. Although they do consider themselves to be part of the community of English language speakers, they do not consider others who are in a similar position to be part of this community. Indeed, when in a previous experience they were shown a video of a Spanish footballer speaking English, their reactions included laughing at and ridiculing the speaker.
3. They are unable to transfer knowledge and skills from the classroom to real-life contexts.
4. They are unable to perceive power asymmetries in everyday interactions and, therefore, to tackle them.

These results are in accord with previous research in the field. For example, there are several studies on the native speaker construct and its effects on teachers and learners, their perceptions of their own proficiency in the foreign language and even their linguistic performance (Braine

1999; Cook 1999; Davies 2003; Llorca 2005; Weydt 2003; Yazan and Rudolph 2018). Furthermore, participants' initially contradictory answers regarding the community of English speakers betray the tensions between difference and sameness, exclusion and acceptance, and local and global identities that the native-non-native-speaker construct often conjures up (Dörnyei 2006; Jenkins 2007; Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000; Tschurtschenthaler 2013). At the same time, students' inability to transfer knowledge and skills from the English language classroom to real communicative contexts is indicative that the way they have been taught English is not enabling them to effect this transfer, probably because it has been mostly based on grammar instruction and/or because they have been afforded little communicative practice, as pinpointed in the literature (Larsen-Freeman 2013; Leaver and Willis 2004). Finally, although studies on learners' capacity to perceive and tackle power asymmetries in communicative interactions are scant, this is an issue to which critical attention has been recently drawn (Archakis and Tsakona 2012; Curdt-Christiansen and Weninger 2015; García Landa 2003; Hornberger and McKay 2010; Peña Dix et al. 2016; Terborg and Velázquez Vilchis 2005; Yazan and Rudolph 2018).

All this leads us to conclude that the learning of a powerful language does not necessarily entail the empowerment of the learner, an idea already present in previous studies where it is sustained that, rather than contributing to a redistribution of power, the learning of English is further accentuating inequalities among its speakers (Appleby 2010; Deneire 1993; Macedo, Dendrinis and Gounari, 2003; Phillipson 1992; Weydt 2003). Furthermore, power asymmetries are being perpetuated as these are aspects that might be transferred from teachers to learners through the hidden curriculum (Giroux and Purpel 1983). In this context, the results of the diagnostic test demonstrate that it is necessary to provide teacher trainees with strategies to empower students in the English language classroom.

#### 4.2. Discussion group

The discussion group allowed participants to identify and reflect on unchallenged beliefs and ideas about power and identity issues and how they relate to language teaching, learning and use. The results of the discussion group may be grouped in the four categories used in the theoretical framework and are summarised in the following matrix:

**Table 1**  
Summary of the results of the discussion group.

Theoretical categories	Participants' beliefs
The way language and communication are theorised	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Language is a neutral vehicle for communication.</li> <li>– Language itself does not oppress people, but it may be used to oppress people.</li> <li>– There is an objective meaning (determined by rules and conventions) and a socially-constructed meaning (determined by use).</li> <li>– Changes in reality must precede changes in language: changes in language do not effect changes in reality.</li> <li>– Participants accept the idea of language change, but not the idea that language is in a process of change.</li> <li>– Participants share a functional rather than collaborative view of communication: communication as achieving one's aims through language, rather than as co-constructing meaning.</li> </ul>

The way communicative competence is discursively built	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Communicative competence is mostly understood in purely linguistic terms</li> <li>- There is a mismatch between what is thought to be gained from learning English and what participants think they have actually gained from it</li> </ul>
The way identity factors affect successful communication and learner empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participants are generally unaware of the role that identity factors and power issues play in successful communication and in the teaching of English</li> <li>- Participants' own experiences of disempowerment (e.g. bullying, inability to access services, abuse, etc.) are helpful for understanding the ways in which language may oppress people</li> <li>- Participants tend to identify with less powerful speakers, which betrays their own disempowered position</li> </ul>
The way English is taught	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participants share a competence-based view of language teaching that is too focused on purely linguistic aspects</li> <li>- Participants agree that language can and should be taught neutrally at primary level</li> <li>- Empowerment is conceptualised as self-confidence rather than as awareness of and capacity to tackle power asymmetries</li> </ul>

In spite of their condition as teacher trainees with specific linguistic training, participants share popular beliefs about language and communication that are mostly based on structuralist, conservative and functional views of the language. Contrary to participants' common beliefs, several authors agree that language is not a neutral vehicle for communication (Fairclough 1989, 1992); that meaning is socially constructed (Janks and Ivanic 1992, p. 307); and that communication is a process of co-constructing meaning (Lévinas 2006, p. 12). For all these reasons, language teaching is not an activity that may be carried out neutrally, but rather is inherently ideological (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson 2013; Reagan and Osborn 2002; Said and Zhang 2014), something of which participants are not initially aware.

Regarding communicative competence, respondents understand it solely in linguistic terms. This is in accord with theoretical configurations of communicative competence in reference and institutional documents such as the CEFR, where communicative competence is made up of three language-specific sub-competences: linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic sub-competences. Several authors have drawn attention to the shortcomings of such a configuration, seeing it as central to the power inequalities among speakers (Terborg and Velázquez Vilchis 2005, p. 47). Others have pointed to the need for communicative competence to encompass other sub-competences, such as intercultural competence (Byram 1997; Coperías Aguilar 2007), emotional competence (Martínez Agudo 2018) and critical competence (Archakis and Tsakona, 2012; Curdt-Christiansen and Weninger, 2015; Peña Dix et al., 2016; Yazan and Rudolph, 2018). Furthermore, it may be argued that the mismatch between students' expectations of what is to be gained from learning English and what they think they have actually gained from it is the result of such a narrow conceptualisation of communicative competence. This mismatch responds to what some authors have referred to as "the myth of language learning" (García Landa 2003, p. 614).

Now, regarding the way identity factors affect successful communication and learner empowerment, results show that participants are generally unaware of the role that identity factors and power relations play in successful communication and, as a corollary, in language teaching and learning. As stated in the theoretical framework, identity factors (such as age, academic status, professional status, social class, social status, gender, religious beliefs, ethnicity/origin, sexual orientation, disability, etc.) and the way they transpire through language have a determining effect on learners' empowerment (Liben, Bigler and Krogh 2001; Martin and Ruble 2009; McCrory Calarco 2011; McKown and Strambler 2009; Miller, Lurye, Zosuls and Ruble 2009; Sinno and Killen 2009; Teig and Susskind 2008). At the same time, the discussion group demonstrated that participants' reflections upon their own experiences of disempowerment helped them become more aware of the role of identity factors and power relations in successful communication. These reflections helped them become more equipped to tackle power asymmetries in communicative interactions.

Finally, regarding the way English is taught, participants' view of language teaching as a competence-based discipline is in accord with current models of language education based on the development of communicative language competence, as described above. Participants also exhibit inability to identify the shortcomings of current communicative approaches in which the materials and examples used: a) obfuscate interlocutors' identity factors and the power relations between them; b) present interactions that do not resemble real-life communication; and c) do not allow for the development of critical aspects in the classroom (Fairclough 1989, 1992). However, the discussion group helped them develop a more comprehensive understanding of empowerment as awareness of and capacity to tackle power asymmetries through language.

All this is indicative that they need further training in aspects such as the political dimension of language teaching, learning and use, poststructuralist theory and Critical Language Awareness in order to be able to reflect on and question unchallenged beliefs on the relationship between language, power and identity, as well as specific teaching strategies to empower students in the English language classroom.

#### 4.3. Workshop

In the workshop, participants were provided with a series of strategies to empower students in the English language classroom through three sets of activities.

##### *Part 1: Perceptions and Attitudes*

In this first part, teacher trainees were made aware that certain perceptions of and attitudes towards the target language and its speakers contribute to power asymmetries in the communicative interactions in which they take part. For example, when asked to draw an "English Speaker" and to identify English speakers in a set of pictures of people from different backgrounds, participants exhibit a tendency to associate certain physical features with speaking English: for example, white, Asian and smart-looking people (people in suits) are thought to be



English speakers. On the contrary, dark-skinned and Hispanic-looking people are generally not considered English speakers. Furthermore, when asked to assign personality traits to these people, English speakers are generally associated with self-confidence, respectability, education and power. These kinds of associations are often found in the literature (Motha 2014) and have serious consequences for how students approach social interactions in English. Failing to identify themselves (or others like them) as English speakers and seeing English speakers as more confident, respectable and educated than themselves, immediately places English language learners in a disempowered position.

This activity can be easily carried out in the English language classroom at different levels. It is necessary to emphasise that activities like this cannot be considered a one-off, but rather need to be reinforced throughout the academic year in order to expand learners' deep-seated beliefs of what an English speaker is. Even if cultural diversity is a central feature of the English-speaking community, teaching programmes and actual teaching practice tend to focus on and provide a very monolithic and stereotypical view of English and its speakers (Galloway 2017; Jenkins 2007). This type of activity helps counter this aspect of the hidden curriculum.

At higher levels, an extension of this activity may include dealing with linguistic varieties, since one of the aspects that most worry learners when they speak English is phonetic accuracy. Again, phonetic models in the English language classroom tend to reproduce only a very standard variety of British or American English, neglecting other varieties including non-native varieties, which are in fact larger in number of speakers than native ones (Crystal 2006). In order to deal with this, an interactive online map which the students can colour in with the places in which they think English is spoken is a good tool to make them aware of the numbers of English speakers and how they are distributed across the world.

### *Part 2: Building Confidence*

As discussed above, gender is a central aspect to understand production patterns in language learners as well as confidence issues in the school years (Liben, Bigler and Krogh 2001; Martin and Ruble 2009; Miller, Lurye, Zosuls and Ruble 2009; Sinno and Killen 2009; Teig and Susskind 2008). The aim of this activity is to provide teacher trainees with strategies to empower their students by making them aware of how gender inequalities, and the way they transpire through language use, contribute to power asymmetries in communicative interactions. Also, confidence is a central aspect of learner empowerment, as it contributes to autonomy and risk-taking in language production. Finally, by working on models that girls can imitate and boys can respect, students develop more freedom in their choices and confidence to stand up for themselves.

On the one hand, when asked to draw pictures of different professionals, students tend to draw more men than women, which is indicative that the mental image that they have of professionals is male. At the same time, when women are drawn at all, this is mainly due to students' own experiences with women in these professions

(for example, one of them had been recently researching women astronauts; another student had had to read J.K. Rowling for a class assignment). On the other hand, when asked to analyse two videos with songs about professions commonly used in the English language classroom, participants find it easy to spot female underrepresentation. However, they fail to pinpoint women's association with caretaking jobs, which is indicative that students are unable to see how gender inequality in teaching materials may contribute to learner disempowerment and, therefore, support power asymmetries in communicative interactions. These results support previous findings regarding sexism in TEFL materials (Mills and Mustapha 2015). A discussion of these issues helps students to: a) engage critically with texts; b) question the models to which they are exposed; and c) relate classroom material to their own experiences.

### *Part 3: Developing Empathy*

In this part of the workshop, our objective is to offer teacher trainees strategies to empower their students by developing their capacity to perceive and understand other people's emotions and by making them aware of power asymmetries in communicative interactions and how language can be used to tackle them. The results show that, when first asked to complete a dialogue in which a misunderstanding or conflict emerges from the fact that both interlocutors do not share the same degree of linguistic competence, participants tend to: a) ask their interlocutor to repeat what was said (a strategy commonly taught in the English language classroom, but that proves really inefficient when the interlocutor does not know how or does not want to rephrase); or b) use imperative forms and an aggressive tone, which is indicative of their desire to exert their power over the interlocutor. Both strategies are, generally, communicatively unsuccessful. Also, they show that students are unable to either perceive or tackle power asymmetries in communicative interactions.

After creating and critically analysing the storyboard and experiencing the Empathy Museum, participants are asked to go back to their answers in the previous dialogue. Results show that students tend to want to change their previous answers to new ones that include: verbalising their understanding of the other person's feelings; a more proactive and collaborative approach to conflict resolution; and a bigger capacity to empathise with the interlocutor. Finally, the experience also shows that activities to work on empathy in the English language classroom can help students develop alternative linguistic skills to become aware of and deal with power asymmetries in communicative interactions.

As an extension of this activity, the empathometer may be introduced as a useful tool to make students aware of and analyse their empathic reactions and choices in the classroom. The empathometer (see Fig. 4), which is based on the four characteristics of empathy according to Brené Brown, was designed by us. It can be put up on the wall and students can use stickers to measure their progress in empathy development. There is also the possibility that, depending on the age of the students, the empathometer may be designed by them.

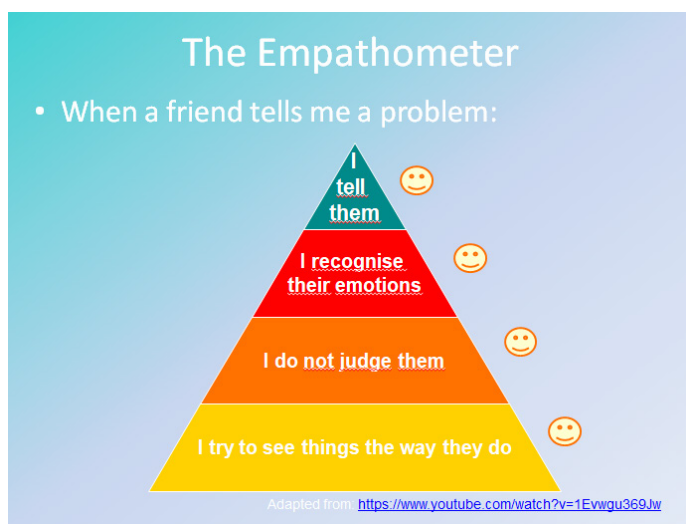


Fig. 4. The Empathometer. Designed by López Gándara and Fernández González. Based on Brown's model as explained in Morris 2015, p. 99.

The Empathy Museum may also be adapted, depending on the school's resources and the learners' age and level of English. A different version includes matching the shoes to cards in which different stories are told (for example, the story of a transsexual woman, a refugee, a visiting student, a sewer worker, etc.), or to pictures of different people's lives.

## 5. Conclusions

In this article, we have presented the results of a piece of experimental research carried out with teacher trainees in the final year of the Degree in Primary Education (English) at the University of Seville. The experience, which was carried out in three stages, had three main aims:

1. To explore the nature of the relationship between communicative competence and learner empowerment in this group of students. In order to reach this aim, a diagnostic test was administered. The results of this test demonstrate that these students do not feel confident when interacting in English with native speakers; that they do not consider learners in a similar situation to their own to be part of the community of English speakers; that they are unable to transfer knowledge and skills from the English language classroom to real-life communication; and that they are unable to perceive and tackle power asymmetries in communicative interactions.
2. To help them adopt a critical and reflective attitude when considering the relationship between language, power and identity. This aim was achieved by means of a seminar in which a series of theoretical issues were discussed and where students were encouraged to challenge their own beliefs and ideas about power and identity issues and how these relate to language teaching, learning and use. The issues discussed can be grouped into four different categories: the way language and communication are theorised; the way communicative competence is discursively built; the way identity factors affect successful communication and learner empowerment; the way English is taught.

3. To provide teacher trainees with effective strategies to empower students in the English language classroom. This aim was reached through a workshop in which teacher trainees were given the opportunity to try out a series of activities for themselves. These activities focus on three main aspects: students' perceptions of and attitudes to the target language (English) and its speakers; building learner confidence; and developing empathy in the English language classroom.

The main conclusions that can be drawn from this experience are:

1. The experience proved as useful for providing strategies to empower students in the English language classroom as it was for empowering teacher trainees themselves, as they were made to reflect on issues that had so far remained unchallenged for them.
2. Students' perceptions and attitudes are generally firmly established, and so one single workshop is not enough to really destabilise these powerful structures. Work on these requires continuation throughout a period of time.
3. More work on critical discourse analysis is needed (especially in the fields of manipulation and meaning construction), as students' critical and analytical skills are not sufficiently developed.
4. The inclusion of experiences along the lines of the one described here should be part of the compulsory training programme of the Degree in Primary Education (English) in Andalusia, as no syllabus contemplates the political dimension of language teaching.

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