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English language assistants in the 21st century: Nation-state soft power in the experience economy

Eva Codó & Jessica McDaid

Although the figure of the English language assistant (ELA) dates back a long while, its current popularity is unprecedented in some areas of the world. Such is the case of Spain, where the goal of raising English standards among the younger generations has become a national obsession. Using critical ethnographic methods, this paper examines the experience of three British LAs placed in secondary schools in Barcelona. It draws on a focused case study of one of them –combined with ethnographic snapshots of the other two, interviews with school teachers and regional programme administrators, relevant programme publications, and social media data. The analysis reveals three major tensions shaping the ELA experience in the 21st century revolving around: (a) the underspecified and unskilled nature of the job; (b) its culturalist imagination and state diplomacy mission; and (c) the native speaker ideology constituting its raison d'être. This paper provides new insights into the intertwining of the ELT infrastructure with global travel and tourism capitalised as skill boosters for employability purposes, and showcases the importance of foreign language education as a soft power tool.

Keywords: language assistantship; soft power; language industries; ELT; native speakerism; working tourists.

1. Introduction

In July 2016, we were about to close off one year of fieldwork at Pinetree Secondary, a state secondary school near Barcelona (Catalonia, Spain),¹ where English had recently been introduced as medium of instruction (for further details, see Codó & Patiño-Santos, 2018). We were enthusiastically told by the school head that an English language assistant (ELA) had been appointed to Pinetree Secondary for the upcoming academic year. However, when we returned for more fieldwork, in late November, we could sense a generalised feeling of disappointment, which was a stark contrast to the excitement just some months before. We had the feeling that Michael, the ELA, had not lived up to expectations. Intrigued by this, we wanted to know more about Michael, his profile and motivation to be an ELA, but also about

how the assistantship programme was framed, and what the school was expecting of him. In the larger picture, Michael's case was not unusual. The language assistantship scheme had a high drop-out rate, according to the Catalonian programme head, with most assistants resigning during the first term. And yet the ELAs had voluntarily applied for the job only a few months earlier. There was clearly something in the experience that did not match the expectations of either schools or assistants.

A quick review of the literature revealed that research on language assistants is scarce. The few existing publications focus on pedagogical issues or ELA's professional development. Most studies discuss "traditional" ELA profiles, that is, modern language (ML) undergraduates or recent graduates seeking to improve their target language/culture skills and acquire teaching expertise. Yet, going back to our ethnographic observations, Michael's background was not linguistic; he was a music graduate hoping for a gap year-like experience abroad. For him, as well as for many other native speakers of English, becoming an ELA was a rather unproblematic way to consume new experiences in the form of global travel and tourism while deciding what next step to take in life. It was also a means to accumulate capital in the form of highly-valued soft skills for a competitive labour market. From the perspective of the local Catalan/Spanish context, we knew from our fieldwork that ELAs like Michael were yet another piece of the booming English learning industry, also in mainstream education, where the availability of intensive, quality-based English language learning schemes (often embodied by the ELAs) articulates distinction among schools.

This article purports to fill a gap in research on the language assistantship programme, situating it within wider discussions of language, mobility and work, and the industrialisation of language provision (Cummins, 1998). We tie in with ongoing sociolinguistic research on the economisation and touristification of language education (Bruzos, 2017), and more specifically, on the contours of English language teaching (ELT) as a global infrastructure encouraging the mobility of native speakers (NSs) around the world (Codó, 2018; Stainton,

2008). These works provide a situated, empirical account of the questionable economic “value” of native English for the teachers themselves, although it is a source of huge profit for the schools, and certainly with symbolic value for parents and (some) students. We argue for the need to move beyond pedagogical/educational issues in the field of foreign language education, and consider it not only as an industry (and in so doing, try to answer questions such as who are the players? what is produced? at what cost and for whom? what are the gains and for whom?), but, increasingly, a key state soft power mechanism (see Chaloner, Evans and Pragnell, 2015: 4).

In this paper, at the intersection of critical sociolinguistics (Heller, Pietikäinen and Pujolar, 2018) and critical applied linguistics (Pennycook, 2001), we adopt an ethnographic perspective which brings to the fore the daily struggles of individual ELAs and schools, framed by a long-standing inter-state exchange scheme. We will argue that the programme is fraught with numerous contradictions that stem from its origins in the field of pre-service ML teacher training and the way it has evolved (at least in the UK) to attract larger numbers of applicants from non-linguistic backgrounds. We will focus on three constitutive tensions to do with (1) the (un)skilled nature of the job; (2) the programme’s culturalist agenda; and (3) the native speakerist ideology on which it is grounded. These three tensions will shed light on the reasons why many ELAs’ experiences turn out to be unsatisfactory. Far from specific, however, these tensions structure processes and relations in the field of ELT at large. To understand them, we need first to historicise the programme, and discuss its origins and evolution. It is to these aspects that we now turn.

2. The English language assistantship programme: A historical perspective

A foreign/modern language assistant (henceforth LA) is a type of teaching assistant who helps the main, fully certified teacher of a foreign language (usually a non-native speaker) with a variety of tasks linked to fostering oral communication. LAs are usually employed in

compulsory schooling (primary and secondary), although some positions might be available at college or university level, or in the case of Spain, in state-funded language schools (*escuelas oficiales de idiomas*). The typical LA is a young person with little (or no) experience in formal educational contexts who is a native speaker of the language. The LA's educational credentials and linguistic competence in the host country language(s) may vary depending on sending state requirements.

The language assistantship scheme dates back to 1904, when the first bilateral agreement was signed between Britain and France, which got extended to Prussia in 1905 (Wörsching, 2012). The programme was part of the “emerging European infrastructure to help language teachers and their pupils gain first-hand experience of the target culture” (McLelland, 2018: 14). Similarly-minded initiatives were holiday training courses for FL teachers in the target language country and pen-friend schemes for schoolchildren. All these endeavours were linked to a shift in FL learning in Europe away from grammar and translation and towards more direct engagement with the foreign language. Spain joined the scheme in 1936 (Rowles & Rowles, 2005).

Inter-state reciprocity is one of the pillars of the programme. In many ways, it is a sort of early 20th century precursor of the ERASMUS exchange scheme (Wörsching, 2012). The initial goal was to give pre-service FL teachers the chance to improve their linguistic and cultural competence by being “immersed” in a target language/culture environment as well as obtain professional experience as teachers-to-be. Since it was a reciprocal part-time work-in-education placement scheme to be combined with undergraduate studies, candidates would only work 12 hrs and would initially receive no payment but be guaranteed lodging and board.² A 100 years later, the number of work hours is still the same, despite changing applicant profiles, and even though LAs receive a monthly allowance, it is not technically considered a salary; it is actually called “stipend” across many of the LA platforms and literature.

Due to limitations of data, this article discusses only the official UK programme for providing ELAs around the world, organised by the British Council (BC), with a particular focus on Catalonia/Spain. We are aware that in Catalan schools there might be ELAs from many other countries such as the US, Canada or Australia, but the examination of each of these schemes would require more data and space than currently available. Similarly, we know that some of the challenges observed may be common to all LAs, independently of the language taught, but we also claim that there might be significant differences between the profiles of many ELAs and of those of other languages. Although official figures do not seem to be available, in a publication reviewing the history of the UK programme (Rowles & Rowles, 2005) it is reported that, in a survey conducted in 2004-2005, the proportion of ELAs intending to become language teachers was only 48% as compared to 77% of LAs in general. Although there might have been a percentage of ML-educated ELAs not wanting to become teachers, these figures index a difference between the kinds of candidates the ELA programme recruits (*vs* other languages). This has to be understood in the context of huge demand for English worldwide, combined with declining numbers of ML students in the UK. This has resulted in a lowering of requirements for ELA candidates. The UK programme is now open not just to undergraduates in any discipline, but also to school leavers. (Note that this has not happened in other language schemes, for example, in the Spanish one organised by the Spanish Ministry of Education, where all applicants must be graduates of a language or teaching degree.) In fact, the UK ELA scheme reached its peak in 1973, with some 4,500 ELAs sent and received (Wörsching, 2012), and then progressive declined. It is now at the same level as in 1984 (around 2,500 ELAs per year).

The figure of the native-speaker ELA is not new in Spain, but its current popularity is unprecedented.³ This is connected, broadly, to Spain's national obsession with English language proficiency, and more specifically, to the rapid popularisation in state schooling of what are called "bilingual programmes" (English-Spanish). Most of the regions with such

programmes (not all regions, because education is highly decentralised) have institutionalised the ELA figure. In Andalucía and Madrid, for example, each state school running one such programme is entitled by law to receive at least one FLA every year (see Dafouz & Hibler, 2013 for the Madrid region, and Méndez García & Pavón Vázquez, 2012, for Andalucía).

In Catalonia the programme is not as institutionalised in language policy as in other areas of Spain, but it is also terribly popular among state schools (over 1,500 applications are received every year for some 110 posts, according to data supplied by the head of the official programme in Catalonia). Because of high demand, the programme has recently been reconceptualised by the administration as some kind of “reward” for those schools that (make the effort to) participate in foreign language-related or international projects, such as Content-and-Language-Integrated-Learning (GEP is the official programme name in Catalonia), Global Scholars, Batxibac, E-Twinning or Erasmus+ Key Action 2. This was exactly the case of Pinetree Secondary, the school context analysed in this paper, which had been involved in GEP. Schools currently not taking part in one of these projects are automatically excluded from selection. ELAs now seem to be used as a means of elitising the Catalan state education system: schools with an international(ising) profile may get extra FL resources in the form of an ELA; the rest, will not.

The presence in state schools of ELAs, associated with quality, correctness and authenticity, has spurred private institutions to incorporate these teachers too. The public discourse that regularly deprecates the oral competence of Spanish non-native English-language teachers, the stigmatisation of pronunciation being a classic (Corbella, 2017), makes these figures particularly appealing. As private institutions can guarantee its continuity, the ELA programme is often advertised as an element of distinction indexing the quality of a school’s educational programme. A number of for-profits and NGOs offer school placements for LAs in exchange for a fee (applicants may pay up to 2000€; we do not know how much they charge schools). The fee is meant to cover induction sessions, emergency insurance and

support for applicants throughout their stay. One programme that is very popular among private schools in Catalonia, running since 2009, is slightly different from the official one. LAs work 25 hrs a week, live with families and earn a lot less (315€-465€, according to the organisation's webpage).⁴

To sum up, ELAs are becoming an increasingly significant trend, educationally, socially, and in regard to language policy. However, surprisingly, the phenomenon has been overlooked by the relevant literature, as discussed in the next section.

3. Researching ELAs: Existing studies and framing ideas

There exists very little research on ELAs (Ehrenreich, 2006), not just in sociolinguistics, but also in applied linguistics and language teaching. This contrasts markedly with the attention that, for example, study abroad experiences have received. It is true that in some studies (e.g. Coleman, 1997, 2013), language assistantships are discussed with other types of residence abroad periods. However, they have systematically been assessed in terms of individual impact (e.g. language gains, intercultural competence, professional identity construction, etc.), and not in terms of how the programme is embedded in wider social processes. Nor has available research adopted the multi-dimensional, ethnographic perspective of this paper.

Coleman (1997, 2013) discusses the impact for ML students of assistantship placements from a qualitative and sociocultural perspective. Ehrenreich (2006, 2007), in turn, analyses the impact of the assistantship scheme on LAs' development of their professional competence as teachers. Although Ehrenreich's participants had a different profile from Michael's, many of her observations seem to match the latter's experience, as we shall see. In particular, Ehrenreich discusses how (a) many LAs start out being highly motivated but seem to transition to feelings of uselessness/disappointment as the year progresses; (b) the programme may be (too open) and require (too much) personal initiative for some assistants to adjust satisfactorily; (c) the

programme may end up reproducing the same target culture stereotypes it aims to undo. Both Coleman and Ehrenreich focus exclusively on LAs from a ML background.

In Spain, some publications have also considered this figure, but only recently, given its growing appeal to policy makers, schools and families. Yet, the few existing studies have focused on the teaching duties/classroom performance of ELAs/LAs, and have not examined the experience holistically or taken an ethnographic perspective. For example, Dafouz & Hibler (2013) discuss the nature of the classroom discourse produced by the ELA and the main teacher in a Science class taught in English. They conclude that, despite the lack of explicit institutional guidelines on how to collaborate effectively, the presence of ELAs in teaching partnerships enriches classroom talk linguistically, pragmatically and culturally. Méndez García & Pavón Vázquez (2012) study focuses not on classroom talk, but on ELAs' perceptions of their identity, role and function in the classroom. They report that ELAs see themselves as in charge of the less academic, more spontaneous and conversational aspect of classroom talk; they also view their role as supplementary to the main teacher's in providing repetitions and further explanation on vocabulary and concepts. The authors also identify two of the key shortcomings of the programme: the lack of clear instructions/training on ELAs' duties, and the fact that many assistants are not foreign language teaching specialists, which may result in some of them exhibiting "a lack of competences and skills in this area" (2012: 4). Both aspects, as we shall see later, are part of the tensions that Michael and the school will have to navigate.

As mentioned, language assistantships have not –to our knowledge– been considered as part of the language teaching infrastructure that fuels the mobility of English native speakers worldwide (an estimate of 250,000 according to data in Stainton (2018), working in some 40,000 schools and language institutes worldwide). The precarious and exploitative nature of most (English) language teaching jobs has been amply documented in the literature (Goulding, 2016; Stanley, 2016). However, its connections with tourism-related employment and mobilities have only recently been explored. This has taken two directions. Bruzos (2017)

discusses how the Spanish language teaching industry follows the low-cost business model of the tourist industry, backgrounding educational parameters and teachers' professionalism, and foregrounding, instead, exclusively economic aspects. Stainton (2018), by contrast, focuses on the affordances of ELT jobs to travel around the world. She defines what she calls the "TEFL tourist" as "a person who travels outside of their usual environment to teach English as a foreign language, whose role shifts between tourist, educator and educatee at various points in their trip" (2018: 02). In her account, language teachers resemble Duncan's (2007) working tourists, a new class of workers for whom work is a just means to fund the emotional satisfaction provided by travel and leisure. In many ways, Stainton's TEFL tourism is closely related to the phenomenon of English-language volunteering, described by Jakubiak (2016), where unqualified English NSs travel to the Global South to teach basic or conversational English for a short period of time (1-10 weeks). Participating in these projects allows volunteers to claim cosmopolitanism, generosity and adventurousness on their CV, and the possibility of taking up certain professional roles that would otherwise be inaccessible at home.

The motivations of TEFL teachers, language volunteers, as well as of many ELAs, as we shall see later, must be situated within the growth of what Pine and Gilmore (1998[2011]) call "experience economy". They define it as the distinct economic offering of our times, tying consumption to emotional satisfaction, and experiences to commodification. Urry (2010) argues that contemporary capitalism (which he labels "expressive/fascination capitalism") generates expressive bodies, who are "emotional, pleasure-seeking and novelty-acquiring" (2010: 214), and are focused on the consumption of (commodified) new places and new people. However, the appeal of experiential consumption goes beyond emotional satisfaction or even lifestyle quests; it is increasingly connected with the desire/need to accumulate capital to enhance one's employability

Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2004) uphold that graduates' extra-curricular experiences are increasingly important for employability, but for them to be converted into

personal capital, job seekers must create a narrative of employability, that is, be able to frame their experiences in skill development terms. In keeping with this, in recent years, the ELA programme has increasingly drawn on the skill gain discourse to sell the programme to graduates. The promotional literature, both for the official scheme and for privately-run placements, foregrounds the chance to develop the following transferrable skills for one's CV: adaptability, risk-taking, cosmopolitan orientation, problem-solving, leadership, time-management, self-confidence, etc. The BC has even institutionalised this through the creation of the Personal Development Portfolio which "now gives UK students the opportunity to reflect on and recognise the skills they have gained during their Year Abroad in the context of wider academic, career and personal development aims." (Rowles & Rowles, 2005: 25).

While the skill gain discourse is a rather recent development (note the use of "now" in the previous quote), the LA programme has always had a significant cultural component; from the very beginning, the LA's job was not only to provide students with the opportunity to practice the spoken language and model their pronunciation, but also to promote/explain/disseminate the culture of their native country. McLelland (2018: 14) describes the scheme as "marking the beginning of the state's involvement in cultural diplomacy". Cultural diplomacy still defines the spirit of the programme. However, the spirit is different. The programme was initially conceived as a way of fostering understanding among neighbouring states through enhanced mutual knowledge. Now, it is increasingly seen as an instrument of soft power. This is not exclusive to the ELA programme, but to foreign language teaching more generally. In Coulmas' words (2018: 18) "foreign language education is a huge market generating tens of billions of dollars annually as well as a field of fierce diplomatic competition".

Nye (2004: 256) defines soft power as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments". Soft power is exerted through the deployment of "soft resources", that is, non-material or symbolic resources of a country, such as images,

theories, culture, traditions, and national or global symbols (Lee, 2009). This is where classic soft power institutions, such as national culture and language agencies, come in. Harvey (2005), among others, has claimed that there has been a revival of cultural nationalism, both internal and external, under neoliberalism. As countries increasingly need to differentiate themselves on the world stage in order to strengthen their economic performance (exporting, inward investment, talent attraction, tourism, etc.), they resort to different forms of nation branding (Del Percio, 2016), a key tool of soft power. Thus, what we see in recent decades is the strengthening of nation-building practices although in newer formats, where language and culture, both as objects of consumption and as means of attraction through familiarity, serve powerful economic agendas.

Turning now to the UK-ELA scheme, we must note that it was initially administered by the Board of Education, then the Department of Education and Science. In 1964, it got taken up by the Central Bureau for Educational Visits and Exchanges, which became part of the BC in 1992. In this new framing, it got officially instituted as part of UK soft power infrastructure. After this selective discussion of existing gaps and available research, connections with related fields and framing ideas, we move to a brief presentation of the data on which this paper is based and our methodological procedures.

4. Data and research procedures

This paper analyses different pieces of data. First and more importantly, it draws on the ethnographic data gathered at Pinetree Secondary. This includes: (1) informal chats, check-ups over the course of several months and an ethnographic interview with Michael, the English LA; (2) shadowing of Michael around the school to observe his role and demeanour in the English-language classes and in the content courses to which he had been appointed; (3) ethnographic observation and audio-recording of a whole teaching unit in a 4th of ESO technology class (with students aged 16). Michael was present in two of the seven sessions

recorded. We could compare the organisation and structure of the lesson with and without the LA; (4) ethnographic interviews with Maria, Michael's mentor in the school, who was the head of the foreign language department, with Pepa, the head teacher, and with 19 4th of ESO students; and (5) informal comments by teachers and the head made to us during the academic year 2016/17.

Secondly, we conducted a semi-structured interview with the head of the language assistant programme at the Catalan Department of Education. Thirdly, we collected and analysed several official documents outlining the nature of the programme, role and the functions of LAs, and recommendations for successful school placement. As we mentioned in section 2, we have focused on the exchange programme between the UK and Spain for reasons to do with scope and feasibility. We have examined, on the one hand, local publications directed at LAs, such as the *Guía del Auxiliar 2017/18* (Assistant's Guide), issued by the Spanish Ministry of Education (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2017), and the *Guía del Auxiliar de Conversación en Catalunya. Curso 2017/18* (Guide for Language Assistants in Catalonia) published by the Catalan Education Department (Departament d'Ensenyament de la Generalitat de Catalunya, 2017), and on the other, *Spain Country Notes for English Language Assistants Appointed in Spain 2014-15*, compiled by the British Council (2015), as well as the official webpage of the programme on www.britishcouncil.org. We have also drawn on on-line data from chats and platforms containing feedback posts and experiential stories from in-service or post-service LAs.

Finally, since our objective in this paper is to focus on Michael's experience at Pinetree Secondary to then engage in a larger discussion of the figure of the LA, we will also be drawing on the experience of two other assistants, Jessica (one of the authors of this paper) and Isabella, employed as LAs at the same time as Michael. Jessica wrote an auto-ethnography of her experience, and we interviewed and observed Isabella in her daily undertakings in the school.⁵ The following section presents our discussion of the LA data.

5. Tensions currently constituting the ELA figure

Given the amount of data available and the way in which this article could potentially branch out in many different directions, we shall keep in focus by dissecting three key tensions that are central to understanding the ELA experience at present times. They will allow us to problematise the mismatch between programme imagination and reality, understand its reasons and discuss its consequences. The three focal tensions have to do with: (1) the programme requirements; (2) its culturalist nature; and (3) its native speakerist ideology.

5.1. Tension 1: programme requirements vs school expectations

The introductory paragraph in the BC webpage containing relevant information on the teaching assistantship programme in Spain states:

Extract 1

Spain's geography boasts beaches, cities, mountains and national parks, all within a relatively short distance of each other. Made up of 17 autonomous communities (*comunidades*), all with their own cultures and even languages (such as Basque and Catalan). Spain is the perfect place from which to visit other countries, such as Portugal or Morocco.

In what seems like an excerpt from a tourist guide, the programme chooses to focus on the country's renowned beauties and possibilities for enjoyment, adventure and extensive travel to attract the interest of prospective ELAs. Clearly, the kind of person programme administrators seem to have in mind is not the teaching-oriented individual. Rather, with few teaching hours and, in theory, not much responsibility, this job seems to suit the profile of the working tourist down to the ground. And indeed, living a new experience abroad was the main motivation Michael expressed for applying for ELA. He is an example of the wide variety of candidates that are encouraged by the BC to apply, who because of "the uplift in the number of posts available in Spain, combined with the lower language requirement" (BC website), are said to have many opportunities to be selected.

Michael, originally from a small city on the Irish border, had just graduated from Queen's University Belfast with a BA in Music. As he states in his interview, for him applying for a LA post seemed like a natural answer to the question of what to do after graduating. It

was through several of his Student Union co-workers, all ML students, that he first heard of the programme; they suggested he signed up. He viewed the scheme as a “really easy way for me to just get a job in another country”. He did not consider his non-linguistic background as a problem, given that he thought the job as required no skills (“just speaking my fluent language”). In the interview, he reports having “absolutely no idea what the job itself was going to be like” and drawing on his own school experience with a Spanish language assistant to figure out what he would be expected to do.

Similarly, at Pinetree Secondary, expectations were modelled after John, an ELA from Manchester, who had been appointed to the school eight years earlier (and the only one the school had had). John had been a charismatic figure, and the general consensus was that he had revolutionised the school. Maria, the head of the English department, listed autonomy, resourcefulness, creativity, dynamism, involvement and pro-activity as John’s distinctive qualities. Although this was often discussed as a matter of personality, John was a ML graduate, and as such, more aware of the complexities of foreign language education. He was also someone who enjoyed teaching as well as interacting with students and colleagues.

While John and Michael may have indeed had different personalities, we claim that, fundamentally, their alternate demeanour was linked to their different educational backgrounds. In fact, at one point in the interview, the English head came to the same conclusion: “Michael is Irish but not a teacher,” she said. Interestingly, however, this breakthrough came to Maria only after she had discussed Michael’s lack of fit in terms of personality and attitude. So, the school was expecting someone with the qualities expected of a ML teacher, but this was not listed anywhere. Nor did Michael expect this to be a requirement. In fact, in the interview and his numerous chats with us, he repeated that “he was not a teacher”.

Our data shows that the broadening of the “ideal ELA profile”, despite it being a way of attracting more candidates, was not unproblematic after all. When schools were expecting ELAs to embody *assistant* teaching roles they were, ultimately, anticipating *teaching* roles.

Isabella, one of the other two LAs whose experience we draw on, made comparable comments regarding fellow ELAs: “you can quite end up with literally anyone”, by which she clarified people doing a gap year –as opposed to people, like herself, using ELA posts to “ease themselves into teaching”. Part of the problem was the under specification of the ELA duties, as an ELA explains in a YouTube video on the subject.

Extract 2

So, the description on the *Carta de Nombramiento*, which is a letter that you get in your email, that describes your job requirements and things like that, it actually says our job is “student linguistic support”, okay? So unfortunately this actually means a lot to a lot of different people, different coordinators, different teachers, everyone seems to interpret it in their own way.”⁶

The vast width of such an unspecified job description (see also Dafouz & Hibler, 2013; Ehrenreich, 2006; Méndez García & Pavón Vázquez, 2012) means that all stakeholders, from the Ministry of Education to ELAs, infuse the context with their particular expectations and objectives, which may vary significantly from school to school (Byram & Alred, 1993). However, what we saw through and through was that the success of the post (for both parties) was constructed as the responsibility of the ELA. According to the Catalan programme officer, “it all depends on you: you can open up to what they [the school] offer” you or you can sit on a chair and get depressed”.⁷ And as future advice for ELAs, he suggests that “they shouldn't only think of themselves as language resources but give 200% of themselves and get involved in school life”. This means that, for a successful experience, ELAs have to consider their job not as part-time but as requiring intensive (volunteer) involvement with the school. In the BC guide (2015: 17), similar recommendations are provided.

This was not what Michael wanted nor expected. One of his expressed interests in joining the programme –as opposed to doing an internship abroad– was the part-time nature it facilitated. Unlike many LAs, he was not teaching private lessons in the evenings. Hence, even if he was fulfilling his *explicit* professional duties and working the established hours, he was not complying with what was *implicitly* expected of him, prompting the let-down they were experiencing.

5.2. *Tension 2: ELAs as country/culture representatives or individuals with particular histories?*

The ELA programme was founded on the dual desire “to expose learners to real (‘authentic’) language” and “aid their understanding of neighbouring countries and cultures” (Rowles & Rowles, 2005: 3). These two goals still constitute its core. In this section, we aim to discuss the second of these objectives; the first one will be examined in the next section.

The programme was initially devised to fulfil a state diplomacy agenda (McLelland, 2018), with a particular emphasis on facilitating peaceful neighbouring relations. ELAs were then (and are still now) not only imagined as “inspiring embodiments of another culture” (Rowles & Rowles, 2005: 3), but as representatives of their states. The imagery of the programme has many elements of banal nationalism (Billig, 1995). Flags and maps are everywhere, but also iconic country images. LAs are spoken about as “ambassadors” of their home countries and in the reception organised in Madrid (of course the capital) in September they are welcomed to Spain by the (real) ambassadors of their respective countries “who speak to them in their language”. “It’s like the UN”, described to us the head of the programme in Catalonia. As “ambassadors” they do not only represent their country, but must actively work to promote and “sell” it (British Council, 2018a: 6). The LA is, thus, not just an individual UK citizen sent abroad; s/he must strive to be a “positive example” because it is the whole country s/he is representing not just himself/herself. ELAs are thus conceived as components of the UK soft power infrastructure headed by the BC. As we discussed in section 3, the notion of soft power is grounded on a country gaining political or economic influence through the attractiveness of its customs, traditions, art, literature, food, films, etc., that is, elements of what is usually understood as “national culture”.

Country and culture go hand-in-hand in the official programme rhetoric (“the UK and its culture” reads Extract 4). We also note that *culture* is regularly employed in the singular. Nation-state ideologies (one state-one culture-one language-one territory) clearly underpin the

scheme. However, having UK nationality may not be enough to be considered an appropriate (cultural) representative for the UK. “Those educated abroad who hold a UK passport will have their knowledge of UK culture tested by looking at their application and potentially at a telephone interview or further assessment stage.” (British Council, 2018b: 1).

The existence of a testing mechanism indicates that the programme’s approach to culture is essentialist. A single UK culture, reified, homogeneous and testable, is imagined. More evidence of this monolithic view on culture is provided in the extract below, which is taken from the ELA guide section by the BC providing recommendations on how to incorporate culture into class activities.

Extract 3

Past assistants have found that the following materials worked well: Photos of family and friends and your home town, lots of postcards, examples of UK coins and notes, train tickets and timetables, stamps, posters and tea towels to decorate walls, Christmas cards and crackers, posters and games, UK TV programmes and listings, magazines and local newspapers, CDs, photos of school uniforms, a school timetable and school report, flashcards, word searches, maps, tourist brochures, UK food (marmite, jelly, chocolate, custard, mince pies, gravy granules, etc), adverts, menus, cartoons, comic books, DVDs (e.g. Ready Steady Cook for catering students), simple recipes e.g. scones, recordings of the weather forecast, London tube map, tapes of friends’ accents and conversations, bingo, Taboo etc. (British Council, 2018a: 26)

Apart from the anachronistic flair of these recommendations in our online era, by suggesting that LAs should bring such memorabilia to their destined school, the BC is listing what it considers “appropriate” UK culture to be shown abroad (marmite, the London tube, scones, Christmas crackers, etc.). In that sense, it is prescriptive of what constitutes “authentic” UK culture. Of course, ELAs are free to use other artefacts (or none, as Michael did), but instead of working towards breaking down stereotypes of the home country abroad (as the programme aims to do according to Rowles and Rowles (2005: 26)), it seems as though there is a push towards reinforcing these (see also Ehrenreich, 2006, along the same lines).

The culturalist approach to the figure of the LA, apart from having the potential for excluding those candidates that do not fit the stereotype, also means that LAs were constructed as fundamentally different from their host students and teachers. By insisting on culture, the programme somehow otherises LAs; that is, it constructs them as distinct others. This may lead to feelings of uneasiness, such as those experienced by Jessica. As is customary across the LA

programme, Jessica was requested by the school to give each class a powerpoint presentation introducing herself with photographs of her life in Ireland, her school, family, and hobbies. She recalls the situation with discomfort as it felt as though she was expected to entertain each group with the amusement being based on her Irish traditions and extensive family. Although Jessica was not seen as inferior, she was constructed as an exotic “other”. Exoticisation may lead to objectification, which is a process Jessica also experienced.

Jessica relates how, during the sessions, students and teachers alike felt at ease to comment, judge and often laugh at her customs, the political-religious situation in Ireland, and the same-sex, same-faith schools her cousins had attended. Although the conversation inherently concerned her, she was systematically excluded from the debate as it was held amongst peers and teachers. A similar situation often occurred in the staff room, where teachers would humorously talk across to each other about the fact that she was drinking tea, without her being part of the joke. However, we would like to claim that objectification is not only present in Jessica’s individual experience, but rather it is inscribed in the programme’s imagination. On the slides shown during the LA introductory sessions in Madrid, applicants are reminded that “in order to comply with their job correctly they must satisfy their students curiosity by speaking about themselves.” (Subdirección General de Cooperación Internacional y Promoción Exterior Educativa, 2017: slide 14). The wording of this LA responsibility constructs a power relationship where LAs are assigned a subordinate role.

While Jessica resented objectification, Michael found culturalisation particularly problematic. On several occasions, he had expressed his intention of putting some distance between himself and his national frustration through the ELA programme.

Extract 4

He is very happy to get away and is glad that we do not know anyone in common because he wants to reinvent himself (reinvent is my word, which he agrees on). He tells me that Ireland never really goes away because as soon as he arrived here he met so many Irish people (which he has tried to avoid doing since) and all the teachers at Pinetree asked him on the first day whether he was Catholic or Protestant (he wasn't pleased about this). He says that “everyone” knows and has been to Ireland, that even Maria knows all the words to Molly Malone. He says it is strange because nobody back home knows about Catalonia. (Fieldnotes by J. McDaid, 18th January 2017)

Despite the plan to unburden himself, Michael found this almost impossible to do once he arrived; his national identity, with its corresponding baggage, was immediately called upon at the school. Coming from a city on the Irish border, and from a country with such a turbulent and painful history regarding religion and politics, the teachers' direct questions about Michael's faith would have certainly been uncomfortable. Despite the school's socializing intentions to greet Michael over breakfast the morning he arrived by singing Irish "national heritage" *Molly Malone*, this was at the expense of him being asked to broadcast his "culture", which is something he did not expect, and more importantly, did not want or enjoy.

5.3. Tension 3: The nativeness of ELAs: valued or challenged?

Nativeness is not only central to the programme; it is its *raison d'être*. From the onset, the need for LAs was justified on the grounds that they would help introduce spoken communication into the FL classroom. At a time when FL education was translation-based and FL teachers were most often not fluent in the target language, the LA figure was essential to achieve this. A hundred years on, despite the myriad possibilities for communication and travel and scholarly problematisation of the native speaker (Cook, 1999), the programme continues to draw on the same model to justify the key role of ELAs in the FL classroom. Through the scheme students are said to have "invaluable access to native speakers", according to Rowles & Rowles (2005: 3).

The native speaker ELA discourse has two axes. On the one hand, the ELA is construed as guaranteeing correctness. Among the duties of the LA is to "provide a model of phonetic and grammatical correctness in the corresponding FL" (Departament d'Ensenyament de la Generalitat de Catalunya, 2017: 14). Thus, as well as fostering face-to-face communication (usually in small groups), ELAs uniquely ensure that students receive quality input. In fact, employing one (or several assistants) has become a practice of distinction among (mostly private) schools in Spain in recent years (see Relaño-Pastor & Fernández-Barrera, 2019). On

the other hand, as “real” speakers of the target language, LAs are said to “awaken students’ curiosity and motivation for the language” (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2017: 7). They are also said to facilitate language learning by creating authentic (“natural”) contexts of use. The value of LAs, then, is the fact that they are real speakers of the language (“it makes students realise that there are ‘real foreigners’ to whom they can relate”, Rowles & Rowles, 2005: 27). However, that “reality” is not unproblematic, as we shall see.

Maria, the head of English at Pinetree, described the assistantship programme as “fantastic for students” because they were tickled to have a young, native person who could explain things about their homeland, who they could connect with and who “had a REAL accent”. However, this positive outlook did not persist when she specifically talked about Michael. The main description awarded to him was that he had a very thick, small-town Northern Irish accent which was very difficult to comprehend (although he did acknowledge, and we also noticed, that he made a perceivable effort to accommodate his vowels to a more standard form of English). Michael’s accent was real, but clearly not desirable.

One of the complaints we often heard was that John, Michael’s predecessor, was able to switch to a more standard accent to communicate within the school. The explanation given by Maria was that he had been to university (and Maria remarked that “nobody speaks Mancunian at university”). Michael had been to university too (although it is significant that Maria seems to forget this), but he was not a language specialist. As such, he might not have been as aware as John of the ways in which language variation may affect mutual understanding. However, rather than attributing John’s accent “adaptability” to his academic background, it was attributed to his more travelled and cosmopolitan life. Michael, by contrast, was construed as a small-town person with a parochial outlook. His broad accent fed into –and was a consequence of– that construal.

One of the things Michael remarked on in the interview was how little Spanish people seemed to know about regional varieties of English in the UK. This indicates how his “real”

English must have become regularly thematised, both in the school and outside. Michael's bewilderment at the lack of realisation, and, hence, appreciation, for the richness of accent diversity across the UK reveals how deeply ingrained the myth of the standard speaker is in the FL field. Although, as we have seen in Extract 3, new ELAs were encouraged to bring "tapes of friends' accents and conversations, bingo, Taboo etc." as authentic materials to "make language learning real" (British Council, 2018a: 26), no reference is made in any of the official programme documents reviewed to sociolinguistic variation. This ideological erasure is not entirely surprising, and is in line with the monologic understandings of culture discussed in the previous tension.

There was still another reason that contributed to devaluing Michael's nativeness. It was institutional. Located in a working-class area, the objective of Pinetree had been to democratise access to English for their students (for a long time considered the cultural capital of the (upper)middle-classes). To do this, the school needed to elaborate a discourse which deproblematized far-from-perfect uses of the language both on the part of the student body and the teachers, especially the non-language specialists who taught their classes in English (Codó, 2017). This is the discursive order in which Michael got inserted.

Michael was obviously regarded as a very competent speaker of English who would help students (and some teachers) with their English, but he was not construed as the aspiring speaker model. Instead, what most teachers emphasised was his youth, and the way in which he was able to "connect" more easily with the students. This was also the framing of the 16-year-old students we interviewed. They said they got on well with him "because he is young and a nice guy". At no point was there any mention of what they learned from him. Rather, when asked to explain what they did with Michael in class they all said, "play games". So, Michael was associated with having fun, similar to the pedagogy of enthusiasm described by Jakubiak (2016).

Michael's teachings or native identity was not what students appreciated most. In fact, the low achievers expressed their reservations about Michael, not as a person, but at a monolingual, “native” teacher. They found it difficult to talk to him because he did not know Spanish, and this forced them to speak monolingually, something they were not used to doing (note that, even if LAs speak Spanish, acting monolingually is one of the recommendations of the guide published by the Spanish Ministry (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, 2017: 23)).

In the content classes that were taught in English, Michael was employed differently depending on the teacher or the nature of the class. In some cases, he was turned into a dictionary of sorts; in some others, because of the specialist nature of the course, lexical aid was soon discarded. Such was the case of the technology class for 15/16-year-olds, where Michael’s task was generally confined to reading instructions. On one such occasion, we were audio-recording the lesson. The scene (a part of which is provided in Extract 7 below) is the following. The teacher reads the instructions for an exercise, then asks Michael to read them again. After Michael has finished reading, we can hear one student humorously challenging the more authoritative stance that the teacher has interactionally constructed for the ELA by having Michael provide a correctly-sounding (native) version of the same instructions he has just read. “I know how to do this as well”, retorts the student, which provokes general laughter in the class. The scene continues with the teacher having Omar read. Omar is a student of Moroccan origin who had been living in Australia for a few years with this family. After Omar’s (much admired) reading (considering the comments the tape recorder picked up), this brief interaction took place, where accents are evaluated and compared and a consensus is reached as to which of the three accents (Australian, Spanish or Irish) is better.

Extract 7

J: Jordi (teacher); S (students)

- 01 J: =so::\ is easie::r/ an Australian/ accent\ tha::n\
02 ((some Ss laugh))
- 03 S: a Spanish accent
- 04 J: than/ Ireland\

05 J: e::h/ (.) [Spani:sh/
 06 S: [Spanish accent\ [i::s\ (.) [is better\
 07 J: [is/ [the most understandable for all of us\ (.) right\

Although the whole scene has to be taken lightly, it is relevant how both the students and the teacher collude to construct an alternative regime of value for their Spanish-sounding English. In this locally-situated regime, their accented English is not only legitimised, but constructed as actually more functional than native-sounding varieties.

6. Discussion and conclusions

In this article we have attempted to problematise the reality of the ELA programme in the 21st century. We have cast a critical eye on the predominantly positive discourse on the ELA figure found in the literature (e.g. Dafouz and Hibler, 2013) and the media, as well as tried to explain some of the reasons why the programme may turn out to be a disappointing enterprise for assistants and schools alike. We have put programme discourse in dialogue with a highly contextual examination of the experience of one British ELA, combined with ethnographic snapshots of two others, as well as ELA narratives found online. Our analysis has brought to the fore some of the tensions the ELA figure encapsulates. While it is advertised (and seen by many) as temporary, risk-free employment in a foreign country requiring no specific skills or qualifications (akin to e.g. au-pairing and *Workaway* experiences), this was not quite the case. Our data has shown that the teachers at Pinetree Secondary were actually anticipating somebody with some experience and/or expertise in education, somebody who did not need much coaching or “looking after” around the school or in class. They were awaiting Michael to pro-actively suggest activities to do, that is, carve out his own teaching role for himself. But Michael thought of himself as a mere speaker of English, not a teacher. The underspecification of the LA duties facilitated this mismatch of expectations, which was not understood as a structural deficit of the programme, but rather that the LA was not cut out for the job or was mainly interested in paid holidays. As one webpage put it “if you are just interested in effortless

paid tourism, we would advise you not to apply”. While this seems sensible enough, it runs contrary to the way the appeal of the programme is presented by bodies such as the BC, and the seemingly touristic propaganda it uses to encourage applicants.

Admittedly, some of the problematics we have identified with the programme may affect ELAs across the board, and not just the newer profiles. Such is the case of its culturalist conceptualisation, grounded on nationalist ideas, where native speakers are represented as embodying the nation. As we said, culturalisation is always unfair, because it erases many other fault lines of inequality, such as class, gender, race, religion and sexuality. But when culture is understood as a list of testable items, it also provides the justification for exerting power and excluding those deemed unfitting. We have seen how the programme tended to exoticise and objectify ELAs, and while this affected all ELAs, it may cause more discomfort to ELAs like Michael for whom the cultural immersion framing often associated with FL education may have sounded quite alien. In addition, we have claimed that the serious diplomacy/state representative role assigned to ELAs in the programme is at odds with the tourist propaganda employed to encourage applicants. Michael was eager to regularly discuss what Holliday terms *small cultures* (1999), in this case, the differences in school culture between the two countries. He was particularly puzzled by the close relationship between students and teachers in Catalonia/Spain, as opposed to his experience back home. However, he tried to get away from being showcased in national cultural terms –let alone being a UK ambassador– because it ran against his individual life project in applying for the LA job. More broadly, the nation-state soft power agenda does not seem to fit well with the cosmopolitan and skill-acquisition orientation the BC is trying to give to the programme.

Michael’s ambivalent opinion and experience of the programme was balanced out by his personal experience in Barcelona. In fact, this is what he mentioned as the highlight of the year “not because the job is bad, it’s just I’ve had a lot of fun in Spain, d’you know”. In a way, the gains of being an LA do not differ substantially from those of being an au-pair (the cultural

immersion part and skills development is also foregrounded in the promotional literature for au-pairing). Although we are aware that the experience may differ in several terms, it is interesting to notice the similarities. Both (together with commercial ELT) are part of the global infrastructure that facilitates and funds the global mobility of English native speakers but that also fuels the (re)production of language-based inequalities locally. Most of these inequalities centre around the nativeness (or lack of it) of English language educators.

Even though it seems true that native English varieties continue to hold prestige worldwide (Tupas & Rubdy, 2015), we must, first, empirically determine whether this is the case for specific locales (Duchêne, 2011, makes a similar point with regard to the value of multilingualism). Our data suggests that, in the case of Michael, nativeness was problematised. This is because, on the one hand, he did not fit the programme ideological imagination of a real native speaker as a standard speaker, and on the other, his nativeness clashed with school's agenda for democratising access to English. In addition, low-achieving students found it hard to relate to him monolingually, which, again, questions some of the programme's founding ideas.

Second, we must ascertain whether prestige translates into economic value (better posts, higher salaries, etc). Research has shown that nativeness gives quick access to jobs, but that those jobs are precarious, unstable and seasonal (Bruzos, 2017; Stanley, 2016), exactly the same as the ELA scheme. Although one may claim that ELA posts are temporary and not comparable to other teaching jobs, we want to claim that they are not. The LA scheme begins to socialise NS would-be English teachers into the insecurity and precariousness that will define their work life if they decide to pursue a "career" as English teachers in Catalonia. We have claimed elsewhere (Codó, 2018) that the only way for English-language teachers to be able to access a stable and decently-paying post is to enter mainstream education. To do that, however, is not easy, especially for foreigners. Most of the "post-service" LAs we know who have decided to continue living in Catalonia have engrossed the list of underpaid NS ELT

teachers (Thornbury, 2001). Some have tried to make a career in private international schools, where access to teaching posts is much easier than in publicly-funded schooling, as they are not regulated by the state, and where nativeness (combined with experience, qualifications and certain attitudinal traits) may be valued. However, these jobs also tend to be unstable and exploitative as some scholars have pointed out (Bunnell, 2016).

We want to conclude by encouraging more ethnographic research into the figure of the LA. Despite the limitations of this study, the ethnographic data on which it is based brings new light to the field for researchers to begin to comprehend what the figure means today and what the assistantship programme does (or does not do) to those involved (LAs, main teachers, students, schools). Furthermore, we would like to suggest investigation on ambivalent profiles of non-native speakers taking on the role of LAs, especially in the case of citizens coming from former colonies, to investigate issues of native-speakerism, legitimacy and authenticity. Finally, a more in-depth study on the subject of LA youth in connection with the pedagogy of enthusiasm in the world of ELT would be necessary.

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² Many stories and anecdotes of these early days can be found in the publication “Breaking the Barriers: 100 years of the Language Assistantship Programme” (Rowles & Rowles, 2005).

³ <https://www.britishcouncil.org/study-work-abroad/english-language-assistants/spain>. Last accessed 9th May 2018.

⁴ <http://capsassistants.com>. Last accessed 9th May 2018.

⁵ We want to thank Andrea Sunyol for taking care of this as part of her ethnography of Forum International School.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rL-HeghGxvo>. Last accessed 15th May 2018.

⁷ This seemed to be a circulating discourse as a similar opinion regarding a former ELA was expressed at Jessica's school; "it is up to the LA whether they want to sit in a corner, repressed, or not".

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Appendix

Symbols used in the transcripts

(.) short pause (0.5 seconds)	[start of overlapping talk
(()) transcriber's descriptions	= latching
a:: lengthening of sound	\ descending intonation
- self interruption	/ rising intonation