# Ethnographic Encounters with Young Language Learners in an Urban Primary School of Oaxaca*

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## Abstract

The article reports on a long-term ethnographic study with pre-service EFL teachers teaching a group of working-class 4th and 5th grade students in Oaxaca, Mexico. The authors present ethnographic narratives on three different language encounters that took place among these students and student-teachers. They illustrate that by listening to the kinds of imagined communities that students envision, we can begin to see how bilingual/multilingual encounters can open up spaces for creative and aesthetics actions. The performative activities taking place in these complex interactions allow the children, teachers and researchers to examine their identities and to express their agencies in new and imaginative ways. Through a framework of critical pedagogy, the analysis of these narratives suggests a way to move beyond the concreteness of these particular contexts towards more hopeful worlds of social responsibility and justice.

El artículo se trata de un estudio etnográfico a largo plazo con maestros practicantes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL), haciendo su práctica docente con un grupo de alumnos de clase trabajadora que están en 4o y 5o grado en Oaxaca, México. Los autores presentan las narrativas etnográficas de tres encuentros lingüísticos entre dichos maestros y alumnos. Estos encuentros demuestran que si ponemos atención a las posibilidades o »comunidades imaginadas« que los alumnos crean, podemos empezar a percibir cómo estos encuentros bilingües/multilingües pueden abrir espacios para acciones creativas y estéticas. Las actividades performativas que ocurren durante estas interacciones complejas permiten a los niños, maestros, e investigadores examinar sus identidades y expresar su agencia en formas novedosas e imaginativas. A través de un marco teórico de la pedagogía crítica, el análisis de estas narrativas señala una manera de pensar más allá de la especificidad de estos contextos e ir con esperanza hacia un mundo de responsabilidad y justicia social.

## Introduction

For over the last two years we have been tracking a group of students through their 4th and 5th grade classes in an urban primary school in the city of Oaxaca. The Language Center at the state university of Oaxaca has, for the past several years, been placing its practice teachers in urban classrooms to provide introductory classes in English. However, the class we have been observing is somewhat different in that the students come from very humble backgrounds and several of the male students are from the *Ciudad de los Niños*, a children's shelter and orphanage in Oaxaca. Through our encounters with the practice teachers (*Yesenia*,

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Rosi and Irma), the children in the classroom, and the homeroom teachers, we felt that our research should be focused on how the language performances in the classroom were more dramatic and profound than just the utilitarian presentation of grammar and pronunciation skills. The young children were becoming aware that they could imagine many different outcomes for their lives, the student teachers found that they could imagine how to bring their concerns for social justice into the classroom, the homeroom teachers could see new ways for these children to learn and we could envision new dynamics for the process of doing ethnography (Fabian, 2007).

Fabian stresses that "ethnography is product of interaction, with speaking as its major, though not only medium, it is dialogical" and that "[w]hat we take away from research as data is only sometimes found, most often it is made" (2007, p. 13). Thus this "emphasis on communication and language in action made us realize how much of cultural knowledge and hence ethnography is performative" and "what we learn does not come as responses to our questions but is enacted in, and mediated by, events which we may trigger but cannot really control" (ibid). Fabian states that the "goal of anthropology or challenge to understand (and demonstrate) humanity's unity … depends on recognizing the presence or co-temporaneity (co-equvalency) with whom we study" (2007, p. 3). We refer to our methods, interviews, observations, and protocols as ethnographic performances. And it is within these performative dynamics that the co-equivalency of all the participants is composed. It is within this dynamic context of co-equivalency that we (the social actors of these ethnographic encounters) are changing social and personal objectives of language learning, particularly in terms of additional language acquisition (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007), contesting the geopolitics of knowledge production through our collaborative efforts against the colonial difference (Mignolo, 2002), and composing sets of learning styles and strategies that are non-hegemonic through the assumption that knowledge is something to be used not owned (Clemente & Higgins, 2008; Lins Ribeiro, 2006).

Thus, in this paper we will present what we have ethnographically encountered as to this point in our research. This will involve briefly describing the state and city of Oaxaca, providing a background of the students and the student-teachers, offering interpretative observations of classroom interaction, and using critical pedagogy to move beyond the concreteness of our particular contexts towards more social responsibility and diversity. These ethnographic encounters suggest that activities of language learning can be spaces where the imagined has more far reaching implications than the utilitarian goals of grammar and pronunciation.

## The Context

Oaxaca is located in the southwestern region of Mexico. It is a small state in terms of territorial size and population. The current population is estimated to be approaching four million. The overall political economy of Oaxaca is a regional variation of national patterns of neo-liberal policies of development (Higgins, 1997). The economy of the city of Oaxaca is centered on mercantile enterprises, tourism, and small scale 'artisan' production. The class structure of both the city and the state includes a very small upper-class elite, a large and diverse middle

class and the popular classes. The social and political realities of this social division of labor can be understood in terms of the dynamics of the formal and informal sectors of the economy (Higgins & Coen, 2008).

The formal sectors of these social and economic spaces are organized around a set of assumed rational rules and regulations that are supposed to be applied equally to everyone. These are the social fields of Mexico's larger industries, the country's vast networks of commercial and financial institutions and national, state and local governmental agencies. This is the world of profits, formal wages, taxes and bureaucratic procedures and processes. The informal sector involves those social spaces where small or larger businesses operate outside the legal requirements of wages, health insurance and job protection. It is where one can get services or products without paying taxes or import duties or where one, when dealing with government institutions at any level, can find a way to get something done beyond the actual rules and procedures (Higgins, 1997).

The need to move in between these two sectors is a reality for all social classes of contemporary Mexico and Oaxaca, where one's class position and location affects how effective one's movements can be. This division of formal and informal sectors is expressed differently in rural and urban settings of Oaxaca. The rural areas of Oaxaca are composed of either indigenous or mestizo villages anchored in extreme poverty. Interwoven into this rural social structure, there is a middle income sector that is composed of merchants, small land holders, teachers and government officials. The urban areas of Oaxaca are composed of urban popular classes (ranging from the urban poor to the working class), a diverse middle class of small business owners and professionals, and an elite level divided between the old money of Oaxaca and new money of politics and international commerce (Murphy, Stepick , Morris & Winter, 2002).

The children presented in this essay come from the urban popular classes. When we began this ethnographic encounter there were 18 children in the class, four girls and fourteen boys. Several of the boys were from the children's shelter, several others were from single-head households (in one case the child was in care of her grandmother) and many lived in households where the fathers were working in the United States. Parents worked in a variety of jobs found among the popular classes; they were construction workers, small scale vendors or domestic laborers. Crises of health, economic scarcity, and domestic violence were part of the tapestry of these households.

These children were attending afternoon classes that were set up to meet the realities of such households. Both homeroom teachers (for the fourth and fifth grades) were veteran teachers who were concerned about the children and showed genuine compassion for the difficult, everyday struggles of these children and their households.

Ignacio Allende Primary School is located on one of the main streets in the center of the city. The building was constructed over 50 years ago; it is a two story building with an L-like structure, and a large cement patio area. The classroom is on the second floor. It is a larger room, with widows on the street side, overhead lighting, an array of desks, storage areas, the homeroom teacher's desk and per-

sonal space, and the most prestigious area-- the computer. The room is in no way fancy but is an adequate learning space (1).

Urban primary schools are centered on Spanish, with no officially mandated amount of English instruction. In the rural areas there may be multilingual programs that include both Spanish and the local indigenous language. In the urban areas, there are attempts at bilingual education with English instruction in some private schools. However, English, or any other foreign language, is not an official requirement in the public schools of Mexico at the primary level. Thus, parents who can afford it often send their children to private language schools for either English or other language instruction. At the *Facultad de Idiomas*, students in the English teaching degree program are encouraged to do their teaching practicum in the public primary schools of the city. This is a popular program because it means the schools can offer English without having to bear the cost. Students, teachers and parents are very happy to get English instruction from the student-teachers (Clemente & Higgins, 2008).

**The Student Teachers**

Yesenia (who is in her early twenties) was the first English student teacher to work with these students during their fourth grade year (2007-08). She finished her coursework last year, and is now working as a part time teacher elsewhere. Currently, Rosi and Irma, who are also in their twenties and students in the eighth semester of the bachelor's degree in TEFL, are working as the English student teachers for the same class in their fifth grade year (2008-09). They are fulfilling their social services requirement for graduation by working with these students. All three are excellent students who were searching for a context where their teaching of English could be more than isolated language exercises. They wanted an opportunity to link their teaching to their concerns for social justice. Yesenia says "[I want to] give them something almost unreachable for poor people: the knowledge of English, but I am also giving them something else. I give them love and attention. I am trying to make them stronger, to have courage to go on, to change their lives". Rosi and Irma share this view: "We believe that everything creates a chain… If we mistreat them, they will repeat this type of behavior… And if they are mistreated in other places, we will only teach them to be more aggressive. We want to show them another way."

Yesenia, Rosi, and Irma's concern for social justice is also evidenced in their commitment to using both English and Spanish in their daily classroom instruction. They recognize that their students are in the early stages of English language acquisition, so Spanish is used as a resource to help them access their prior knowledge and experiences, to develop critical thinking skills, and to explore new understandings. In addition, the mix of Spanish and English creates a positive affective environment that results in greater student engagement and investment in learning. As Toribio (2004) notes, "*not* mixing languages … [in this classroom] would be considered irregular and socioculturally insensitive" (p. 136).

## English Lessons and the Everyday Lives of the Students

Rosi and Irma's Teaching Practice

When we arrived at Ignacio Allende School's fifth grade classroom, the students were all sitting, attentively listening, and looking at the whiteboard. The homeroom teacher was explaining something about math. We greeted him and looked for a chair at the back. The teacher finished his explanation and moved to the computer desk with his back to the whole class. When it was evident that the person in charge had changed, the students also changed their attitude and behavior; that is, there was a marked difference between the English class taught by Irma and Rosi and the students' "regular" class with the homeroom teacher. The teacher generally stands in the front of the class by the whiteboard, and the students sit in rows, attentively listening to the teacher and writing in their books and notebooks. When the teacher realized that the English teachers had arrived, he stopped teaching to give "the stage" to them. Immediately the students started moving chairs around because they knew that they would be engaged in activities of a very different nature.

In Rosi and Irma's class the students are always moving around and working on activities that involve games, arts and crafts, and loud noise. Rosi and Irma say that the homeroom teacher is undoubtedly "más estricto" (more strict) than they are (2). They are "más relajadas" (more relaxed). However, the homeroom teacher is extremely supportive of everything Rosi and Irma do in class, no matter how rambunctious the students get. As Rosi and Irma say, he knows that this is their time for them to be the teachers, so he gives them total control of the class. The students know that the English class is very different from their regular daily work.

A Class Activity: Choose a Profession

On one occasion the class was learning about professions. Rosi and Irma prepared several activities to introduce students to different occupations that reflected both skilled and non-skilled labor, in addition to professional careers. One day before class, they asked us for a few English translations. They wanted to know, for example, how to translate the word "albañil" into English. After some discussion, we agreed that "construction worker" might be a better translation than "mason," since "albañil" can refer to anyone who works in construction rather than just stone workers in particular. In discussing the translation of "barrendero," we talked about the fact that the word "street sweeper" in the U.S. generally refers to a machine (a truck), rather than a person. We also had difficulty finding an English translation for "cargador." We came up with words like "skycap" and "bellhop," but concluded that they are too restrictive because they refer only to people who work in airports and hotels. After consulting the dictionary, we came up with "stevedore," which is a bit old-fashioned but better reflects the range of meanings they intended. Clearly, Rosi and Irma wanted to include in their presentation of occupations a range of jobs that are common in the Oaxacan context.

A week later, Irma asked the students which were the professions they had talked about the previous week, and as they shouted out their answers, she wrote them on the board. Someone said "teacher!"

Another wanted "astronauta" in Spanish. Irma translated "astronaut". Another one remembered "pilot!" and shouted it out, while another one remembered "chemist!"

Armando was trying to remember something and said: "Wis-er?...wider?....mesero!!

"Waiter" said Irma, and wrote it on the blackboard. Irma wrote "teacher" on the other side of the whiteboard to start a new list and asked them to give more examples of professions:

"¡Cazador!" Irma wrote "hunter."

"¡Cantante! Cantor"! Irma wrote "singer."

"Arquitecto" and Irma wrote "architec" (sic). She hesitated about the spelling.

José complained about the list:

"¡Yo queria arquitecto!" (I wanted architect!). Damián joined him:

"¡Yo no me se ninguno!" (I do not know any of those!)

Rosi arrived and Irma asked her to check her spelling on the board. Rosi spoted the missing "t" and added it. Next Irma explained the activity:

"Tienen que escoger una profesion y escribirla en su pedazo de papel" (You have to choose a profession and write it down on your piece of paper). She also told them to arrange their chairs in a circle. It was evident that they had played the game before. Very creatively, some of them played around with some variations: filling the piece of paper with too much scotch tape, sticking the piece of paper on their legs or on their heads, or even using the back of the paper to write a different profession, which some of them defined as cheating.

The game was a variation of the popular musical chairs game. It started with Irma standing in the middle of the circle and saying: "La teacher viene por los hunters" (The teacher takes the hunters). All the students who had a piece of paper labeled "hunter" had to stand up and find a different chair to sit in. Meanwhile, Irma would sit in one of the empty chairs, so one of the hunters would be missing a chair. This student had to stand in the middle of the circle and make the next announcement. He said "El hunter viene por los actors!" (The hunter takes the actors). There was some discussion about some of them playing with too many professions. Soon it was evident that there were more actors, hunters and teachers than singers, which meant that the singers could never win. Irma announced that the ones that lost three times had to dance. José started dancing in a provocative way and everybody started chanting "¡Que baile! ¡Que baile!" (Dance! Dance!) pointing to Anita. Irma showed them the dance she wanted: "El pollo mueve la patita, el pollo mueve las alitas, el pollo mueve el piquito, el pollo mueve la colita" (The chicken moves its leg, the chicken moves its wings, the chicken moves its beak, the chicken moves its tail). There were laughs and giggles when the chicken moved its tail. Now, Anita had to do it. She was very

nervous and hardly moved. Irma finished the song and asked her to sit down while most of the boys complained that she did not dance properly. Irma restarted the game. This time Damián pushed Adan and he fell. Everybody laughed. Damián did not want to lose. He also refused to dance. Everybody was looking at him. He defended himself: "¡Yo no perdí! ¡Todavia no es mi tercera vez!" (I didn't lose! This is not my third time!). Irma decided that it was time to finish the game.

Now it was Rosi's turn. She started with some instructions: "¡Formen dos grupos!" (Divide into two teams!) We are going to play a word game". But nobody paid attention. Some were relaxing from the last activity, and others were attracted to the computer, where Rosi had started a program. She repeated the instruction several times. There were some attempts to form the teams (some boys used this chance to embrace the only two girls in the class), but nothing concrete happened. To motivate them, Irma told them that she would give balloons to the ones that were already in a team. Everybody shouted that they had a team. Their main goal was now to get a balloon, and Rosi was completely ignored. Everybody was around Irma, who was struggling with them. She had managed to inflate some balloons and given them away. Fredy and Fernando started playing volleyball. At one moment, Mariano got the bag of balloons and everybody surrounded him. Adan got four balloons and tied them together. Armando and David were competing to blow them bigger. Santiago was holding the balloon pump and threatened Sonia to blow hers up. Irma managed, with some difficulty, to get it back. Now, Santiago wanted Sonia to notice him simulating masturbating movements with the balloon in between his legs. Again, the lesson finished when somehow the movie was started and all the kids gathered around the computer. Rosi and Irma seemed relieved that their time was over.

As we see it, the overall style of classroom management (or lack of) used by Irma and Rosi gives the students a very fluid context for performing their particular expressions of agency. Students choose where to sit, to work independently or in groups, to collaborate or not. They go in and out of groups, they move around the classroom, and they often gather around the desk next to Irma and Rosi to complete their work while talking to them. These alternative formats encourage student freedom and self-initiative, allow for exploration and negotiation of relationships within the class, and give the students opportunities to express themselves through multiple modes and media. There are diverse performative activities going on, such as formation of social groups, practices of gender games and overt expressions of sexuality. In allowing these flexible participation structures Irma and Rosi risk losing control of the class. They struggle with discipline issues, but they want to create spaces where the children's daily school routines are altered for a short time, thus encouraging and reinforcing student agency and initiative. Students will remember these activities more than how well they conjugated verbs or pronounced English words. Instead of attempting to control this bilingual and bicultural context, Irma and Rosi are composing new ways of learning and producing knowledge.

Yesenia's teaching practice

*During her work with this class, Yesenia was committed to creating a curriculum that included the everyday lives of the students. Below, we offer two examples, one dealing with household organization and the other with body types and diversity.*

Last year during Yesenia's student-teaching experience, she was pondering how to link a lesson on vocabulary to the reality of family structures. She was especially concerned about the situation in the classroom. As noted earlier, many of her male students came from a children's shelter. Some of them had been left there by their families and some didn't even know if they had families or not. Also, several students came from single-parent households. To make things more difficult, there were some children in the class that did live with their nuclear families. From this group, there was one, Santiago, who had discovered that he could bother his classmates by bragging about the fact that he had a "real" family. He took advantage of any opportunity to mention his mother, his house, and the fact that his father was in the U.S. and would bring him lots of presents from there. We discussed different ways of treating the topic, and some days later Yesenia came back to tell us about her lesson. She started her lesson by showing an excerpt from the animated movie Ice Age (Blue Sky Studios, 2002). After checking that everybody understood the main plot, she introduced the topic of alternative family structures, focusing on the way one of the characters describes their family: "We are a weird herd." The "family" in the movie was formed by "Sid, a fast talking but dimwitted sloth; Manny, a moody wooly mammoth; Diego, a devilish saber-toothed tiger; and a human baby" (ibid). Then she explained that families are very different, and she asked them to describe their families, taking into account not only relatives but also people they lived with and people they cared for. That way, Yesenia made it possible for her students to use English as a means to include their friends, their caretakers and all the other significant people that were part of their "herds" or households.

Yesenia's second question was a week later, when she told us about her plan to do a class session on body parts. This derived from the fact that she was worried because two of her students did not meet what was assumed to be the norm in terms of a "normal body:" Anita had a misshaped hand and Fernando was missing an ear. We discussed various possibilities, and some days later she visited us to report on her results. She had taught the names of the different parts of the body with separate pictures of each of them, to avoid presenting a complete "normal" body. Then she asked them to draw monsters using the vocabulary learned. She made it clear that she wanted them to use their creativity. The results were very attractive, varied and original. The students used their imagination to add elements to their drawings that expressed concerns about their identities and their connections to other imagined communities.

Yesenia knew that her students enjoyed making *cartulinas (posters)* more than writing. The drawing of cartulinas offered the students a stronger means of expression than attempting to stay within the framework of composition writing. Four of the students used existing materials and adapted them to the assignment by adding more parts of the body.

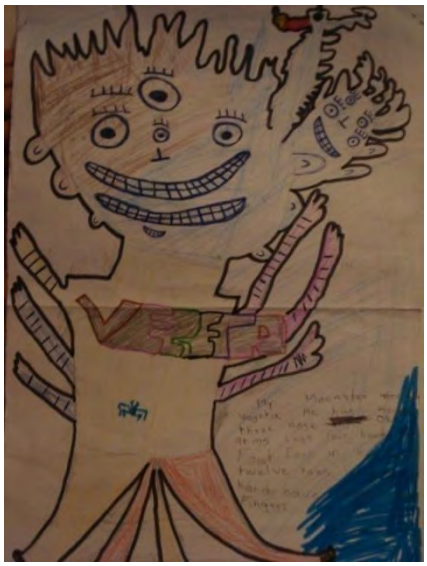

Figure 1: Federico's Vegeta

Several of the students used estampas (collectible cards that they exchange among themselves) showing their favorite characters from cartoons, movies or videogames. Others created their own monsters from scratch, adding features and details that contributed to their "monster-ness." A good example is Federico's Vegeta (see Figure 1). He started with the sketch of a human figure. Then he added two more legs in between the original ones and two pairs of arms below the first he drew. He did the same with the face, adding details to the "normal face". One interesting addition was a second head that seems to come from behind the main one. In between this two heads there was a dragon coming up from the left cheek. To finish it up he stamped a spider on his belly and wrote the name of the monster on its chest in a tattoo/graffiti style.

Whether they were copied or not, most of the monsters had a human resemblance (only two were more alien-like figures) decorated with cultural elements that were salient in the students' lives (graffiti, punk look, tattoos, piercing), and were things they aspired to have or do when they grow up. Although the purpose of the activity was clearly directed to learning the parts of the human body, some of them used non-human features like animal parts (antennas and horns) or even non organic elements (speakers, umbrella) to create their monsters. For us the high frequency of scars (e.g., Figure 2) was a direct connection with a Frankenstein type of monster; however, when we talked to the children they did not make that connection (some hadn't even heard of Frankenstein). This made sense when we realized that the scars were meant to symbolize street fights, with no link to the surgical interventions of Mary Shelly's character.

Figure 2: Ramon's monster with scars

According to Yesenia's instructions for creating a monster, they needed to add or take away parts of the body. That way they were learning the names and practicing the numbers. However, according to the students' view, their creations were monsters not only because of the way they looked but because of their personalities (e.g., bad, weird) or their behaviors (e.g., troublemaker, fighter, nocturnal, human eater).

Another salient feature of this activity was the fact that most of them added written texts to their creations. Often these texts were illegible to us because they had been erased, were unfinished, misspelled, or crossed out. Also some of these texts consisted of coded graffiti, the odd names of the monsters (which they decided was also the title of the drawing) or anything that they wanted to add. Jose's cartulina had the largest textual addition: "El Amor es aora escondido entre los hombres Parece una rosa (sic)" (Love is now hidden among men. It looks like a rose) -- see Figure 3.

Figure 3: Jose's monster and text

This activity was definitively an opportunity for the students to express themselves in creative and playful ways. The ludic aspect of this activity can be illustrated with Fredy's Portberto (see Figure 4), a female monster with a male name, who, apart from wearing a quilted skirt, a blouse with 15 buttons and a hat with flowers, does not fight, but sings.

The most developed cartulina was Edgar's Pandy (see Figure 5). Pandy does not have anything apparently monstrous about it. He is clearly a man. He has one eye not because he is a monster but because he is a fighter. His hair is arranged in a punk style and dyed in two different colors. He has a long scar from his neck to his waist. He is also characterized as a wrestler, bare to the waist, with tight leggings and high-top tennis shoes. He is wearing a belt with the word CHOLAS written in it. His white face (different from the color of his body) resembles a mask. José Edgar completed his creation with some drawings in the background: a bear face, a container and a sign. He explained to us that the bear is a Panda

*Figure 4: Fredy's Portberto*


*Figure 5: Edgar's Pandy*

bear that connected the monster with its name; the container is labeled PANDA and holds the chains that Pandy uses to fight. There is also a triangle sign that reads CHOLAS. Its function is marking territory and preventing trespassing. Edgar told us that the CHOLAS are the people who hang around in the streets.

Through these various activities, the particularities of Anita's and Fernando's bodies were no longer so exotic, but were just part of the diversity of how bodies are formed. The students participated in composing a discourse that expanded the boundaries of body types as they moved beyond pre-determined assumptions of what is viewed as "normal." As in their exploration of the diversity of household structures, and again in a playful way, they were adding their voices to how knowledge can be produced (3).

More *Cartulina* Activities

Drawing upon Yesenia's work with the children's use of *cartulinas*, Rosi and Irma have continued with these activities. As we've seen above, the *cartulinas* have given students the opportunity to express themselves through art, utilizing colored markers, glue, scissors and graphics. They integrate the use of written text in both Spanish and English, and pictures (e.g., drawings, clip art or magazine cut-outs) in creative ways. The objective is always to personalize the material being learned. For example, after a unit on jobs and occupations, the class worked on a *cartulina* to answer the question: "What do you want to be?" During a unit on describing locations, the class created *cartulinas* entitled "Where do you want to live?"

In Rosi and Irma's classroom the *cartulinas* have become an important outlet for self-expression, allowing the students to make the English language more authentic and relevant to their world. In this way, the *cartulinas* have also provided Rosi and Irma with a window into the students' lives and their hopes and desires for the future. They learned about Anuar's special relationship with his mom through a *cartulina* activity which asked the students to answer the question: "¿Con quien les gusta vivir?" (Who do you like to live with?). Rosi reflects: "Y el puse pues con su mama. Y en el futuro, ¿con quien te gustaría de seguir viviendo? Pues con mi mama, ¿no?" (And he then wrote with his mom. And in the future, Who would you like to keep living with? Well, with my mom, no?). Rosi concludes that this close relationship with his mother may be the reason why Anuar plays so well with the girls in the class, unlike the other boys: "Anuar… juega con las niñas... y yo digo que tiene mucho que ver con la relación que tiene con su mama … por que la quiere mucho… Habla de eso en la cartulina." (Anuar plays with the girls… and I say that this has a lot to do with the relationship he has with his mom. He talks about this in the poster).What do you want to be?

As mentioned earlier, after learning about jobs and occupations, the class worked on a *cartulina* entitled "What do you want to be?" The kids were supposed to write about what they wanted to be in the future and why. On the back side of the *cartulina*, they were also asked to write about what they *didn't* want to do in the future and why. Rosi and Irma wrote the following directions on the board:

*Yo quiero ser de grande _____.*
*I want to be _____ in the future.*
*¿Por qué?*
*Lo que no quiero ser de grande _____.*
*I don't want to be _____.*
*¿Por qué?*

The kids immediately started working. Rosi and Itezel had brought several different magazines for them to find relevant pictures. They had also brought clip art graphics with drawings of different professions (e.g., fireman, mailman, pilot, doctor, veterinarian, psychologist, teacher).

Several kids expressed very practical reasons for the jobs and occupations they chose for their future. Ernestina, for example, said she wanted to be a psychologist "Porque tengo que estar sentada" (Because I can be seated) and "Porque puedo mandar" (Because I can give orders). Antonio didn't want to be a fireman: "A mi no me gusta ser bombero porque te puedes quemar" (I don't like being a fireman because you can burn yourself). Fredy didn't want to be a pilot: "A mi no me gusta ser pilot porque casi no me gusta biajar (sic) porque me mareo" (I don't like being a pilot because I often don't like traveling because I get sick). Alberto expressed a concern for safety: He wanted to be a chef "porque trabajan en lugares seguros" (because they work in safe places). Finally, Roberto was more materialistic (see Figure 6): "I want to be a fireman ¿Yo quiero ser? Fireman porque apaga el fuego y gana mucho dinero" (What do I want to be? Fireman because they put out the fire and earn a lot of money).

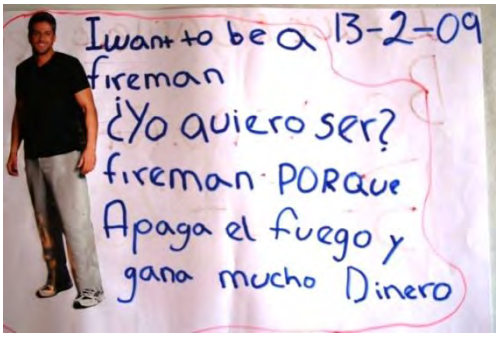


*Figure 6: Roberto's cartulina*

The kids also expressed idealistic hopes for future occupations. Many of them talked about a desire to help others and to make a difference. Anita wanted to be a doctor "para curar ninos" (to cure children).Vicente also wanted to be a doctor for several reasons: "Porque quiero salvar vidas. Porque quiero conocer bastantes curas de enfermedades incurables. Porque quireo cuidar a los enfermos. Curar a mi familia" (Because I want to save lives. Because I want to know many cures for incurable diseases. Because I want to take care of the sick. Cure my family). Sonia wanted to be a doctor, a lawyer, a chemist and an astronaut so she could "ayudar a la gente a cumplir obligaciones" (help people fulfill their obligations). Edgar wrote on his *cartulina*: "Yo quiero ser chemical (sic), quimico y doctor por que me gusta el oficio, para cuidar a las personas, para inventar cosas" (I want to be a chemist and a doctor because I like the occupation, to take care of people, to invent things). Antonio selected a picture of a mariachi singer

and wrote in his *cartulina* (see Figure 7): "Singer – cantante. Yo quiero ser cantante porque me (sic) a mi me gusta cantar canciones bonitas" (Singer -- I want to be a singer because I like to sing beautiful songs).

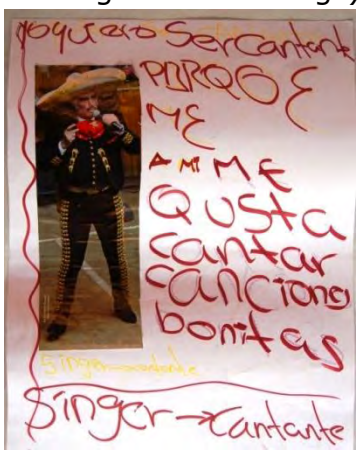


*Figure 7: Antonio's cartulina*

The students' sociocultural realities perhaps became more clearly depicted when they expressed what they *didn't* want to be in the future. Vicente, David, Damián and Roberto all said that they didn't want to be "borracho" (drunk). Damián added: "porque no me gustaria andar en la calle ni tomando" (because I wouldn't like to walk the streets or drink). Sonia didn't want to sweep the streets, to make candy or to be a beggar: "Lo que no quiero se: barredera, dulcera, pidiente lismona. (sic)" Finally, two boys reflected in their *cartulinas* the negative stereotypical image often assigned to teachers in the state of Oaxaca. Edgar said: "I don't want to be a teacher. Es orible no me gusta ser teacher (sic)" (It's horrible, I don't like being a teacher). Alberto was more critical (see Figure 8): "I don't want to be teacher. Porque hacen huelga" (because they go on strike).

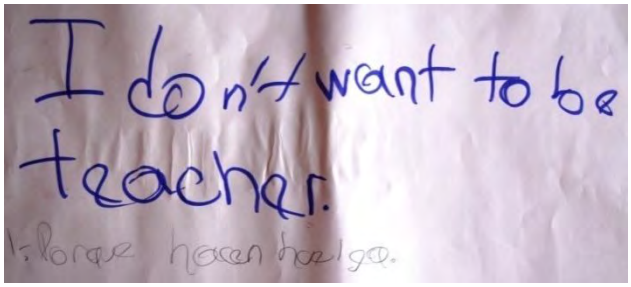


*Figure 8: Excerpt of Alberto's cartulina*

Where do you want to live?

Another *cartulina* activity asked the students: "Where do you want to live in the future? Why?" The students had just learned about describing places, and this was an opportunity for them to use the language they had learned in a contextualized and personal way.

Most of the students expressed that they wanted to live either in the country or by the beach. In describing the country, the kids mentioned the natural landscape, animals and plants. Sonia said: "I would like to live in *campo* = country in the future. Porque me gustan los rios que hay los animalitos y las frutas" (Because I like the rivers that have the small animals and fruits). Anita expressed a

more nostalgic feeling about the country (see Figure 9): "Porque ahi nascio (sic) y me gustaria vivir mas tiempo en mi pueblo y me gusta mucho los peces, las flores, los arbores, las casas, las frutas y los pollitos" (Because I was born there and I would like to live in my village longer, and I like the fishes, the flowers, the trees, the houses, the fruits and the little chickens very much).

In describing the beach, the kids mentioned the climate, the beauty of the sea, the attraction of seafood and leisure activities. Vicente said: "I would like to live near the sea in the future. Porque es bonito, me gusta el clima y tambien el mar" (Because it is pretty, I like the climate and also the sea). Ernestina reflected: "Porque me gustan camarones, los pescados, es bonito estar en la playa y para salir a jugar y por todo demas" (Because I like shrimp, fish, it is nice to be on the beach and to play and everything else). Edgar had a more adventurous reason: "Porque me gusta la playa y nadar manejar los barcos las bananas lancha" (Because I like the beach and to swim and to drive boats and banana boats).

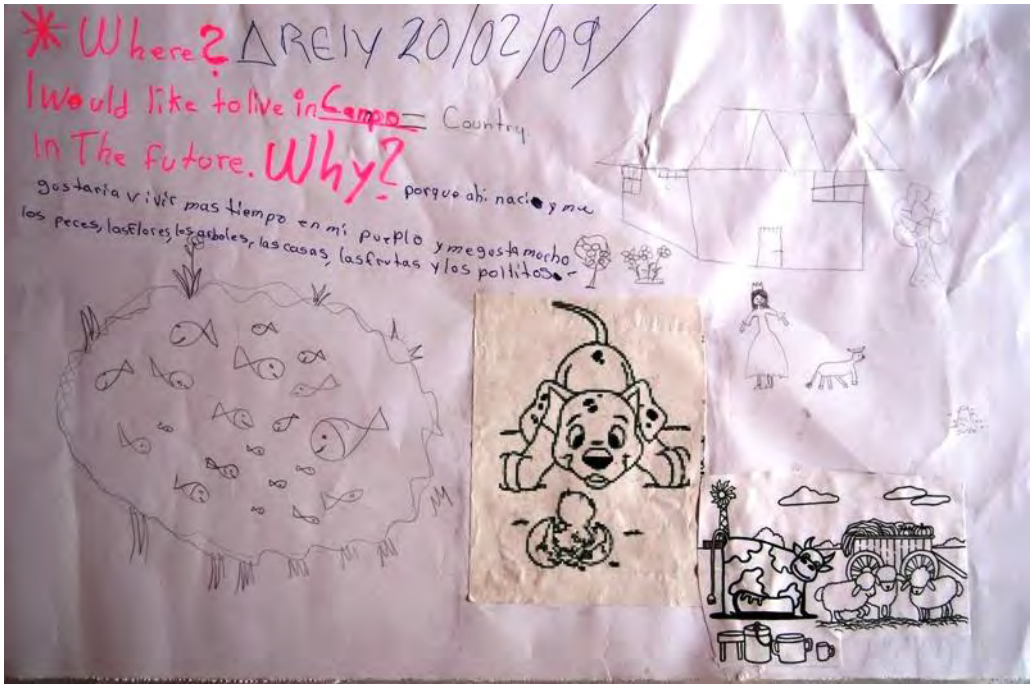


*Figure 9: Anita's cartulina*

Several students mentioned specific places where they wanted to live. Most of them wanted to live in different places in Mexico. David said: "I would like to live in Acapulco ¿por qué? Ay un vonito (sic) mar" (Why? Because there is a beautiful sea). Damián mentioned that he would like to live either in Oaxaca or in Guadalajara "porque me gusta" (because I like it). Fredy was quite a bit more descriptive in his desire to live in Quintana Roo: "A mi me gusta y me quiero montar en un caballo y quiero tener un carro de carga para poder llevar a los animales como borrego, vaca un caballo salvaje y quiero vivir en una casa y me voy a Quintana Roo" (I like and want to ride a horse and I want to have a carriage to push animals like sheep, cow and wild horse, and I want to live in a house and I will go to Quintana Roo). Roberto was the only student who said he wanted to live in

the United States in the future: "I would like to live in the E.U. in the future.Why? Esta bonito. Ermoso (sic)" (It is pretty. Beautiful).

Anuar's *cartulina* expressed a very simple desire for his future: "I would like to live in casa in the future. Why? Para tener familia" (I would like to live in a house in the future. Why? To have a family). He added clip art pictures of a horse, a dog, a car, and even an airplane (see Figure 10).

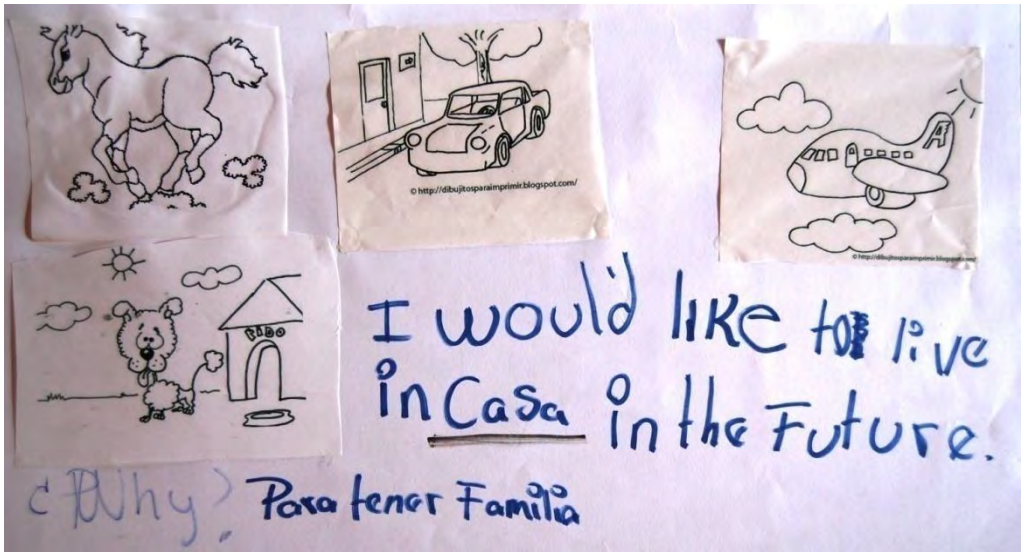


*Figure 10: Anuar's cartulina*

As the reader can see, in these various *cartulina* activities the children's agency was strongly expressed. They easily moved from concrete concerns to the more hopeful world of imagined dreams and aspirations: They explored body types, what they could be in the future, where they could live, the aesthetics of places and foods, and also what they did not want to be. Again, in playful and creative ways, they were also defining themselves as producers of their own knowledge.

**Conclusion**

In this article we have presented a series of language performances that expresses a wide range of learning activities, feelings, emotions, and styles of social interaction. We have no doubt that many of our readers could encounter similar performative activities in their classrooms. For us, this suggests that the language classroom can be a stage for meaningful learning that goes beyond the utilitarian presentation of grammar and pronunciation practice.

For these students in urban Oaxaca in particular, many of whom live in poverty, lack family support structures, and face daily struggles related to health problems, economic hardships, and domestic violence, the English class has provided them with strategies for dealing with the realities of their own lives. Although these students don't have an immediate need to learn English, they have other important needs that are addressed through the English language class. The activities in this class have helped the students not only articulate and explain who they are, but also rehearse other possibilities for their lives. The use of multimodal forms of instruction for their assignments-- posters, games, film and com-

puters-- has allowed them more freedom of movement in their learning, both literally and figuratively. When the students express themselves through these various modes and media, they are in effect gaining some control over their own present and future.

We have attempted in these ethnographic "snapshots" to focus on various forms of creative and responsible activities that were not only ludic but also socially productive. Through our observations and interpretations of Yesenia, Rosi and Irma's styles of classroom management and their choices of curriculum assignments, we have tried to show how they have used the classroom for different forms of social interaction and play through breaking down the space between authority and learning. Through this relaxed style of classroom management, the students have come to learn that their classroom can be an arena for them to explore issues related to their identity, their hopes, and their fears. That is, these young student teachers, through the use of their own agency in composing their teaching styles, have opened up the classroom for their students to also use their own agency.

As we have seen through the few examples described here, the students have begun to understand different forms of social responsibility in terms of the diversity of household structures and body types. They have explored without fear of punitive reactions how to negotiate friendships while playing a game. And quite dramatically, they were able to move into an imagined future, where they pondered who they could be and where they wanted to live, how their aspirations might come about, and reflected upon what they did not want in their futures. The combination of these various performances suggests that for these students, learning the imagined had more immediate implications than simply learning the rules of the English language.

As far as we know, this is a new area of research in Mexico. Further ethnographic studies could be carried out on classroom encounters which offer a space to reflect upon language teaching and learning. In this paper we have illustrated that by listening to the kinds of imagined communities that these students envision (Kano & Norton, 2003), we can begin to see how language encounters with English can be more than just learning a second language. We are not saying that English has some kind of essential quality that encourages imaginative activities, but that encounters within bilingual/multilingual contexts can open up spaces for creative and aesthetic performance (Milstein, 2008; Sommer, 2004). As we stated in the introduction, these performances express ethnographically and linguistically the *coevalness* of all the actors involved (Fabian, 1983, 2007). That is, all the actors of this project (the students, the student teachers, the homeroom teachers, and we as researchers) are jointly composing these performances by sharing in each others' time and place.

## Notes

1. In general, students enter primary school at age six and leave close to age twelve. The educational objectives of the primary schools are to develop literacy (reading and writing), numeric skills and general information subjects such as national history and geography and both natural and social sciences. The level of classroom enrolments in primary schools varies in terms of the age and social composition of the students. Also there is great deal of diversity in the actual quality of the schools. The more prestigious public schools in the urban areas tend to have larger class sizes, but they are more homogenous in terms of student age and position in the social class. However, in the rural schools and the urban afternoon special schools, the students tend to be from various age ranges and are often poor or from the working class; ironically, the class size is smaller (12-25 students) than in the prestigious schools. In the urban areas, generally the classroom size ranges from 25 to 40 students, with a homeroom teacher who is in charge of the class during an academic year (from August to June, two hundred school days). Nowadays, most of the urban primary schools are supposed to have computers and it is up to each school to organize how they will be utilized. In the rural areas, classes often have multiple grade levels, in which teachers work with a mix of students at different age and skill levels. The luckier schools may have a staff of several teachers, but more often than not there is only one teacher for the whole school.

2. Original data excerpts are provided in Spanish with English translations in parenthesis.

3. When we first observed Anita, she was quite timid about using her "different" hand, on which she always wore a glove. Michael, one of the authors, has a granddaughter-Aliana-who also has a "different" hand. We thought it would be nice to give Anita a photo of Aliana, so that she could see that she was not the only child with this kind of difference. Luckily, we first asked the homeroom teacher how we should approach this exchange. She took the photo and waited for a time that she thought would be appropriate to offer the photo to Anita. Later, she presented the photo to Anita in front of the whole class and gave them a lecture on the importance of differences and how all the students need to respect that. The next time we observed the class, Anita still had her hand gloved, but she showed no hesitation in using both of her hands. Michael reported these events to Aliana, who at the particular time was feeling somewhat depressed about her hand, and the story of Anita helped her feel better about herself.

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Michael Higgins, as an anthropologist, has been doing ethnographic research in the city of Oaxaca for more than 35 years. Though by no means an insider, he has been ethnographically moving into and out of the various fields of social diversity found in Oaxaca. He is at best an uneven bilingual in English and Spanish.