MATTER, LITERACY, AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Matter, literacy, and English language teaching in an underprivileged school in Spain

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Abstract

This article analyzes the processes and findings of a collaborative action research (CAR) project that aimed to analyze the potential of materiality to radically transform the way English was taught and learnt in an underprivileged public school in Spain. The CAR drew on *new materialisms* and *new literacy studies* to explore the relationship between matter and English language teaching from socio-economic, socio-cultural, and technological perspectives. The main pedagogical strategy consisted of widening the quantity and quality of the material resources in the English classroom, precisely to draw a material link between the English classroom and the students' homes, communities, and the informal literacies they enacted in them. Through two cycles of inquiry, the CAR team put into practice two multimodal and artifactual workshops with a group of nine children coming from underprivileged, minority backgrounds. A variety of qualitative strategies were used (including classroom recordings, student interviews, and photographs) to confirm that the insights from *new materialisms* and *new literacy studies* had generated opportunities for meaningful English learning within a culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Keywords: literacy, materiality, English language teaching, multimodality, artifactual literacy

Introduction

Culture and identity are key terms for analyzing (dis)continuities between schools and students' families and communities, as well as the impact that these variables may have on learning (Bronkhourst & Akkerman, 2016). While educational literature has approached both culture and identity from multiple perspectives (see Hviid & Martsin, 2019), their heuristic and pedagogical potential experienced a significant boost as *new literacy studies* (NLS) (Gee, 2000; Pahl & Rowsell, 2012; Street, 2012) gradually revealed that neither culture nor identity could be properly understood as long as they remained disconnected from the specific *literacies* (in the plural) through which children acquired and reconstructed their own cultures and identities. To a large extent, school and family (dis)continuities manifested themselves as (dis)continuities in the literacies used in each of these contexts. Furthermore, cultural realities and identity investments clearly permeated children's paths across literacy development (Cummins, Hu, Markus & Montero, 2015; Nieto, 2015). On the tracks of these breakthroughs, research on the multimodal and material aspects of literacy further contributed to the empirical concretion of culture and identity, to the understanding of their interrelated nature, and finally to how they could be organized and utilized in actual educational settings (Thiel, 2015; Wohlwend, 2013).

Through theoretical and empirical sections, this article plans to build and expand on the argument that careful consideration of the material dimension of literacy is necessary for designing curricula that harness and make the most of students' cultures and identities. First, it presents NLS in connection with *new materialisms* (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010; Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012) in the hope that this dialog will expand the pedagogical implications and possibilities of NLS, especially in problematic educational contexts such

as the one discussed in this case. Second, through the empirical phases of the research, the article examines the application of these two paradigms to bridge the gap that separated the English language from the cultures and identities of students who attended a public school in Nazaret, one of the most impoverished neighborhoods in the city of València (Spain).

A key idea in new materialisms is that "human living, thinking, and acting are always material, just as the material is also semiotic," as Brinkmann (2017, p. 116) claimed. A manifestation of this general tenet, new materialisms' main contribution to pedagogy has stemmed from its critique of the privileged role of language and discourse as the essential media of education. From the angle of new materialisms, the availability and arrangements of material and spatial resources are not external to, or independent of, the linguistic and non-linguistic behaviors comprised in learning (Ashton, Wood Mah, Rivers, 2019). Accordingly, new materialists have called for curricula that combine signs and tools, texts and bodies, and subjects and objects in new, creative ways. For Helfenbein (2016), this must involve, first of all, acknowledging that "such objects as chairs, textbooks, classroom spaces, chalk, iPads, pencils, worksheets, security cameras, and science laboratory equipment all participate in education: they are not merely inert stuff that form the background for a more important 'human' learning experience" (p. xxi). In practical terms, this means that educators should look for pedagogical resources in the whole realm of matter and take advantage of them from a pedagogical perspective; to explore how, by drawing on a wider and richer range of material resources in their lessons, they may create wider and richer opportunities for teaching and learning to take place (Hickey-Moody & Woods, 2016).

New materialisms' focus has also extended to the dispositions of matter that characterize not only schools but also student households, communities, and the entire society. It is not surprising that, from this angle, this philosophical paradigm has engaged in the production of political and economic discourses essentially critical with capitalism and with a neoliberal model of society. The way in which access to material and immaterial resources is distributed is unfair and prevents large sectors of the population from powerfully transforming their immediate environments (Barad, 2013). In accordance with a Deleuzian emphasis on what matter can make us do—i.e., its "thing power" (Bennett, 2010) or "environmental potentiality" (Fox & Alldred, 2016)—from an educational perspective new materialist studies have investigated how the qualitative and quantitative material variables of home and community environments favor or prevent the emergence of certain behavioral and cognitive skills (Prinsloo, 2005). This has shed light on the possibility of articulating and connecting specific socio-economic, racial, ethnic, and cultural realities in meaningful ways, all from the point of view of literacy.

Matter, multimodality, and new literacy studies

New literacy scholars acted as forerunners of new materialist tenets decades before the idea of new materialisms arose (Kuby & Rowsell, 2017). They embraced a socio-material perspective that understood literacy not as a purely cognitive process—as a skill developed exclusively within school walls, oriented towards a single, academic literacy—but as a *social practice* imbedded in children's everyday lives through their material and cultural surroundings: i.e. in games they played, in familial activities carried out in their households, in hobbies shared and exercised in their neighborhoods, etc. (Thiel, 2015). Literacy events occur around food, with shopping lists or recipes, behind or on the margins

of photographs, attached to the memories of family possessions, and on drawings, toys, and children's books (Wohlwend, 2013). By approaching literacy from these socio-material lenses, these scholars also brought awareness to the technological dimension of written language—writing is "a social technology that entails historically evolving techniques for inscription" (Luke, 1994/2018, p. 48)—that is, to the fact that literacy needs a material platform to come into being. This material support may be as basic as a pencil leaving its mark on a blank page, or as complex as the digital algorithms needed to encode a written message into a mobile phone or website, but it needs to be acknowledged from the outset, to the extent that the material element imposes restrictions on what can or cannot be said, and also in which manner. Finally, as was the case with new materialisms, NLS extended their reach beyond the familial, and household contexts to include the material-semiotic environments of entire neighborhoods and communities, where it examined how the availability of libraries, cinemas, bookstores, or community centers in rich or poor neighborhoods made it easier, or harder, for people to develop their literacy skills (Neuman & Celano, 2001).

Research in education has found valuable insights within the concepts of NLS. These insights include ideas like the importance of teachers' pedagogies connecting with literacies beyond school and including the multimodal means and material artifacts through which children and teenagers originally interact with language in their natural surroundings (Pahl & Rowsell, 2012). If only as a first step to enriching their home literacies through specific academic work, the fact is that identifying, understanding, and articulating domestic and community literacies in the classroom should be a precondition for any school which wishes to give their learners the chance to expand their cultures, knowledge, languages, and

identities in ways that remain true to their voices (Binder & Kotsopoulos, 2011). These multimodal and multiliterate orientations to literacy and language learning found a direct and compatible outlet in extra-curricular spaces like those described in Thiel (2013), or media and art-based clubs like those detailed in the Digital Underground Storytelling for Youth program (Hull & Zacher, 2010). Yet they are gradually filtering into formal education contexts. In this regard, Morrell (2008), Dezuanni (2010), or Kervin, Comber, and Woods (2017) contributed to research on adolescents' digital and media literacies that advanced suggestions as to how these could enrich school curricula and make them more engaging and meaningful to learners who were, thus, given the chance to recreate their worldviews in their own ways. In the same line, Matthews (2008) mapped out how these multicultural and multimodal approaches should be adopted by refugee education in Australia. Among the research that has decidedly tapped into "the material culture of literacy," as Luke (1992/2018, p. 111) put it, Pahl and Rowsell's (2010) and Esteban-Guitart and Llopart's (2019) reading of artifacts (which treated them as the material embodiment or sedimentation of students' *habitus* and identities) relied on the transportable quality of objects to strengthen the connection between home and school cultures and literacies. Students' cultures, identities, languages, and literacies travel hand in hand with artifacts as children carry the latter from home to school and back, thereby giving educators the chance to honor these objects, work with the stories attached to them, and lead them towards other forms of academic literacy. Artifacts participate in the socio-material continuum of students homes and communities (new materialisms), and in doing so they also form part of the context in which literacies emerge and are developed (as defended by NLS).

Context

At the time of this investigation, Nazaret remained the most impoverished neighborhood in the city of València. For decades, neoliberal urban policies and planning had intensified the spatial dimension of social exclusion in València and given rise to ghetto neighborhoods such as Nazaret, whose 5,953 inhabitants were segregated though visible and invisible borders (Cucó i Giner, 2016). Access to cheap but run-down housing had attracted newly arrived immigrants to this neighborhood. In addition, it had traditionally been home to a large native Roma community, which added to its multicultural and multiracial reality. A recent report commissioned by the city council revealed that, as harmful urban construction progressively isolated the neighborhood from the rest of València—see Figure 1 for how Nazaret remains trapped between a high-way, a railroad line, and an old river bed—the neighborhood's youth developed a "specific subculture of a marginal type" (Ajuntament de València, 2017, pp. 66-7). This marginal subculture no longer coincided with the most impoverished sectors in the neighborhood but had ended up becoming a general signifier of what it meant to belong to Nazaret. This phenomenon was a powerful reminder of the kind of the entanglements between culture and matter that this research wished to explore and experiment with, although with a transformative aim and in a solely educational sense.

[Figure 1. Map of Nazaret in València]

As to the elementary, public school in which the research was based, despite the loving staff and the school's peaceful and welcoming atmosphere, enrollment decreased year after year while certain cultural and socio-economic realities were overrepresented, even in relation to the neighborhood population. At the time of the research, 50% of

students were Roma, 14% Nigerian, 16% eastern European, 6% Latin American, 6% from North Africa, and 6,5% of Spanish non-Roma origin. The regional administration had granted the school a special CAES status (*Centros de Acción Educativa Singular*, Special Educational Action Centers), conceded whenever 30% or more of a school's student population requires compensatory education on account of socio-economic deprivation, immigration processes, belonging to a linguistic and cultural minority, and so on. This figure rose to an astonishing 98% at this school.

The actual research was framed within the Words Matter/*Palabras reales* project. For 18 sessions starting on 17 November 2017 and ending on 11 May 2018, every Friday from 14.30 to 16.30, Luis, a teacher educator from the Department of Language and Literature Education at the University of València, together with seven of his former university students, volunteered to teach English to nine children from the neighborhood (aged 9 to 12). The Head of Studies chose which children would participate, based on the school's need to allocate these students on Friday afternoons. In any case, they were representative of the school's socio-economic and multicultural profile.

Methodology

In order to explore how a pedagogically-informed consideration of matter could transform the teaching and learning of English in this specific context, the team designed two multimodal, artifactual workshops that widened the quantity and quality of matter active in the English classroom. The aim was to build a material bridge between English as a subject and their homes and communities where these children worked and reworked their own cultures and identities through particular languages and literacies. As seen in Table 1, while the lessons' structures varied from one week to the next, the workshops

always started by identifying generative themes from the students' lives, generally by encouraging them to speak, write, play, or draw about what they did outside school walls. During the second workshop, the whole group went outside for the children to show the educators the spaces they inhabited in their daily lives. Through the remaining phases, the educators and the learners came up with suggestions as to how the project could pay homage to these spaces, which in turn inspired and motivated the students to discover new ways of representing and interpreting their worlds, while using the unfamiliar language of English as a central conduit for doing so. Since most of the learners participating in this project had not attained a basic level of English, it was impossible for them to directly express their cultures, identities, and literacies through English. In order to compensate for this mismatch, the educators offered a whole variety of materials, like fabrics, maps, colors, and photographs, to fill the classroom with bits and pieces of the children's worlds. The expectation was that, attached to this diversity of materials, their cultures, identities, and multimodal literacies (and the skills associated with them) would come on board and manifest themselves in their work.

[Table 1. Phases and structure of the Words matter/*Palabras reales* project]

Analytical framework

With the *new literacy* and *new materialisms* frameworks in mind, the educators systematically learned strategies to identify the many levels through which matter impacted the lives and education of these learners, and also to *read* matter pedagogically and develop activities for the English classroom that allowed these underprivileged learners to overcome the socio-economic, cultural, linguistic, and even existential gaps that separated them from

the English language. On a sociological plane, intense socio-economic stratification deriving from neoliberal policies caused the residents of Nazaret to develop their lives and cultures at the margins of the cultural and economic advances taking place in the surrounding areas of València——and hence also external to the English language through which these advances are mostly conveyed in society (see Phillipson, 2009; Vandrick, 2014, and Villacañas de Castro, Cano Bodi & Hortelano Montejano, 2018, for a description of how this phenomenon operates on a global scale). While they did not regard their own segregation from the English language as an essential manifestation of Nazaret's peripheral position in society, it still placed these chidren at a clear disadvantage. At the end of the day, English was a compulsory school subject which they had to pass in order to continue studying. Refering to the international panorama of ELT, Kanno (2014) pointed to the growing concern that "the learning of English in many parts of the world has become implicated in the reproduction of social classes" (p. 118), and these divisions manifested and became magnified in the ELT classrooms of Nazaret's public school. On the one hand there was 'English', not only a school subject, but the dominant, imperial language through which neoliberal production channeled its cultural and economic advances (Block, Gray & Holborow, 2012). On the other hand, there stood the local cultures, identities, and languages of these minority groups, who were segregated from the English language as deeply as they were from other aspects of the society which surrounded them. Still, rather than adopting alternative methods and approaches to ELT, the English lessons at this school were taught completely disconnected from all of these realities.

Accordingly, the project drew on key tenets of new materialisms and NLS to construct a viable *culturally sustaining pedagogy* for this group of underprivileged learners.

As defined by Alim and Paris (2017), "CSP seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation" (p. 1). As shown in Figure 2, the resulting pedagogical orientation was multicultural, multiliterate, multimodal, artifactual, and also translingual (Canagarajah, 2013). For the project to be multicultural it had to welcome first the multiple literacies through which the learners' cultures were originally built and conveyed; this, in turn, demanded that the project be multimodal and artifactual (since home and community literacies clearly supported themselves on multiple modalities and artifacts), which, likewise, required that the familial languages through which each of these literacies were originally built be accepted and conveniently mixed in the English classroom at different phases of the project.

This entire framework was put into practice through the creation of a school museum in the Biblioteca del Mar, the neighborhood public library, which was the one purposeful act that brought together and reassembled the diverse interests of the students and the research team. The inauguration was on 11 May 2018 and brought together the children's friends and families. It remained on display for an entire week, during which time the school organized visits for the entire student body to see it.

[Figure 2. Model for a multicultural, multiliterate, multimodal, and translingual pedagogy]

Methods for data collection and analysis

The members of the research team were particularly concerned with ensuring that during the course of the project the research would not interfere with either the learners' right to be educated or their right to privacy. For these reasons, they organized themselves into a *collaborative action research* (CAR) structure (Burns, 2005) and trusted its ethical

framework to devise research methods that would not distort the fragile ecology in which English teaching and learning could take place in this underprivileged school. This commitment imposed restrictions on the research methodology, which had to adapt itself to the educational demands, and not the other way around. This meant that the children would not engage in any research task that was not meaningful for them, a principle which was applied to the project's workshops as much as to the interviews and focus groups that the team conducted to gather data directly from the students. As a result, some children talked much more than others and consequently provided more data. The same was true of most of the educators in the CAR team, who preferred to limit their participation to the teaching tasks (more of this later).

As to the researchers' concern for the children's right to privacy, the Head of Studies informed the CAR team that the school council had agreed upon an open policy regarding the children's names and images, which were often displayed on the school's social networks. When the researchers requested special permission to reproduce their data from the school's staff, the children and their families, the parents granted this permission by written consent and proudly encouraged their children's work to be publicized for research purposes.

The project ended up consisting of two research cycles, one for each workshop. The research team drew on individual and group interviews with all students, sound recordings from key school sessions, analyses of the students' multimodal work, weekly CAR meetings, end-of-cycle assessment sessions, and the CAR members' research journals. Also, photographs were taken at significant moments during the project to record not only the gradual outcomes of the project but also key, ongoing experiences.

Data analysis

Framed within a qualitative paradigm, inductive analysis at the end of each research cycle focused on whether the pedagogical design around the material dimension of literacy (its multimodal and artifactual qualities) had helped establish a link between the English language used in Words Matter/*Palabras reales* and the students' home and community literacies. The researchers then adopted a deductive focus to identify whether, thanks to this connection, the students had been able to actualize their cultures and identities in the English classroom and produce work that, despite utilizing English, was inherently valuable for them and their communities. In order to give an answer to this research question, Luis, as the most experienced researcher, examined the diverse data the team had collected to identify the *relevant texts* (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003) and filter out the information that was not related in any way to the research question, and which would therefore not enter the transcription process (for example, the sessions often started with a collective game that was only aimed at creating a friendly atmosphere). During the next phase of analysis, Luis individually conducted an initial coding on a series of Excel spreadsheets, and meetings were held at the end of the research process for all the team members to compare and discuss their impressions and analyses, and trace interrelationships between the codes and the emerging categories. As has been said, other than Luis, the research team was comprised of primary school student-teachers who did not intend to become expert university researchers. Rather than demanding to participate equally in all the phases of the coding process, they were primarily interested in understanding *how* Luis conducted the coding, *why* he had chosen certain codes and not others, etc. It was in the context of these explanations that they shared their opinions and presented their own alternatives, often

initiating thorough revisions of certain transcripts and pieces of children's work (which always remained close at hand). Through these meetings, intercoder agreement was reached and also a common understanding of the underlying processes that had taken place. The most significant evidence and predominant interpretations provide the backbone of the following Findings section.

Findings

Owing to the cyclical nature of CAR, the conclusions reached by the team changed from one workshop to the next, as the passing sessions gave access to a deeper vision of the project's development. In this Findings section the evolving quality of our insight has been maintained, together with the constant oscillation between the descriptive and analytic lenses through which the members of the CAR team approached and reacted to classroom phenomena.

Activating and enriching home-literacy practices: 'Stuff I'm made of'

In the first workshop, which was called 'Stuff I'm made of' and extended from 17 November 2017 to 9 March 2018, the students used text and images to create multimodal and bilingual self-portraits in which the significant potential of matter, on the one hand, and the visual potential of language, on the other, were developed in parallel. The workshop involved differentiated outcomes, as exemplified in Figure 3 through images of Natividad's work. After printing photographs that the students had taken of themselves during the second and third sessions, the children cut the self-portraits into pieces and decorated each of them differently, with tempera, crayons, water-colors; they also filled them with stickers, wrapping paper, glitter, wool, foam, and other fabrics; they even drew and glued all sorts of stuff onto them to create artistic shapes and visual effects. Once the pieces of the self-

portraits were re-assembled on a large piece of cardboard, the students learned vocabulary by including the English words for the materials they had just used in their self-portraits. At that point, they were induced into the art of *lettering*, to make the material layout of their words more beautiful and striking. Finally, during the last phase of the workshop, the children wrote longer texts explaining to the intended audience of the exhibition which materials they had used to represent who they were. The text was written in Spanish—"or otherwise our friends and families are not going to understand it!" (Tatiana, Session recording, 11 January 2018)—but the children had to choose relevant words and key expressions and render them into English, in a different color and lettering, to make them stand out from the rest. Still, by means of paper flaps that could be lifted, the Spanish equivalents could be accessed. The final text was a multimodal, bilingual, and artifactual piece of art, packed with the students' likes and identities.

[Figure 3. Natividad's work for the 1st workshop: 'Stuff I'm made of']

By including so wide a range of material resources, and by offering the students an equally wide range of multimodal forms of expression to channel their voice—drawing, cutting, pasting—the first workshop activated key literacy practices they often developed at home. In fact, one of the key insights of the research came when, during the interviews, the team discovered that these children actually "wrote a lot" at home—as Yomna, Blessing, Natividad, and Teresa (as we shall discuss next) said during their interviews—yet always combined with other modes of expression. Most of them wrote when they got bored. "I like to draw and write things", said Natividad. Blessing preferred to "make a drawing and write about what I like about the drawing", and recognized that during the first workshop they did "exactly the same thing" (Blessing, Interview, 27 April 2018). Yomna said that she

mostly wrote on Saturday and Sundays, especially at night, since it helped her to sleep; she kept two diaries, one of which she shared with Blessing and on which, apart from writing, both of them glued stickers—mostly emoji, to make their feelings visually known to each other (Yomna, Interview, 11 May 2018).

As made clear by these examples, the specific quality of these children's home literacies was that they did not *just* write: they always wrote *and* drew, wrote *and* played, etc., in multimodal combinations. This was precisely what the first workshop allowed them to do, this time in a ELT school context. As was expected, the home literacy practices displayed by these children were impure and messy, but also rich, complex, and eclectic; they manifested themselves as part of wider socio-material and agential contexts which their writing enriched by simply adding another layer of meaning. The nature of their home literacy practices ran counter to the way writing was normally taught in school, where the students were typically exposed to—and made to produce—academic texts that could be understood without close reference to the temporal, spatial, and activity-based contexts in which they originated. By contrast, at home these children wrote while they were doing other things with other objects. From a material perspective, their writing was not an individual, isolated activity, one involving just a mind, a pencil, and a sheet of paper or computer on a separate desk (which most of these students lacked). Even when they wrote alone (as many of them said they did), their writing was part of an activity that unfolded among other real artifacts, purposes, and concerns.

It was Teresa who gave the most comprehensive vision of her home literacy practices and also of the specific way the Words Matter/*Palabras reales* project had successfully channeled and built on them:

Teresa. Ha! I'm always writing! And reading! I like reading and writing.

Luis. Where? At home or at school?

Teresa. Everywhere, because at school you have to write to do the tasks and at home, if I get bored, I write.

Luis. Is that so? You simply start to write? About what?

Teresa. Ha! I don't know! Maybe I draw a picture and write things about it. "This and that; so and so" and so on. Or a book I've enjoyed—I make a summary. I like to write.

Luis. In this workshop you've done something similar, haven't you? You've drawn a picture…

Teresa. Yes, and then I've said what I've done, the materials I've used, and all that.

Luis. Ok. So would you say that this workshop was similar to what you do at home when you get bored, or not?

Teresa. Yes.

Luis. Yes?

Teresa. Well, no. It's better. Because at home I don't have anything, I mean, I write or draw and that's all. But here we have many things and we've done beautiful things.

Luis. So in what ways were they similar and different?

Teresa. [Similar in that] I've made a picture (or a photo) and then I've written what I've done, what I've added to them and all. And it's been different in that, here,

we've done it beautifully, and I've used many materials, and I've put more effort into

it. (Teresa, Interview, 23 February 2018)

As opposed to the economic restrictions affecting their homes, this excerpt shows

how, in accordance with new materialist understandings of the material and cognitive

planes as interrelated realities, the wealth of material resources the students found in this

English workshop made it easier for them to establish links with their home and community

spaces, with their home- and community-based literacy practices, and with the cultural and

identity motives that they recreated in and through them. Thanks to this personal

involvement, the English workshop also activated the learners' creativity, pushed them

towards doing more complex and sophisticated work, and—as Teresa said—motivated

them to put more effort into it.

Luis. And what about English? Do you often write in English at home, as you

did here, or not?

Teresa. No. Never. Well… not never. Typical words such as love, friends…

those ones, yes.

Luis. How come you use those words at home? In which situations?

Teresa. Because at school we [she and her friends] send each other letters that

we write at home, and we like to use those words.

Luis. I find everything you are saying very interesting, Teresa. Because,

according to you, this workshop has looked like many of the things that you already

do at home, but, also, you've said that you've made more effort here and that you've

had access to …

Teresa. … more words. I have learnt more words. (Teresa, Interview, 23 February 2018)

As the above fragment shows, the multimodal and translingual nature of the first workshop enabled the students to replicate the specific multimodal combinations that they enacted at home and transform them into academic and artistic work that included the English language. The outcome of this workshop were long, expository texts that played intelligently with form and content to craft rich metaphors and imagery that sprawled all over the sheet of paper. In addition to this, the first workshop made it possible for them to activate the few English words that—like "friend" and "love"—they had successfully integrated into their daily lives and informal literacies. This transference phenomenon became even more intense during the second workshop, as the project approached matter in expanded ways, in order create more connections across space, time, languages, and literacies.

'Explaining' memories in English: 'All the world's a board!'

The pedagogical strategy played out by this project was inherently optimistic, premised on the belief that there was intrinsic wealth and value in these children's home-based cultures, identities, languages, and literacies. Evidence from the first workshop had proven this expectation right, and it would continue to do so during 'All the world's a board!', the second workshop and cycle of inquiry. It ranged from 16 March to 11 May 2018 and led directly to the exhibition at the neighborhood public library. In this case, photography was the medium chosen for the students to turn the imagery of their personal lives into multimodal, curricular resources. On the session of 23 March 2018, the members of the research team handed out a disposable camera to each student, with their

corresponding names on them, and ready with a film of 24 analogic photographs. Instructions were precise: they would take the cameras home to take photographs of their school, households, and neighborhood contexts. Through them they would capture activities they carried out in each of these spaces that structured their lives. A week later, once the students brought the cameras back, the research group had the photographs developed, and started to organize the English literacy activities around the printed photographs.

First, with the help of the members of the research team, the students explained (orally and in Spanish) the stories and events behind the photographs, giving the rest of the group a glimpse of their lives. After sharing these stories, the students identified key nouns and verbs contained in each image that acted as generative themes, and made sure they knew the English words for them. They either wrote the English terms down on post-its next to each photograph, or played a matching game with the photographs and the words, once the members of the research team had written them on post-its, as shown in Figure 4, on the upper-left corner. Next, with a dossier the team had specifically prepared to scaffold the activity, the children wrote sentences in English summarizing the activity depicted in each photograph. As seen in Figure 5, the work that ultimately resulted from these phases was poured onto the one artifact on which the title of the workshop was based: namely, a large, wooden board where the students displayed a selection of photographs from their Neighborhood, Home, and School hubs, whose corresponding labels helped to structure the multimodal content across the board. Key vocabulary, action verbs, and the short sentences produced earlier in English were neatly rewritten and added next to the photographs, and the board was profusely decorated with stickers and drawings. "It has trees, it has flowers,

many flowers; it has pompons, hearts, and in some photos we've added the letter of the

person on it (for example, they've added a T next to my photo)," Tatiana explained. "And I

have written two texts. One in English and one in Spanish. About what I was doing in the

photo. *Playing*" (Tatiana, Interview, 4 May 2018). Itself a metaphor of the culturally

sustaining pedagogy embraced by the project, all of these elements were finally connected

and attached in the wooden board with colored strings and pins that materialized the socio-

material, cultural, and linguistic assemblages that filled the students' lives, giving form to

the colorful and complex network showed in Figure 5.

[Figure 4. Phases of the second workshop: 'All the world's a board!']

[Figure 5. Final outcome of 'All the world's a board!']

"It's not the same to write than to directly put your photo there", Pablo noted in his

interview. The children's photographs seemed to honor and affirm their personal lives and

identities in ways which kept their motivation high throughout the second workshop, even

when they had to carry out writing tasks in English. "Since we made the photos ourselves,"

Pablo continued, "we are eager to stick them there and make it [the board]. But if, once you

do this, you then stop to think and write something, then your work will be better, and it

will have more meaning. But the thrill was—you know—to stick our photos there" (Pablo,

Interview, 18 May 2018). The multimodal and material qualities of the board also activated

other interesting connections with their familial spaces and literacies. Yomna, for example,

identified a consistent link between what the second workshop had allowed them to do with

the photographs and an informal literacy practice that was essential within her home.

"When she was a child, my mother also wrote on photographs," Yomna explained. "She

added information about when they were taken, what they showed, and all that… just what

we've done—although not the date. We have not included the date. […] At home she has at least ten of these photographs" (Yomna, Interview, 18 May 2018).

The fact that the workshop allowed Yomna to create strong links between her family life and stories and the English language possibly explains why she engaged so passionately in this part of the project. Some of her photographs appear at the upper-left hand-side of Figure 4. A sensitive and imaginative girl of barely ten years old, Yomna had already made sense of her mixed-racial identity: her father (who, she told us, was working in Paris at that time) came from Pakistan, while her mother was *mechera*, which is how the Roma community referred to individuals of mixed white and Roma ancestry. Yomna was also aware of how this variety of cultural, ethnic, and racial realities translated into different cultures, languages, ways of speaking, and literacies. "My grandmother", she said, "speaks like Aroa [a Roma student in the group], so my grandmother is like Aroa; but my grandfather is different" (Yomna, Session recording, 23 March, 2018). Through her photographs and the conversations the team had about them, Yomna mobilized latent threads of her past experiences (some of which connected to distant, geographic sceneries like Pakistan) and channeled them towards English language learning and her present life in profitable, constructive ways.

In the interview at the end of the project, Yomna referred back to a significant event that had taken place a week before, during the exhibition. Two Dutch international students from Luis's course at the university had come to the inauguration; since they barely spoke Spanish, the children in the group had to speak with them in English. With the help of the board (with its photographs, words, and labels) she was able to make herself understood and speak about photographs that showed her grandmother cooking, her uncle "playing

teachers" with her in her bedroom, or the bench in the park in Nazaret where her parents had first met. With these Dutch students, Yomna said during her interview, she had been able to "explain" herself in English, and then proceeded to describe what distinguished *explaining* from just *speaking* about something. This distinction was important to her and also for the research:

> Luis. What do you mean by 'explain'? Why do you say that you 'explained' to them?
>
> Yomna. [After a pause] It is harder, 'to explain'.
>
> Luis. 'Explaining' is harder, right?
>
> Yomna. Yes. And that's why I often 'explain' in Spanish, even València, but not in English.
>
> Luis. But what does it mean to 'explain'—apart from it being deeper, harder?
>
> Yomna. That… I have memories.
>
> Luis. You have memories...
>
> Yomna. … of things that I've kept for myself for a long time and have never released until now.
>
> Luis. And now, during this workshop, you've been able to release them in English?
>
> Yomna. Yes.
>
> Luis. How did you do it? When? With the board?
>
> Yomna. When I told them [the Erasmus students] about my photographs: who they were, what they were doing. Like my "grandmother", "auntie", "cooking"…
>
> (Yomna, Interview, 18 May 2008)

On the 23 March 2018 session, when the whole group shared the stories behind the places, people, and activities the photographs showed, Yomna had also voiced part of her memories and feelings. But what was special about the conversation that took place during the exhibition, with the international students, was that, on that occasion, Yomna had been able to "explain" herself in English. Unluckily, she had not done so for a long, long time:

Yomna. The last time I 'explained' something in English was in Pakistan.

Luis. Don't you usually 'explain' things in English at school, in the English class?

Yomna. [After a long pause] No.

Luis. Do you generally speak English in the English class?

Yomna. A bit.

Luis. But not 'explaining', that is.

Yomna. No. More like speaking in general, but never 'explaining'. (Yomna, Interview, 18 May 2008)

In the collective data sessions held during the last phases of the coding and analysis of the data, the research team interpreted this fragment as expressive of the alternative perspective that the Words matter/*Palabras reales* project had given to English education at this school. Yomna's words connected to the key topic of our research question: The material paucity that was the norm in mainstream English lessons—and which was usually a way to impose, at all costs, concentration and silence on these students by boring and flattening their senses—often had the undesired consequence of preventing the enrichment of education and stifling its complexity and transformative potential. According to Pablo, it had been "easier" to write about their drawings or their photographs than it had been to do

so about course book topics, since in the first two cases they already had feelings to share (Pablo, Interview, 18 May 2018). Earlier on in the first workshop, Natividad had complained that regular English writing tasks asked them to make connections among words and sentences that the course books had already chosen for them, which curtailed their freedom and creativity (Natividad, Interview, 23 February 2018). The material paucity of the English curriculum and classes—strongly focused on form, academic literacy, Anglo-saxon culture, and printed modalities—seemed to translate itself into educational experiences that were poor *also* from the cognitive perspective: they posed no meaningful challenge to these underprivileged learners; they barred their cultures, identities, and multimodal literacies from playing a role in the learning context; and, finally, they made it impossible for the children to capitalize on these rich cultural resources in order to use English to "explain" themselves and further analyze and understand their worlds. Fortunately, according to Yomna, the second workshop had the opposite effect. Amidst the multi-textured and multilayered scenario of the board, the English language mingled and conjoined with more familiar sceneries and modes of expression.

The final focus group held after the exhibition at the community museum also bore witness to these undergoing processes. Julianna, for example, described how her classmates and neighborhood friends reacted to the photographs, the art, and the texts that hung from the wooden board in the museum: "Others exclaimed, 'Look! There's my brother, there's my aunt!' […] They recognized many people so they enjoyed everything a lot more. (Julianna, Focus group with students, 25 May 2018). On account of its material and multimodal quality, this community museum was the perfect corollary of the Words Matter/*Palabras Reales* project, focused as it was on the material aspects of literacy. The

display was full of everyday household objects that encouraged the visitors to use their informal literacies to express their thoughts and emotions on the children's work. The success of the exhibition not only confirmed the expectations of the research team, both as a group and as individuals, but inspired them to later explore the potential of museum education and pedagogy (Hein, 2011) for ELT, as a way to amplify the pedagogical potential of material resources. Together with new materialisms and NLS, the concepts and practices of museum pedagogy proved useful to further inform the teachers' design and organization of realia, artifacts, and other material resources in the ELT classroom, to expand upon the affordances of multimodality, and to make their lessons more interesting for all these learners.

[Figure 6. Words matter/*Palabras reales* exhibition]

Discussion and conclusion

The research team was able to apply insights from new materialisms and NLS from one cycle of inquiry to the next and design two increasingly sophisticated workshops that took advantage of the material, multimodal dimensions of literacy to generate opportunities for English learning. As has been explained, the first pedagogical affordance that the research found on matter was the possibility of objectifying cultural and identity phenomena that were difficult to grasp and use in the English language classroom. Second was the possibility of using these material objectifications to successfully bridge and synthesize the cultures, identities, literacies, languages and skills of both the school and out-of-school contexts. By materially replicating the transition between the English language and students' personal lives and experiences (but also by providing safe-houses for the students to freely explore these connections), the Words Matter/*Palabras reales*

project gave these learners the chance to produce academic work that was valuable, not only for us English teachers, but also by their own standards. In Yomna's case, this value had to do with its "explanatory" character, which—as she defined in her interview—involved meaningful memories from the past, while also making a real effort to express them in the present. A similar balance had characterized the students' multimodal self-portraits, according to Teresa's observations of the first workshop, as described in the first section of the Findings.

Ultimately the purpose of the final exhibition was also related to the participants growing proud of the work they had done. As shown in Figure 6, the community museum organized in the neighborhood's public library generated an actual *third space* (Wilson, 2004) between the school and the learners' community where the children could socialize and their artifacts with their families and friends in ways that would be praised not only for their strict educational or linguistic value—i.e., how much English they had used, and how correctly—but, rather, for being an appreciated contribution to Nazaret's social life. A corollary to the previous phases in the project, the exhibition showed that, while English language learners in Spain (especially those coming from non-privileged contexts) find it increasingly difficult to relate their lives, experiences, cultures, and identities to the English language, a pedagogically-informed use of matter may provide English teachers with a powerful tool to overcome these obstacles.

educational experience. We especially wish to thank the families and the school's Head of Studies for giving us permission to reproduce the students' names, images, and words, and also examples of their fantastic work. Finally, we also wish to thank the editor and anonymous reviewers of *TESOL Quarterly* for the improvements that, through their feedback, they allowed us us to make to our work.

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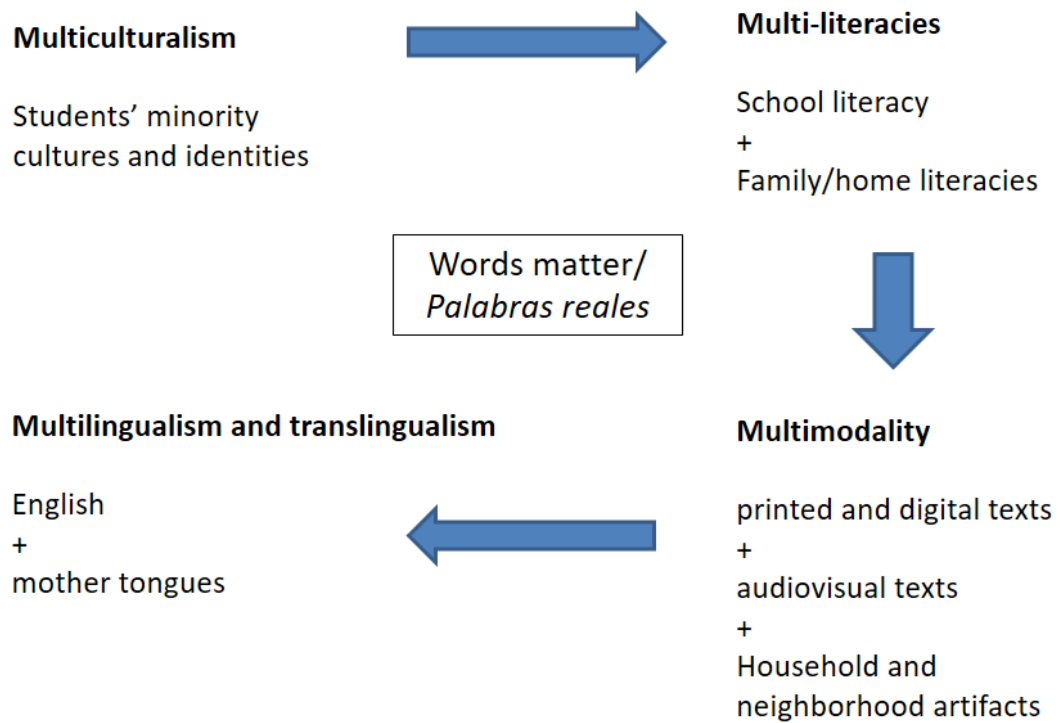
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[Figure 1. Map of Nazaret in València]

Multiculturalism

Students' minority
cultures and identities

Multi-literacies

School literacy
+
Family/home literacies

Words matter/
Palabras reales

Multilingualism and translingualism

English
+
mother tongues

Multimodality

printed and digital texts
+
audiovisual texts
+
Household and
neighborhood artifacts

[Figure 2. Model for a multicultural, multiliterate, multimodal, and translingual pedagogy]

[Figure 3. Natividad's work for the 1st workshop: 'Stuff I'm made of']

[Figure 4. Phases of the second workshop: 'All the world's a board!']

[Figure 5. Final outcome of 'All the world's a board!']

[Figure 6. Words matter/*Palabras reales* exhibition]

*Table 1. Phases and structure of the Words matter/*Palabras reales *project*

| | Workshops and cycles of inquiry | |
	1st 'Stuff I'm made of'	2nd 'All the world's a board!'
	17 November 2017 to 9 March 2018	16 March to 11 May 2018
1st phase: identifying generative themes	3 sessions	3 sessions
2nd phase: multimodal and artifactual work	7 sessions	5 sessions
Student interviews	16-23 February 2018	From 27 April to 18 May 2018
3rd phase. Socialization through museum display	11-18 May 2018	
Student focus group	25 May 2018	