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English language learning and learner empowerment: a mixed-method study of pre-service English teachers' narratives on language, power and identity

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Abstract

It is widely acknowledged that the expansion of English has had a democratising effect: knowledge is now accessible to a larger number of people worldwide. However, it is also contended that the uncritical and unreflective teaching of English is contributing to reproducing power structures, accentuating inequalities among speakers. This article presents the results of a study carried out with 86 final-year students in the Degree of Primary Education (English) at the University of Seville. Working within the framework of critical research, and combining both quantitative and qualitative methods, this study analyses learners' perceptions on communicative competence, on the factors that bear upon successful communication, and their capacity to identify and understand power relations in communicative interactions. Results show that communicative competence does not necessarily entail learner empowerment; learners are too worried about linguistic aspects and accuracy when they speak English; they aspire to a model—the native speaker—that they can never reach; and they are not aware of power inequalities, their origin and how they transpire in communicative situations. This analysis points to the need to include a critical component in English language teaching to equip learners to identify and tackle power asymmetries in communicative interactions.

Keywords: TEFL; learner empowerment; mixed-method research; pre-service teacher education.

1. Introduction

As part of a TEFL module that I teach in the final year of the Degree in Primary Education (English) at the University of Seville, one of the issues raised is that of teacher identity, and how my students (mostly women who have studied English for most of their lives) see and construct themselves as teachers of English. When considering how they would like to be addressed, hardly anyone is ever aware of the asymmetries in forms of address (Mr vs. Miss/Mrs; Sir vs. Miss) or of egalitarian alternatives (Ms). As a teacher trainer, I contemplate with a mixture of dismay and astonishment that I am the first person to make them reflect on this as a linguistic issue that both shapes and is shaped by social inequality, and that affects the process by which they build their own identities as English speakers, as women and as teachers. This is one of the many examples that reveal that the way they have been taught English (in an uncritical and unreflective way), and presumably the way they will teach it too, does not contribute to distributing power more equally but to reproducing and perpetuating power structures.

It is widely acknowledged that the expansion of English across the world has had a democratising effect: knowledge—in the form of cultural products, intercultural exchanges, scientific discoveries and technological advancements—is now accessible to a larger number of people worldwide. However, the sort of uncritical and unreflective teaching practices that I mention above are contributing to reproducing power structures: instead of making speakers more culturally and socially sensitive, more understanding of economic and political processes and more empathic towards others, all of which are necessary for a truly democratic society, English has become a tool for exercising power that further accentuates inequalities among its speakers (Phillipson, 1992; Deneire, 1993; Weydt, 2003; Macedo, Dendrinos and Gounari, 2005; Appleby, 2010).

This article presents the results of a study carried out with 86 final-year students in the Degree of Primary Education (English) at the University of Seville. The aim of the study is to analyse:

1. Learners' motivations for and gains from learning English, competences they think are needed to communicate successfully and what they worry about when they speak English.
2. Their reactions to language use, their perceptions on power, and sources of identification and rapport with other speakers.
3. Their beliefs on what an English speaker is and their perceptions on the factors that bear upon their own experiences of disempowerment.
4. Their capacity to identify and understand power relations in communicative interactions.

2. Theoretical framework

Communicative competence is a central concept in any study on language teaching and learning as it is at the basis of current competence-based models for language education,

theories on language teaching and learning, as well as TEFL methodologies. According to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)* (Council of Europe, 2001), communicative competence is composed of three main subcompetences, namely: linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic subcompetences. I will not delve further into these, as they are clearly delineated in the *CEFR*. For the purposes of this study, I consider communicative competence as being made up of six main components, including intercultural, emotional and critical subcompetences. I will focus on these as they are not so widely considered in the literature on communicative competence.

2.1. Intercultural competence

Intercultural competence is not included in early configurations of communicative competence. Van Ek (1986) drew attention to sociocultural competence as central to communicative competence and, since then, it is generally acknowledged that culture and language are very much interrelated (Guijarro-Ojeda and Ruiz-Cecilia, 2011). However, the term “intercultural competence” would only gain momentum years later. In the *CEFR*, intercultural competence is presented as a “non-language-specific competence” (Council of Europe, 2001: 148) that encompasses:

1. Intercultural awareness: knowledge, awareness and understanding of “the world of origin” and “the world of the target community,” including “regional and social diversity in both” (Council of Europe, 2001: 103).
2. Intercultural skills: capacity to bring “the culture of origin” and “the foreign culture” into contact, to act as cultural mediators, to deal with “intercultural misunderstanding and conflict” and to overcome cultural stereotypes (Council of Europe, 2001: 104-105).

In spite of this, failure to understand intercultural competence as an intrinsically language-related competence in the context of language education, as opposed to Byram (1997) and Coperías Aguilar (2007), who use the term “intercultural communicative competence” to refer to speakers’ capacity to successfully establish solidary relationships between cultures, has had a series of consequences in classroom practice:

1. “Excessive focus on language form with detriment to intercultural communication” (Coperías Aguilar, 2007: 72).
2. Anecdotal, reductionist and/or clichéd inclusion of cultural contents in the classroom: two projects analysed by Coperías Aguilar show that cultural contents like traditions, customs, history or geography are privileged over aspects truly related to intercultural competence, such as “developing attitudes of openness and tolerance towards other peoples and cultures, promoting the ability to handle intercultural contact situations, promoting reflection on cultural differences or promoting increased understanding of the students’ own culture” (2007: 68). Similar conclusions are found in Sercu et al. (2005: 120, 159).

3. Ideological and prescriptive uses of cultural content in the classroom through processes of selection and generalisation (Bouchard, 2017: 72), especially due to an excessive Anglo-American focus of classroom materials (Coperías Aguilar, 2007: 72).
4. Lack of systematic teacher training in intercultural competence, which results in teachers' incapacity to develop strategies to train their students' intercultural competence (Aleksandrowicz-Pędich et al., 2003: 10; Sercu et al., 2005: 169).
5. Misguided understanding that learners' communicative competence can be developed independently from their intercultural competence, or that the latter may be developed later, which shows lack of awareness of the difficulties in deconstructing deep-set patterns, thoughts and beliefs, etc. (Sercu et al., 2005: 128).

2.2. Emotional competence

Affective factors are included in some early configurations of communicative competence. For example, van Ek (1986) mentions values and emotions such as “self-confidence, self-reliance, analytical powers, stable value-systems, empathy [and] acceptance of others” (1986: 61) as part of sociocultural competence. Since then, the “affective turn” in language education (Pekrun and Linnenbrink-García, 2014; Uitto et al., 2015; Martínez Agudo, 2018: 2) has produced a considerable amount of literature on the affective factors that influence teaching and learning processes (Arnold, 1999; Council of Europe, 2001: 161; Rubio Alcalá, 2004). However, the idea that the competent speaker is also emotionally competent is, at best, only implicit in these. More recently, studies have focused on the connections between emotional intelligence and academic achievement in TEFL (Jahandar et al., 2012; Abdolrezapour, 2013; Fani, 2015; Vahedi and Fatemi, 2016).

Emotions are defined as “subjective and conscious feelings that usually evoke certain spontaneous and involuntary responses or reactions in individuals to a particular event” (Ross, 2015; Martínez Agudo, 2018: 2). Thus, because these particular events that make us react in emotional ways are, for the most part, linguistic in nature (they occur in communicative situations), then the development of awareness and skills to deal with these through language is called for. Emotions are central to communicative processes; therefore, dealing effectively with them leads to successful communication, which is the main goal of language learning.

Although a comprehensive definition of emotional competence in the realm of language education is yet to be provided, a working definition could include the following:

1. Emotional awareness: knowledge, awareness and understanding of emotions in oneself and others.
2. Emotional skills: ability to channel those emotions through linguistic means in the TL; to relate and respond to others' emotions; to use a variety of strategies for interpersonal

contact that take into account one's own emotions and those of others; to anticipate conflicts in which emotional factors intervene and deal effectively with them through language; to show willingness to communicate and to engage actively and enthusiastically in conversation; to be able to build positive relationships based on reassurance, bonding, empathy and respect; to be assertive, able to respond to criticism, to recognise one's own mistakes and express joy at the success of others (based on Goleman, 1996; Dewaele, 2010; Council of Europe, 2001; Nieto Moreno de Diezmas, 2012; Vahedi and Fatemi, 2016; Martínez Agudo, 2018).

There are several factors contributing to emotional competence not being considered as part of the subject matter of TEFL:

1. Scientific attention has only been drawn to it recently.
2. Emotional competence is seen, more often than not, as a cross-curricular competence rather than as a language-related one (Nieto Moreno de Diezmas, 2012: 67).
3. It is still understood that one can communicate competently and successfully in a language without being emotionally competent in it: “Communicating emotions in an LX, i.e. with limited communicative competence, is very hard” (Dewaele, 2010: 6).
4. Emotions have been traditionally studied as “internal to individuals, as psychological attributes of mind” (Martínez Agudo, 2018: 4) and only recently have researchers (Benesch, 2016, 2017) become interested in “what emotions do socially, how emotions are culturally and discursively constructed as they are intimately associated with social context” (Martínez Agudo, 2018: 4).

2.3. Critical competence

Critical competence only appears tangentially in some early configurations of communicative competence. For example, van Ek's sociocultural competence includes “the learner's attitudes, opinions, value-systems and emotions” leading towards a general development of “human potential” (1986: 52, 51) through language learning. However, it falls short of incorporating a fully critical perspective: it encourages learners to adopt positive attitudes towards a reality that is already there, rather than encouraging them to use language to explore why and how such a reality came to be, who benefits from it and how language can be used to change it. It makes no reference to the relationship between power and language in real communication, how communicative interaction is affected by power struggles, or how learners may use language to become aware of and tackle these.

Also, Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei and Thurrell (1995) describe some social contextual variables within “sociocultural competence” that need to be identified and tackled by competent speakers (1995: 23-24). Among these, they contemplate participants' “age, gender, office and status, so-

cial distance, relations (power and affective)” (1995: 24). This model is the first one to incorporate explicitly the term “power.” In spite of this, critical competence has rarely been included in theoretical configurations of communicative competence, and it is completely absent from the *CEFR*. This is mainly because critical theories of language education tend to question the very power structures on which competence-based models for language teaching stand.

Indeed, competence-based models pose one main problem in that they convey a view of language as a static and monolithic entity, a system of clearly delineated norms and uses that learners need to master. In this view, language is presented as something that is objectively and incontestably “out there,” waiting to be known. When mastery of the language is not achieved, the learner is accountable for it, which further deepens the gap between competent and non-competent speakers. This does not seem the correct theoretical (and ideological) stance from which language teaching and learning should be approached, as learners who fail to become competent speakers in these terms are perpetuated in their disempowered position.

Furthermore, in these models, communicative competence is considered, presented and used as a purportedly neutral parameter that allows us to objectively know and predict communicative success (Terborg and García Landa, 2006: 163). As a consequence, several authors have already pointed to the deficiencies of competence as a parameter to establish how successful a communicative interaction may be. For example, Terborg and Velázquez Vilchis (2005) argue that “when communicative success is made entirely dependent upon speakers’ competence, then the power relations between interlocutors are emphasised” (2005: 47) and that “competence, which represents an ideology, gives rise to interests that displace attention from content to form. In this way, the verisimilitude of an utterance may be questioned because its form does not respond to the ideological criteria of competence” (2005: 47). This reveals that competence is not a neutral term, but rather an ideological construct that contributes to the maintenance of power by those who are already competent speakers of the language (i.e. those who do not question or challenge those rules and uses).

For the purposes of this study, I draw on Critical Language Awareness (Fairclough, 1989, 1992) and Critical Applied Linguistics (Pennycook, 1990, 2001) to develop a working definition of critical competence that tries to negotiate the tensions between the structuralist conception of communicative competence on which current competence-based models are based and a poststructuralist and critical approach to language teaching, learning and use. For Fairclough (1989), language teaching and learning should “help increase consciousness of how language contributes to the domination of some people by others, because consciousness is the first step towards emancipation” (1989: 1). Indeed, as Fairclough states, developing critical awareness in language learning, that is, using language to become aware of and eventually subvert the power structures that underlie communicative interactions, has become a “prerequisite for effective democratic citizenship” (1989: 3). In this scenario,

[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 (1989: 6).

More recently, several studies already focus on the need to incorporate a critical component in language education (Archakis and Tsakona, 2012; Curdt-Christiansen and Weninger, 2015; Peña Dix, Bruskewitz and Truscott de Mejía, 2016; Yazan and Rudolph, 2018). Based on these ideas, a working definition of critical competence could include the following:

1. Critical awareness: knowledge, awareness and understanding of power relations between individuals, languages and cultures as they transpire through language use; of the power asymmetries that characterise communicative interactions on account of factors such as age, academic/professional status, social class, gender, religious beliefs, ethnicity/origin, sexual orientation (Barozzi and Guijarro-Ojeda, 2014), disability, etc.; and of how linguistic issues shape and are shaped by social inequalities.
2. Critical skills: ability to question the givens of social realities and practices (how such realities and practices came to be, who benefits from them and how language can be used to question, resist and transform them) and the givens of language (language models, conventions and norms learners are exposed to and told to comply with); to question the reasons underlying linguistic choices, how these became institutionalised and the ideologies that they sustain; to make responsible choices regarding the use or transgression of those models, conventions and norms; to use language to challenge, resist, negotiate and transform models, conventions and norms that contribute to perpetuating inequality; to be able to tackle power asymmetries in communicative interactions and to develop agency to neutralise these by reclaiming, giving and redistributing power; to use language to defend their position and that of other oppressed subjects; to participate as active members of the TL community aware of their responsibilities as English speakers in the world.

3. Methodology

This study belongs in the tradition of the critical school. According to Troudi (2015), this research approach is based “on a general view of society and social realities as shaped by the hegemony of powerful economic and political structures, social and educational institutions, and discursive practices” and aims to be “emancipatory, seeking action and change in order to alleviate pain in society and redress forms of alienation, discrimination, injustice, exploitation, and marginalisation” (2015: 90). In order to do so, I carry out a mixed-method study that combines both quantitative and qualitative methods.

The sample is composed of 86 final-year students in the BA Primary Education (English) at the University of Seville (Spain), of whom 88.4% are 25 or younger, 84.9% are women, 86.1%

have studied English for over ten years and 73.2% are in the B levels of proficiency in English (considered to be the “independent user” levels according to the *CEFR*).

Data collection was carried out using four different questionnaires:

1. One questionnaire with closed-ended questions (dichotomous, multiple choice and scaled questions) on learners’ motivations for and gains from learning English, the competences needed to communicate and what learners worry about when they speak English.
2. One questionnaire based on two videos with both closed-ended and open-ended questions on learners’ reactions to language use, their perceptions on power, and sources of identification/rapport with other speakers.
3. One questionnaire with both closed-ended and open-ended questions on learners’ beliefs on what an English speaker is and their perceptions on the factors that bear upon their own experiences of disempowerment.
4. One questionnaire based on two texts with both closed-ended and open-ended questions to gauge their capacity to identify and understand power relations in communicative interactions.

The analysis of quantitative data was carried out using a deductive approach based on the categories established in the theoretical framework: linguistic, sociolinguistic, pragmatic, intercultural, emotional and critical competence. The analysis of qualitative data was carried out using a mixed approach, both deductive and inductive in nature, combining those categories with others created *ad hoc* from learners’ own narratives.

4. Results and discussion

The results and discussion are presented in different blocks that correspond to the different aims of the study.

4.1. Learners’ motivations for and gains from learning English, competences they think are needed to communicate successfully and what they worry about when they speak English

A clear correlation has been found between learners’ motivations and what they think people gain from learning English. Both educational and professional status score high: between 79.07% and 97.67% of students are motivated by these or think that people gain these from learning English. To a lesser degree, the capacity to influence people and access information and cultural products are motivations or gains for 59.3% to 75.58% of students. Finally, only 2.32% consider open-mindedness or tolerance a motivation or a gain. This is already indica-

tive that English is seen as a tool to acquire social and political power, but not really a tool to become more socially sensitive or more understanding and empathic towards others. On top of this, the figures are significantly lower when considering learners' perceptions of own gains, which shows an important gap between learners' motivations and expectations on the one hand, and their actual experience of learning English on the other. Except for educational and professional status (59.3% and 62.8%), the variables measured are not considered actual gains by well over 50% of the participants. At the same time, only 1.16% of them consider they are now more open-minded or tolerant and, interestingly enough, 11.63% consider that they have gained nothing from learning English, a variable that scored 0 in the previous questions.

These data reflect that students partake of common discourses that present English language learning as an empowering tool. This is what has been called “the myth of language learning” (García Landa, 2003: 614): the widespread idea, fostered by both popular and institutional discourse, that English language learning contributes to the reproduction and redistribution of socioeconomic, political and cultural power (Phillipson, 1992: 48). However, and in spite of their partaking of this discourse, the data also show that they are not themselves empowered, as learners' perceptions of own gains score significantly lower than their motivations for and expectations from learning English.

Regarding participants' perceptions on the competences needed to communicate successfully and their worries when they speak English, there is also a correlation between both variables. There is a clear preoccupation with linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects, considered a source of concern by 59.3%, 61.63% and 59.3% of participants, as opposed to intercultural, emotional and critical aspects, seen as a source of worry by 37.21%, 32.56% and 22.09% of participants, respectively. In the questionnaire, items were disaggregated, which may explain why purely linguistic aspects do not score significantly higher: the biggest sources of concern are “pronunciation,” “politeness” and “making sense.” At the same time, intercultural and emotional aspects are not a source of concern probably because they are seen from a positive perspective, rather than as a potential source of conflict in communicative interactions. Finally, aspects related to power do not worry learners, mostly because of the way learners understand power and how it relates to language, as will be seen.

4.2. Learners' reactions to language use, their perceptions on power, and sources of identification/rapport with other speakers

For the administration of this questionnaire, two videos were played: video 1 is an interview with a Spanish MotoGP rider speaking English; video 2 is an interview with a US actor speaking Spanish. Both speakers communicate successfully in the interviews, but the former is less accurate while the latter is less fluent. The first video is considered negatively by more respondents (adjectives used to describe video 1 include “funny” and “embarrassing”), while the second video is considered positively (“interesting” and “surprising”) by more respondents.

When the answers are qualified, we find that 54.65% of respondents acknowledge having laughed during the first video, whereas 63.95% state they did not laugh during the second one. This shows learners' lower tolerance of phonetic inaccuracy, especially in the case of Spanish people speaking in English.

Learners' arguments to justify their answers may be analysed using the following cross matrix (Figure 1):

FIGURE 1

Cross matrix showing the ad hoc categories created for the analysis and examples of respondents' narratives for each video (italicised answers for respondents' actual phrasing; non-italicised for translation by the author). Source: author

Categories	Examples of respondents' narratives for Video 1	Examples of respondents' narratives for Video 2
Accuracy	<i>The first speaker has a bad pronunciation of English. Besides, he doesn't use grammar correctly.</i>	The second speaker made use of specific vocabulary related to what she was talking about and her pronunciation was correct.
Fluency/communication	Even though his pronunciation is not the best one, he can communicate perfectly.	<i>I found video 2 surprising as the actress spoke very good and fluent Spanish and was also able to understand the questions, she was able to communicate a message even though she made some mistakes.</i>
Reflection or reminder of learners' own poor level of English	It made me think of the level of English that I should have and that I probably don't have. And whether I speak English like the person in the video when I talk to native speakers.	I laughed with the second video because I realised how badly we speak English and how native speakers hear us.
Mistakes as a source of ridicule	I think that the first one was funnier because his pronunciation is so bad and he has poor vocabulary.	The second speaker also makes some mistakes that can be funny.

As the matrix shows, the videos help bring to the surface learners' own disempowered position. Three out of the four categories created for the analysis (accuracy, reflection or reminder of learners' own poor level, and mistakes as a source of ridicule) indicate that both videos have a negative effect on the students. Accuracy, especially phonetic accuracy, is seen as the main weakness of Speaker 1, and the main strength of Speaker 2. Also, both videos act for students as a reflection or reminder of their own poor level of English, especially when picturing themselves in conversation with native speakers. Finally, when mistakes are seen

as a source of ridicule, learners' incapacity to empathise with the speakers is disempowering too: the implication is that they feel they might also be laughed at when they speak English. This means that learners are disempowered even before they engage in communicative interactions. Only when they focus on fluency or communication do they exhibit positive attitudes to language use.

These results indicate that students' excessive focus on purely linguistic aspects (above all, phonetic accuracy) is at the root of their disempowerment. Furthermore, the fear of making mistakes becomes also a fear of being ridiculed and laughed at, especially by native speakers. The native speaker construct as a disempowering factor for both learners and teachers is the focus of some of the literature in the field (Braine, 1999; Cook, 1999; Davies, 2003; Llurda, 2005; Yazan and Rudolph, 2018). Finally, as opposed to the potential for ridicule that Speaker 1 affords respondents, the case of Speaker 2 is seen as noteworthy and remarkable. Issues of identity and origin are also raised here: the fact that she is a US person who can speak Spanish is seen as much more praiseworthy than that of a Spanish person speaking English: "[...] the most remarkable case is Speaker 2 (an English person speaking Spanish);" "The second video was surprising to me because I talked to a lot of english speakers and they struggled with our pronunciation because it is very different from english. But I found very beautiful how her accent was and the way she spoke was calm and natural;" and "She was speaking in spanish even when it isn't her first language." As respondents' narratives show, issues related to identity and origin may also be at the basis of their disempowered position.

When asked to assess the speakers' level in the languages used in the videos, 84.88% of respondents consider that the level of Speaker 2 is high or very high, whereas only 30.23% of respondents consider that the level of Speaker 1 is high or very high, in spite of the fact that they both communicate successfully. Also, 46.51% of respondents consider Speaker 2 to be more powerful, and 66.28% of them associate the source of her power with purely linguistic aspects (linguistic competence, especially phonetic accuracy). However, 54.65% of respondents identify with Speaker 1, whereas only 17.44% identify with Speaker 2. These answers are qualified by personal accounts that reveal how learners feel and help build their narrative of disempowerment: "I think that all of us feel his pronunciation a bit stupid, but at the same time all of us have it too;" "Because when I speak English I wonder what English people think about my accent;" and "When I speak English, I think of so many things (pronunciation, grammar, agreement, verb tenses, conditionals, linking words...) that I get all muddled up and I think that I resemble Speaker 1 much more than Speaker 2 when I speak English."

Further issues related to identity and origin also emerge here, with multiple references to the "native speaker" construct and the speakers' "native language": learners identify with the Spanish speaker on account of his origin and language (but they are also crueller with and less tolerant of his communicative performance). Also, they assign more power to the "native" English speaker, emphasising it as a merit that she can speak another language, and

disregarding this merit in the Spanish speaker (and, by extension, themselves). This is indicative of the fact that, for them, origin is a factor that determines social status: on account of her origin and language, the second speaker is immediately assigned more social status and, hence, more power. This is indicative that language learning is colonising, rather than emancipating, learners. Finally, their answers also show that they consider Speaker 2 to be part of the community of Spanish speakers, but they do not see Speaker 1 as a member of the community of English speakers. The following section explores this issue further.

4.3. Learners' beliefs on what an English speaker is and their perceptions on the factors that bear upon their own experiences of disempowerment

Respondents' answers show that native speakers are considered central to the community of English speakers (73.3% of respondents consider them to be part of it), followed by bilinguals (66.3%) and speakers of English as a second language (57%). Within speakers of English as a foreign language, the C and B levels score significantly higher (45.3% and 41.9% respectively). However, only 23.3% of respondents consider themselves part of this community, in spite of the fact that, as was shown before, most of them are in the B and C levels (77.9%).

The overbearing presence of the “native speaker” construct is felt further in their own experiences of disempowerment. When asked whether they feel comfortable when they speak English, up to 69.8% of them disagree or completely disagree that they feel comfortable speaking with native speakers, whereas 62.8% of them agree or completely agree that they feel comfortable when they speak with non-native speakers. The data support the idea that the redistribution of power that is presented as one of the natural outcomes of English language learning is far from achieved. Rather, the teaching of English seems to be contributing to the centralisation of power, that is, the accumulation of power in specific communities or groups of speakers, namely native speakers or speakers with native-like proficiency and, therefore, to the intensification of power asymmetries and inequalities among speakers of English in the world (Weydt, 2003; Macedo, Dendrinis and Gounari, 2005: 52, 111). Discursive creations used in both theory and practice are at the root of this, as this native speaker construct is still used as a point of reference for language teaching and learning: it is a model that learners are made to aspire to, but which, contradictorily, they can never reach. This also makes them approach communicative interactions from a disempowered position.

This idea is further explored in learners' accounts of their own experiences of disempowerment. The following ad hoc categories were used to analyse the contexts in which learners feel disempowered: in interaction with native speakers, in academic settings, accessing services, at work, asking for / giving directions, engaging in bureaucratic procedures, driving. Students' narratives indicate that the presence of this “native speaker” construct is quite overbearing in their experiences of disempowerment. One of the respondents says that “you make mistakes [in front of native speakers] that you wouldn't normally make.” Indeed, in

31.39% of the narratives there are explicit references to the “native speaker” in a variety of contexts: in the target language country, in the learners’ home country, in academic settings, at work, and in language exchanges.

Regarding the factors that they think influenced this situation of disempowerment, linguistic factors still account for the majority of experiences of disempowerment (81.39% of learners think that this was a factor influencing the situation). This is very much in accord with the results obtained in the other questionnaires, which show that students mostly worry about linguistic aspects when they speak English, focus on them as a source of ridicule and associate these aspects with power or lack of it. However, when reflecting on their own personal experiences of disempowerment, they start to become aware of some of the factors that contribute to establishing power relations between the interlocutors: for example, age and academic and professional status, considered as important factors affecting this situation by 56.98%, 41.86% and 40.7% of respondents respectively. To a lesser degree, social class/status and gender are also pinpointed by some students (16.28% and 15.12% respectively). In spite of this, when having a closer look at their narratives, it becomes clear that there are many other factors that influence the situations they describe. That is, there are discrepancies between the factors that learners consciously pinpoint and those that transpire through their narratives. Figure 2 summarises those discrepancies, showing that not only are learners disempowered even before the communicative interaction begins (especially with native speakers), but also that they are not aware of the factors that play a role in establishing power relations in communicative interactions. They mostly blame linguistic factors for their disempowerment, not being aware of the many other factors that have a bearing on it. It is true that the development of linguistic competence might help them become more empowered; however, it does not equip them to analyse critically and address the issues that are really at stake in the interaction. Because in current theories and methodologies for teaching English the focus is placed on communicative competence (Fairclough, 1992: 39-41; Council of Europe, 2001; Pérez Cañado, 2013), learners are not taught how to analyse critically and reflect on all the factors that contribute to their disempowerment in real communicative interactions. Critical competence is therefore needed so that they can identify and tackle those power asymmetries. The following questionnaire explores this issue further.

4.4. Learners’ capacity to identify and understand power relations in communicative interactions

For the final questionnaire, students were given a text (Figure 3) that replicates those that can be found in textbooks: a dialogue between a ticket seller and a customer in which linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic traits are neutralised, while all identity factors are deliberately left out. Students were asked whom they considered to be a more powerful speaker, and to elaborate on their answers.

FIGURE 2

Matrix showing factors identified by respondents vs. factors inferred from narratives. Source: author

Context	Factors identified by learners	Other factors inferred from narratives	Narrative
In interaction with native speakers: In TL country In home country In academic setting At work In language exchange	Language Age	Intercultural factors Emotional factors Social class/status Gender Ethnicity/origin	He tried to say that I must to pay both bottles, but he actually know that my sister had already paid for one. He knows that we are not english speakers". "I tried to explain that my sister had paid before but he acted as if he did not understand (I know he did). He [a 35-year-old man] asked me (a 15-year-old girl) to go with him to work in some coastal town markets during the summer. She didn't understand why us Spaniards found it so difficult to pronounce properly in English, since it was so easy. But then she could hardly speak any Spanish.
Academic setting	Language Age Academic status Professional status Religious beliefs	Emotional factors	I answered correctly but, since it was in English, I get very insecure that I'm going to do it badly and I get nervous. She asked me a very personal question.
Accessing services (fast food places, bank, doctor's, hotel...)	Language Age Academic status Professional status	Intercultural factors Emotional factors Social class/status Gender Ethnicity/origin	She asked me several times and quite aggressively what I wanted, and when she had repeated that five times, she said 'Aaahhhh! Barbecue sauce!', with an intonation that was more British than mine. You don't have any money. She said she wouldn't speak English to me because we were in Paris.
At work	Age Professional status Gender	Intercultural factors Emotional factors Social class/status Ethnicity/origin	He said he didn't like people from other countries. I didn't have a contract. He said he couldn't pay me.

FIGURE 3

Text reproducing the kind of communicative interactions that generally appear in teaching materials. Source: author

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.

When asked about their perceptions on power and language use, respondents' answers are rather inconclusive: 22.1% of them think that the ticket seller is more powerful; 33.7% consider that the customer is more powerful; 16.3% think that neither of them is powerful; and 27.9% think that both of them are powerful. It is when they qualify their answers that their ideas on language, power and identity are made explicit. Figure 4 shows a classification of respondents' answers:

FIGURE 4

Cross matrix showing respondents' answers regarding power and language use.

Source: author

	Ticket seller	Customer	Neither of them	Both of them
Linguistic aspects	Conciseness	More language Complex vocab. Elaborate language	Short conversation	-
Sociolinguistic aspects	Directness Rudeness	Politeness	Neither is rude Both are kind/polite Same register	Both are polite Both use a formal register
Pragmatic aspects	Leads the conversation Persuasion	Fluency Originality	Normal conversation No persuasion	Both are important for the interaction
Intercultural aspects	-	-	-	-
Emotional aspects	-	Friendliness	Both are relaxed	-
Aspects related to power	Job Role	Role as customer	They are equal	Worker and customer Both need something from each other Need more info.

The matrix shows that respondents who consider only one or neither of the speakers powerful (i.e. learners who are less aware of power relations) tend to focus on linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects. At the same time, learners who consider that both interlocutors have power (i.e. learners who are more aware of power relations) pay more attention to identity factors such as the social and/or professional role of each speaker, the social constraints of the interaction (both interlocutors needing something from each other) and even one student claims to need more information to be able to answer.

Whereas it is true that linguistic, sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects have some bearing in power building, these are fairly neutralised in the conversation. At the same time, the identity factors that contribute to the establishment of power relations are deliberately left out: we do

not know, for example, about the age, academic, professional or social status, gender, religion, origin, etc., of the interlocutors. This is, for the most part, what happens in teaching materials (Archakis and Tsakona, 2012; Curdt-Christiansen and Weninger, 2015), in which we encounter:

1. Unreal and oddly equitable interactions in which speakers not only have the same command of English, but they also comply to the same degree with Grice's cooperative principle (the maxims of quantity, quality, relevance and manner). This does not prepare students to face interactions in real communicative contexts.
2. Unreal speakers who are presented as ahistorical and apolitical entities. By obfuscating differences in age, academic, professional or social status, gender, religion, origin, etc. (generally neutralised under the label of the "British/American/Western middle class speaker," with whom learners are made to identify), these representations contribute to reproducing social, historical, economic and political inequalities, and disempower learners who are therefore unable to reflect and act on these.

5. Conclusions

From this study, the following conclusions may be drawn:

1. Communicative competence does not necessarily entail learner empowerment.
2. Learners are too worried about linguistic aspects and accuracy when they speak English.
3. They aspire to, and are intimidated by, a model that they can never reach: the native speaker.
4. They are not aware of power inequalities, their origin and how they affect and transpire in communicative situations.

In this scenario, the following changes are called for:

1. Critical competence ought to be considered an integral part of communicative competence and needs to enter the English language classroom so learners may become empowered speakers of English.
2. The native speaker construct must stop being a point of reference in language teaching and learning, both in theory and in practice.
3. Materials used in the English language classroom need to reflect real uses of language in real communicative interactions in which power relations and their origin are not obfuscated.

Only in so doing may the redistribution of power that is presented as the natural outcome of English language learning become a more realistic prospect.

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