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A CAPABILITY APPROACH TO LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THE GAZA STRIP: “TO PLANT HOPE IN A LAND OF DESPAIR”

Abstract:

This article proposes a shift away from competence models (Byram 1997) toward a more holistic approach in language education. Drawing on original critical participatory action research with English teachers in the Gaza Strip (Palestine), Imperiale argues that the capability approach (Sen 1985; Nussbaum 2000) offers a potential framework for understanding and co-constructing language education in precarious circumstances such as those in Gaza. The participants in this study are followed through their process of nourishing what Nussbaum (2006) considers the three capabilities in education: affiliation, narrative imagination and critical examination. Their work also nurtured the further capability of voice and agency, which, in the specific context of Gaza, intersects with acts of aesthetic, cultural and linguistic resistance.

Keywords:

Language education ♦ capability approach ♦ Gaza Strip ♦ voice and agency ♦ linguistic resistance

Introduction

In a context of occupation, as in the besieged Gaza Strip, Palestine, education is as elsewhere fundamental to individuals, their wellbeing, and the development of their society. In recent years (2010-2011), the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) has issued calls to improve the provisions for quality education for refugees (UNRWA 2011) after several reports documented the increasingly dreadful conditions plaguing the Middle Eastern countries in which UNRWA operates (Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, see UNRWA 2009, 2010, 2011).¹

The vision of UNRWA is to foster an education system “which develops the full potential of Palestine Refugees to enable them to be confident, innovative, questioning, thoughtful, tolerant and open minded, upholding human values and religious tolerance, proud of their Palestinian identity and contributing positively to the development of their society and the global community” (UNRWA 2011: 1). In order to achieve its mandate and improve educational quality, UNRWA launched an ‘Education Reform Strategy’ in which English is one of the core subjects, due to its relevance and value for Palestinian refugees and their society (UNRWA 2011). Undoubtedly, intercultural language education in the broadest sense is capable of fostering values of respect, tolerance and peace-building. However, under the specific siege conditions in Gaza, appropriating English has also an ethical and political value as it embodies the material and symbolic preconditions for Palestinians to represent their fragmented identities and voice their own counter-narratives before the international community—as envisioned in post-colonial studies generally, and in the work of Edward Said in particular (1980, 2003). Said (1980) offered a sustained argument about the ways the Orient has been textually—and inaccurately—constructed by the West. In reference to Palestine specifically, Said (1980: 54) argued that Palestinians’ identity has been questioned, silenced and essentialised.

By re-appropriating English and English language teaching, Palestinians are able to construct anti-essentialist discourses, as envisioned by various critical applied linguists

¹ UNRWA was established in December 1949 after the first Palestine-Israeli conflict to conduct relief and works programme with Palestine refugees. In the absence of a solution to the conflict, the Agency still operates in the Occupied Territories in the Gaza Strip and with Palestine refugees that have been displaced in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. Under its mandate, the Agency’s work covers education, health care, relief and social services, emergency assistance and camp infrastructure. <http://www.unrwa.org/>

and pedagogues who have theorized English linguistic imperialism and forms of resistance to it (Phillipson 1992; Pennycook 1997; Canagarajah 2013; hooks 1989, 1994). Particularly hooks (1989: 80) and Pennycook (1995: 55) have emphasized the need among oppressed populations to re-appropriate English, so as to ‘talk back’ and to ‘write back’ alternative narratives. Canagarajah (2013: 393) has taken the concept of linguistic re-appropriation further, shifting toward ‘linguistic resistance’: in addition to language itself, people on the periphery should also re-appropriate language pedagogy.

The values and goals of English language education in contexts of occupation and oppression thus by necessity go well beyond the kind of instrumental input-output processes often presumed in educational systems, whose neoliberal imperatives have tended to set as their ultimate goals the ‘knowledge economy’ and the production of human capital (Lyotard 1979; Block, Gray and Holborow 2012; Olssen and Peters 2005). In other words, learning a foreign language in Gaza—English, for instance—cannot be limited just to developing the classic four language skills and intercultural communicative competence to respond to market demands (Phipps and Levine 2012).

Meanwhile, scarce attention has been paid in language education to the capability approach (Sen 1999, Nussbaum 2000, 2006), which has nonetheless been identified in other domains as a potentially productive approach toward a richer and a more holistic intercultural education (Crosbie 2014). This approach has also been advanced and adopted by UNRWA in its Education Reform Strategy, in order to shift from competence models and a banking model of education (Freire 1970) to a more active learning framework that views “education as a means to realizing greater human development” (UNRWA 2011: 45). The capability approach was developed in the 1980s by the Indian philosopher and economist Amartya Sen and then extended by the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum. It focuses on individuals’ wellbeing, which in turn is defined as the possibility of individuals to live the life that they value (Sen 1999). Individuals have capabilities and freedoms that can be nurtured and transformed into *achieved functionings* corresponding to the available resources and the constraints / *unfreedoms* that may prevent their realization.

In what follows, I argue that the capability approach may indeed offer a framework for the holistic conceptualization of language education in the besieged Gaza Strip. In the participatory research I conducted with English teachers in Gaza, I found that participants have re-claimed English and English poetry as an occasion to create new narratives by

engaging in linguistic, cultural and aesthetic resistance. I correlate their acts of resistance to the capability of ‘voice and agency,’ also identified by Crosbie (2014) as a core capability for language education. When the true aim of language education is—as expressed by the participants who took part in the study—”to make students fly,” and ”to plant hope in a land of despair,” I argue that skills and competence are not sufficient to fulfill those aims.

From competence models to the capability approach in language education

The concept of ‘communicative competence,’ coined in 1972 by Hymes, catalyzed a pedagogical tradition arising in contradistinction to the mnemonic acquisition of grammatical rules and decontextualised translations. In its initial conceptualization, communicative language teaching (CLT) enhanced a ”democratic spirit of dialogue and interaction” (Kramsch 2006: 249), by encouraging learners’ effective communication and the completion of assigned tasks. Byram (1997) subsequently developed the concept of ‘intercultural communicative competence,’ providing a theoretical framework for the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which has meanwhile been exported and adopted beyond European borders (Byram and Parmenter 2012). The instrumental understanding of language is stated in the CEFR: “All human competences contribute in one way or another to the language user’s ability to communicate and may be regarded as aspects of communicative competence” (2001: 101).

Despite the relevance and seminal value of the intercultural communicative competence model (Byram 1997), other scholars have recently argued for a paradigm shift toward placing ethics, relationships and human values at the heart of language pedagogy. In line with Ronald Barnett’s 1994 critiques of the competence ideal in higher education in *The Limits of Competence*, some scholars have problematized the instrumental value of language education as merely meeting certain ‘competence’ standards. Kramsch (2006), for instance, has developed her notion of ‘symbolic competence’ in clear contrast to the CEFR:

It is no longer appropriate to give students a tourist-like competence to exchange information with native speakers of national languages within well-defined national cultures. They need a much more sophisticated competence in the manipulation of symbolic systems. [...] Symbolic forms are not just items of vocabulary or communication strategies, but embodied experiences, emotional resonances and moral imaginings. (Kramsch 2006: 251)

Learners, therefore, are involved in semiotic practices through which, in addition to communicating meaning, they develop the ability to make meaning (Kramsch 2006; 2008). Phipps and Gonzalez (2004: 90), on the other hand, have explored the concept of ‘intercultural being’ as opposed to the instrumental ‘intercultural speaker,’ stressing a more holistic and ethical approach in the intercultural field. More recently, Veronica Crosbie (2014) has argued for the adoption of the capability approach in language education as a way to nurture and value individuals’ wellbeing (Crosbie 2014: 104).

The discourse of capability was originally developed by the Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen in the field of welfare economics (1985), and was extended to the domain of education by the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2000). The capability approach, as Sen developed it, is a framework that addresses individuals’ wellbeing, rather than conceptualizing development in terms of results or utilities. Processes of distinguishing between means and ends, between values and goals, and between wellbeing and human development are seen in terms of the freedom of individuals ‘to lead the kind of lives they value—and have reason to value’ (Sen 1999: 18). Sen describes these freedoms, intertwined as they are with ‘human agency’—the ability to act and bring change based on one’s own values and objectives—as *capabilities*. The manifest corollary of capabilities are *achieved functionings*, which are the actual realization of wellbeing. Agency and the manifestation of capabilities can be curtailed by socio-cultural, economic, discursive, and political barriers, or *unfreedoms*, which hinder human development. Therefore, in order to achieve human development, contextualized interventions to tackle localized *unfreedoms* need to take place.

Nussbaum and Sen diverge in their view of capabilities. Sen envisions the expansion of freedoms through democratic deliberation, conceived as public discussions and democratic decision-making. Nussbaum, conversely, argues for a list of ten ‘human functional capabilities’ that she compiled with the intention of having them underwritten by government constitutions. Despite their differences, Sen’s and Nussbaum’s views together “can be seen as a complementary set of constructs that provide a framework of evaluation for an enriched quality of life” (Crosbie 2014: 93–94).

Nussbaum has written extensively about capabilities in education as related to democratic citizenship and human flourishing, identifying critical examination, affiliation, and narrative imagination as central capabilities. Inspired by Socratic logic, *critical examination* has long been a principle of note and contemplation among critical

pedagogues. *Affiliation* nurtures individuals’ sense of belonging both to their communities and to world-citizenship, affirming the values of diversity and cultural heterogeneity. *Narrative imagination* presupposes the development of empathy and openness to others, and is cultivated through literature and the arts (Nussbaum 2010: 39).

The capability approach, with its holistic aims and underpinnings, resonates with intercultural language education and foreign language pedagogy. Applied linguists have nonetheless paid little attention to the approach thus far. As mentioned above, Crosbie (2014) has contributed to the theorization and application of the capability approach in language education broadly conceived. In her action research, Crosbie explored the construct of capabilities in a higher education English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classroom, in which the international students attending this course constituted her participant group. Based on the findings, Crosbie developed a list of capabilities for language and intercultural learning (Figure 1). This model encourages the comprehensive development of capabilities, complementing discourses on skills and knowledge without dismissing language skills and sub-skills, which are included in the capability of ‘L2 literacy and communication.’

<p>Figure 1: Capabilities for language and intercultural Learning (Crosbie 2014: 104)</p> <p>Voice and agency Health, wellbeing and bodily integrity Creativity Professional development L2 literacy and communication Mobility Cosmopolitan citizenship Learning dispositions Senses, emotions and imagination Identity and ontological being Affiliation Critical reasoning, reflection and knowledge use</p>

Grounded in post-colonial studies, in critical pedagogy and in the Crosbie’s approach discussed above, my study encourages the development and adoption of the capability approach in language education. In the context of the besieged Gaza Strip, the capability approach provides a space for critical, creative, localized and resistant language pedagogies to emerge. By resisting imperialistic English

language teaching (ELT) and developing counter-hegemonic epistemologies, I argue that language education envisioned through the lenses of the capability approach opens up a space for taking individuals’ besieged wellbeing into account, while at the same time challenging the *unfreedoms* that limit the achievement of individuals’ *functionings*.

In order to explore and develop appropriate and contextualized teaching pedagogies, I propose using methods of creative resistance in language education in a context-sensitive way. Creative methods in language education in acute circumstances open up spaces for multimodality and multisensory experiences, with the ultimate aim of wellbeing-focused language pedagogy (Frimberger 2016). Particularly suitable for the context of the Gaza Strip is the adoption of the local *Palestinian Art of Resistance* movement (Nastas Mitwasi 2015), which is concerned with works of art that are politically embedded in the social context, and support the construction of alternative narratives. As an example of critical and political art, its recurrent themes focus on the Palestinian cause, exile, right of return, and resistance against occupation (Nastas Mitwasi 2015). The *Palestinian Art of Resistance* movement intersects with Crosbie's language capabilities and offers the possibility to nurture creativity; wellbeing; voice and agency; affiliation; identity and sense of belonging; and senses, emotion and imagination.

Through critical participatory action research, I conducted a series of workshops on using 'Art of Resistance' in English language teaching with English teachers in the Gaza Strip.

Overview of the study

My research aims to construct a framework for intercultural language education in the context of the occupied Gaza Strip that could inform a broader framework for language education in contexts of pain and pressure, including refugee language education more broadly. As the study is framed around an intrinsic social-justice-through-education agenda, the research process itself needed to be a socially just endeavor. Therefore, the study takes the form of Critical Participatory Action Research (Kemmis et al. 2014).

Based on the four phases of CPAR (Planning, Action, Observation, Evaluation), I developed and ran a teacher training course for pre-service English teachers enrolled at the Islamic University of Gaza. The course was entitled 'Using Art of Resistance in English Language Teaching' and consisted of a series of workshops rooted in participation.² As entry to the Gaza Strip was denied, the course was conducted online via Skype and via other video-conference software.

CPAR is considered a 'practice-changing-practice' and a 'changing practice architecture,' i.e., the socio-cultural, discursive, and material conditions which held the practices in

² In this article, I use 'teacher training course' and 'workshop series' interchangeably.

place (Kemmis et al. 2014: 51). I adopt the view that CPAR is a ‘social practice,’ a ‘worldview paradigm’ and a ‘philosophy of life’ rather than just a methodology (Fals Borda 2001; Kemmis et al. 2014). This view springs from Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda’s work on participatory research, in which he highlights two stages: 1) the need to ‘decolonize ourselves’ as researchers; and 2) the search for a ‘value structure around *praxis*’ embedded in academic rigor (2001: 29). My research study was conducted using participatory and ‘decolonizing methodologies’ that respond to the needs of both the participants and the researcher (Tuhiwai Smith 2012). This was achieved through ongoing, close collaboration between the University of Glasgow School of Education and the Islamic University of Gaza Department of English.

Thirteen pre-service English teachers enrolled at the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG) participated in the study. Participants were selected out of a cohort of 29 applicants, each of whom had responded to the course announcement posted on the IUG website. Criteria for selection were developed in cooperation with Professor Nazmi al Masri (Vice-President for External Relations at Islamic University of Gaza).

Data collection involved various methods: interviews, a focus group, participant observation, and document analysis, in addition to the teacher training course itself. Participants compiled reflective journals, written assignments and completed an evaluation form at the end of the course. In particular, my own field-diary and notes throughout the course became precious, especially when power-cuts and technological breakdowns—imposed by the siege—disrupted video and/or audio-recording. Data were analyzed thematically, in correspondence with the capability approach.

The course “Using Art of Resistance in English Language Teaching”

The course explored and developed localized, critical, and creative approaches for teaching English in the Gaza Strip, drawing on authentic artistic materials from various genres of the *Palestinian Art of Resistance* (i.e. political cartoons, comics, drama pedagogy, films and videos). The course involved participation in group-work, pair-work, interactive classroom activities, discussions, peer learning, peer observation, lesson planning, as well as two peer-to-peer teaching-practices in which teachers applied their learning by planning, preparing and teaching a chosen lesson to their peers in a simulated language classroom. As a matter of contextualized praxes and relevance, I decided to align all the teacher training course activities to the English textbook *English for*

Palestine, which is adopted in all public, private and UNRWA schools in Palestine and in the Gaza Strip.

The course aims for participants were three-fold:

- to acquire an introductory subject knowledge on creative methods in language teaching;
- to experiment with teaching techniques practically and creatively in a safe *public sphere*;
- to engage in reflective practices both in-action and on-action, in order to ensure sustainability after the end of the course.

The teacher training course ran in April and May 2015, for a total of 24 hours of online teaching (via Skype and other video-conference software), in addition to independent learning undertaken by students. Participants also attended the ‘Language and Art of Resistance’ symposium, organized by the Islamic University of Gaza in partnership with the University of Glasgow, the University of Manchester and the University of Arizona.³

3. Nurturing capabilities through language education: “We have to make our students fly.”

Findings demonstrate that the three capabilities Nussbaum identifies for democratic education are central in the context of the Gaza Strip as well. English language education in this context is, additionally, a way to voice and take actions against the military and the epistemological hegemony of the occupation, opening spaces to nurture hopes and dreams and to write creative and critical counter-narratives. The thirteen participants, in addition to nurturing their capabilities of affiliation, critical thinking and narrative imagination, also nourished their capability of voice and agency, which, in the specific context of Gaza, intersects with acts of aesthetic, cultural and linguistic resistance. Participants for instance engaged with poetry, literature, videos, political cartoons and drama pedagogy in the ways they valued, constructing creative methods suitable for their teaching context.

³ Link to the ‘Language and Art of Resistance’ symposium, organized as part of the AHRC ‘Researching Multilingually at the Borders of Language, the Body, Law and the State’: http://researching-multilingually-at-borders.com/?page_id=1005. The symposium consisted of: keynote speakers’ presentations; early career researchers’ presentations; and a series of moving performances by students at IUG. The innovative format of the Symposium reflected the creative, critical, decolonized practices developed in partnership.

“The world with its countries... *in the Palestinian way*”: Aesthetic, linguistic and cultural resistance

To illustrate how elements of aesthetic, linguistic and cultural resistance emerged in the training course, I will describe one of the teaching practices that participants delivered. Participants formed groups and were asked to develop and deliver a language lesson and teaching materials starting from a unit of their own choosing from the textbook *English for Palestine*. I focus here on the work of one group, who selected the period entitled “The world with its countries” based on the homonym poem by John Cotton. The lesson is in the *Grade 9 English for Palestine* textbook (Period 10, Unit 10), part of the unit on respecting the environment and human beings. The activities presented in the *English for Palestine* textbook interweave 1) the English poem “The world with its countries” by John Cotton, 2) a comprehension task in the form of a ‘mix and match headings’ exercise, 3) an exercise on adjective formation, 4) listening to the audio of the poem, and 5) reading the poem aloud.

The four participants of the group (A.W., N.A., R.A. and L.A.)⁴ prepared a 45-minute task-based lesson on the topic, using the textbook as initial input. In preparation to the reading of the poem, they introduced unfamiliar vocabulary through visuals and *realia*; they drilled pronunciation, and prepared controlled exercises to reinforce the memorization of the new vocabulary. Then, they focused on the poem by listening to it and reading out loud. In order to foster and scaffold a gradual understanding of the poem, they elicited students’ opinions in a brainstorming activity in pairs, and then they checked students’ understanding through a quiz competition.

The activities mentioned above followed a communicative language teaching (CLT) approach and task-based teaching (TBLT) methodologies. The four participants, however, complemented these ‘traditional’ approaches by including creative and critical methods in the second part of the teaching practice, in which they experimented with different genres of the *Art of Resistance*. First, they showed a photo presentation of ‘beautiful places’ in Palestine, accompanied by the famous Palestinian poem, recited in Arabic, ‘Who am I, without Exile?’ written by Mahmoud Darwish, one of the most famous Palestinian poets. After the presentation, the trainees asked their peers/students to describe the pictures they saw in English, and to express their feelings about Darwish’s poem and the ‘beautiful sites,’ in an open classroom discussion both in English and in

⁴ Out of respect for the subjects / teachers, I have chosen not to use pseudonyms.

Arabic. This activity reaffirmed identity and affiliation and, as a participant stated, it allowed them “to make a bridge between English language and literature and the Palestinian one” (L.A., interview).

Secondly, the teachers prepared and acted out a short performance, in English, about the plight of an old woman in exile, who remembers holy places in Palestine she is prevented from visiting. Thirdly, as a recap activity and a follow-up, one of the teachers performed the poem she wrote for the occasion, asking her peers to write a poem on the topic of ‘Beautiful Places’ as a response. In the table below, the original poem by John Cotton and the poem written by A.W., “The world with its countries...in the Palestinian way” are placed side-by-side. The teacher’s re-interpretation of the poem is an act of critical re-appropriation embodying aesthetic, cultural and linguistic resistance. She proceeds as follows:

A.W.: Can I put the music in the background? I will now perform “The world with its countries [pause] *in the Palestinian way.*” (her emphasis).

[Students are silent; A.W. begins reciting the poem she wrote].

The World with its Countries	The World with its Countries in the Palestinian Way
<p>The world with its countries, Mountains and seas, People and creatures, Flowers and trees, The fish in the waters, The birds in the air Are calling to ask us all to take care There are our treasures, A gift from above, We should say thank you With a care that shows love For the blue of the ocean, The clearness of air, The wonder of forests, And the valleys so fair. The song of the skylark, The warmth of the sun, The rushing of clear streams And a new life begun Are gifts we should cherish, So join in the call To strive to preserve them For the future of all.</p> <p>—John Cotton</p>	<p>The world with its countries mountains and trees rivers and fields are looking at us with blind eye and deaf ear the fish in the water the birds in the air are all calling for freedom screaming in one voice: "What is happening to Palestinians is unfair" The birds were looking for food the bees were looking for honey but they were attacked by bullets so they fled away these treasures roses, Shrubberies and trees, was bringing to our soul all sorts of pleasure but by their beauty, the Israeli army bother so they cut off the trees, and the roses withered the bird's voice scattered</p> <p>—A.W.</p>

After the performance, everybody in the class remained silent, as if in a sort of eloquent silent contemplation of a work of art (Sontag 1969). In my field diary, I acknowledged the multiple meanings that the poem “The World and its Countries... *in the Palestinian way*” bears, moving among emotional, analytical and subjective responses. Its *content* creation and the *form* of the performance while teaching (hooks 1994: 11) is an ultimate act of linguistic and cultural resistance:

They wait for my feedback on the lesson they taught, and I know I am waiting for their own comments instead [...]. I could have never expected they would have reached such a level of re-appropriation – an English poem in the Palestinian way. I am blown away. They created literature, and they travelled to beautiful places through a text and through narrative imagination. [...] They smile. They are proud and happy of what they did, as if they wanted to offer me a gift through this lesson, mixing languages, literature, arts and a sort of eloquent silence. I realize I have just witnessed the making of an aesthetic moment of cultural resistance, which culminated in their joyful smiles and hopes [...] and an ultimately political act, since they know I will be writing about that sooner or later.

[Field diary, 9 May 2015, just after the workshop]

The participant-teacher created a representation of Palestine and of oppression in a foreign language, translanguaging between different semiotic systems (Kramsch 2009; Canagarajah 2013). Language education thus offers the space to cultivate ‘linguistic resistance,’ i.e., to elaborate localized ELT resistance pedagogies, which critically and creatively strive toward the pluralisation of norms and confronting hegemonic power structures (Canagarajah 2013: 393). Following Said, critical pedagogues and critical applied linguists have reiterated the importance of the creation of counter-discourses, alternative epistemologies and narratives which, aiming for social justice, convey the voice of the oppressed while pursuing liberatory goals (Freire 1970; hooks 1994; Pennycook 1997; Canagarajah 2013). This often happens in the form of humanism (Said 1978), especially by literature and poetry, through which the oppressed *writes back* (Pennycook 1997; hooks 1989). By learning, using, and re-appropriating ‘the oppressor’s language,’ the oppressed comes to own that language and claims it as a potential site of resistance, in which counter-hegemonic narratives, outlaw cultures, and ‘renegade speech’ are made visible (hooks 1994: 167-175).

Cultural and artistic resistance studies advocating for social justice explore the issue of visibility. Scarry affirms that, in times when justice has been taken away, beautiful things—which do not rely on us to create them but come on their own and have never been absent from a human community—“hold steadily visible” (Scarry 2001: 66). Scott reflects on visibility and invisibility, pointing out how subordinate groups create dissonant, and often hidden, cultures, referred to as ‘hidden transcripts’: he considers them a form of ‘political discourse’ carrying ‘political impact’ when the transition from the hidden to the public space occurs (Scott 1990: 18-19). Darts (2004) argues that the political and the cultural are interwoven and that the cultural is inseparable from aesthetics. In *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry also acknowledges the ‘decentering of the self’ as a consequence of aesthetic contemplation:

At the moment we see something beautiful, we undergo a radical decentering. Beauty, according to Weil, requires us “to give up our imaginary position as the center...A transformation then takes place at the very roots of our sensibility, in our immediate reception of sense impressions and psychological impressions.” (Scarry 2001: 77)

However, reading the poem the participant wrote is not only a matter of silent aesthetic contemplation, but requires commenting (Phipps 2014), since poems involve different layers, as pointed out by Anna Jones:

Poetry [...] allows for the emotional, ambiguous, contradictory and elusive as well as the analytical. It is at once intellectual and aesthetic. It opens up material for the readers that is powerful in its subjectivity, in a way that is at once subtle, concise, unique, powerful and new. It is, in the words of (Cahnmann 2003, 35), ‘a fresh language to describe the indescribable emotion and intellectual experiences in and beyond classrooms.’ (Jones 2010: 594)

In my study, participants, in their affirmation of cultural and linguistic resistance practices, moved between the cultural, the political, and the aesthetic, addressing their subjectivities and affirming their commitment to the freedom and development of their own besieged society. Duncombe perceives current politics as a ‘cultural discourse,’ which is based on “a shared set of symbols and meanings that we all abide by.” He adds that ‘rewriting of that discourse, which is essentially what cultural resistance does— is a political act in itself’ (Duncombe 2002: 6).

Capabilities in language education

*And as they proudly reflect on their teaching practice,
unaware of that, they engage in one of the most
interesting debates we had so far.*

[Field-diary, 9 May, just after the workshop]

A heated discussion followed the teaching practice when one of the participants, N.M., questioned the choice of starting the lesson with the English poem by Cotton. As a consequence, the entire class joined an open debate or nurtured what Freire calls a “capacity to be critical” or a “epistemological curiosity” (Freire 2001: 32) through which “the learners [...] maintain alive the flame of resistance that sharpens their curiosity and stimulates their capacity for risk, for adventure, so as to immunize themselves against the banking system” (ibid: 32). The capacity to be critical, refusing a ‘banking system’ of education in which learners are filled with information is the tenet of critical pedagogy, and could be translated into what Nussbaum defined as the capability of ‘critical examination’ (Nussbaum 2006). The participants discussed as follows:

NM: I don’t see ehm... links... connections

NA: For example, we are in Gaza; we are prevented to move anywhere. We live in *prison*. What are our dreams? Dreams here are to make students fly to Palestine... The poem helps us to be in touch with Palestine. [...]

NM: Ok, I agree with you, but the English poem is in *English* and it talks about *beautiful* nature and it is not linked to *our* reality.

NA: *We have to* make our students *fly*. This English poem will be for them, to make it their voice. I don’t know... but I think that they can do it. Ehm... They can use *this* poem and make it their voice. It is for them. [Pause] It is for us. [Pause] [...]

NM: I mean Ok, but what can you give to the students through that poem? How can we make related to us? What’s the message? [Pause] I’m not a student, I am a *Palestinian* student.

NA: [Pause] We are all human beings. This is the message.

The first lines of the discussion set the scene, laying the ground for what followed: participants refer to the context of unfreedoms and the barriers that people experience in the Gaza Strip. Gaza has been under siege since 2007, when Israel declared it ‘hostile territory’ and closed all borders to the Strip. Only selected humanitarian imports have

been allowed into the strip. These do not include electricity, fuel and other supplies (Winter 2015). Since 2007, three wars—or ‘Operations’—hit the Strip (2008, 2012, 2014), destroying wellbeing, families, houses and infrastructures and, ultimately, hopes—as UNRWA monthly reports, available on the UNRWA website, show. These are the barriers that prevent people in Gaza from achieving their functionings and to live the life that they value. In the discussion above, participants discussed the condition of immobility that affects them. It encompasses both the freedom to travel to their homeland, Palestine, and also to travel abroad, out of the prison.

However, even though they do not have the freedoms (or capabilities) to convert their dreams into achieved functionings, they attempt to work on the resources they do have to nurture their desired wellbeing. Engaging in narrative imagination (Nussbaum 2006), by reclaiming and re-writing a foreign poem, participants are projected into their inaccessible homeland. By way of the virtual, remote travel to ‘beautiful places’ through narrative imagination, learners (as well as Gazan teachers) will find a safe land of relief, where they can cultivate and reclaim their voice. Their voice and agency is manifested through the Art of Resistance and English.

Crosbie (2014) identifies the capability of ‘voice and agency’ as embedded in language education. She draws on Barnett’s two-fold interpretation of ‘voice’ (2007) and on Sen’s definition of ‘agency’ (1999). According to Barnett, voice involves both a process of finding one’s unique voice and of placing oneself in the world (Barnett 2007: 90, in Crosbie 2014: 102). Agency, as the corollary of voice, is referred to as “act[ing] and bring[ing] about change” (Sen 1999: xii, in Crosbie 2014: 103).

The participant involved in the debate, N.M., exemplified ‘voice and agency’ as a main value and ultimate goal:

N.M.: The debate was so so useful [...] It was the best because we have to relate everything... with the art to our situation, to our *doing* and *living*... and it will be so interesting to *us* and to the students... ehm... to show the potential that we.. and they... have something to *do*, something to *say*.

(Interview with N.M.)

The possibilities that language education offers for the Gaza Strip are thus much richer than simply responding to ubiquitous neoliberal imperatives demanding language learners be equipped with a proficient competence and transferable skills. Barnett argues

that “the language of knowledge and skills is insufficient to capture the complexity of the learning processes” (Barnett 2010: 4) and suggests that those domains should be supplemented with “a sense of the student’s *being* and, indeed their continuing *becoming*” (5, emphasis in original). By proposing a language of ‘dispositions and qualities,’ he advocates for the cultivation of students’ humanity, echoing the capability approach. He also highlights the importance of ‘life-wide education’, defined as “learning in different places simultaneously” (ibid: 2).

Similarly, N.M. also mentioned how ‘we have to relate everything... to our *doing* and *living*.’ The dichotomy she uses, *doing* and *living*, resonates with the work of Phipps and Gonzalez (2004) on the holistic dimension of the intercultural *being* as opposed to the skilled ‘intercultural speaker.’ Sen and Nussbaum have acknowledged interculturalism and cultural diversity as intrinsic values of their approaches. The capability of *affiliation* encourages individuals to develop their own identity in relation to other human beings “by ties of recognition and concern” (Nussbaum 2006: 389). Returning to the data presented above, it is noteworthy that the participants discussed their identity and belonging to both the Palestinian community and to “humanity.” Said (1980) and Khalidi (1997) argue that the Palestinians’ identity has always been silenced, denied, questioned, and stigmatized. For instance, Said writes that “the question of Palestine is [...] the contest between an affirmation and a denial” (Said 1980: 8). Despite the need for affirmation of Palestinian identity, which is clearly pointed out by N.M. in the discussion, N.A. reminds her peers that we are all ‘human beings.’ Her statement recalls the human dimension of the Palestinian struggle as evoked by several Palestinian poets. Undoubtedly, her statement resonates with Nussbaum’s capability of affiliation.

As presented in the paragraphs above, critical examination, narrative imagination, voice and agency, and affiliation are fundamental capabilities that could nurture the potential of students, their hopes, dreams and aspirations, in spite of the siege. Those, indeed, may be considered the general values and goals of language education. Far from market demands and capitalist approaches, a participant in the study poignantly reflects on the meaning of being successful language teachers in the Gaza Strip and planning a successful lesson, stressing the holistic and wellbeing-focused approach needed in those circumstances. She writes:

So, in Gaza, everything is different, even the definition of the term ‘success’ is unique. According to the Gazan dictionary, Success can be defined as planting

seeds in a sterile tree, then it could bring ripe fruits. Success means to plant hope in a land of despair and frustration.

(A.W., written assignment)⁵

In her statement, A.W. poetically and concisely presents the rationale for applying the capability approach in language education in the Gaza Strip: the ultimate aim of language education is to nurture the capability to hope and resist in the context of *unfreedoms* of the Strip. She affirms that, even though the tree may be sterile, if capabilities are well nurtured, they “could bring ripe fruits”—or be converted into *achieved functionings*. However, in the context of Gaza, since the condition of the siege hinder many freedoms and capabilities, nurturing hope is both the end of wellbeing and the means to reach it. In *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire addresses the scope of hope: “I do not understand human existence, and the struggle needed to improve it, apart from dream and hope. Hope is an ontological need.” He adds:

as an ontological need, hope needs practice in order to become historical concreteness. [...] without a minimum of hope we cannot so much as start the struggle. But without the struggle, hope as an ontological need, dissipates, loses its bearings, and turns into hopelessness. And hopelessness can become tragic despair. Hence the need for a kind of education in hope. (Freire 2014: 2–3)

Supporting and nurturing students’ capabilities means to commit to this kind of education in hope; whose aim “through a serious, correct political analysis, is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be” (ibid 3).

⁵ Note that “dictionary” here is figuratively intended, and does not refer to a specific published reference work.

Conclusions

It is about a mode of response that follows upon having been addressed, a comportment toward the Other only after the Other has made a demand upon me, accused me of a failing, or asked me to assume a responsibility.

Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (2006: 129)

This article presented empirical work conducted online, from one room at the University of Glasgow School of Education to another room at the Islamic University of Gaza, Palestine. It involved thirteen participants, a researcher and a shared passion for languages, cultures, education for social justice, advocacy, ethical participation, experimentation, playing in interactive ways, teaching and learning.

I argued—as other scholars have done before—that language education is far from being a sequence of transferable skills and knowledge which ensure employability. In a time when higher education is required to train the most competitive candidate, pre-service English teachers chose to join a series of online workshops because they aim ‘to make students fly,’ and, I would add, to fly themselves, establishing connections with the world outside the Strip.

Whilst affirming their voice and agency in ways they value, these thirteen pre-service teachers contribute to the Palestinian struggle for social justice, for liberation ‘in a land of despair.’ They do so in English, *the* language of the international community that is complicit in silencing their presence and, therefore, their identity. They need to master *the* foreign language in order to affirm their right to exist, their dreams and hopes which will never cease to inspire them. In English, they articulate their desired wellbeing which, unfortunately, is besieged. Additionally, although the constraints they face prevent them from fully living the life they value, they nurture their imagination and creativity by navigating literature, poems, videos, and other artistic genres. Through critical and creative language pedagogies, they “write back” (hooks 1994; Pennycook 2001), creating counter-narratives and offering alternative epistemologies.

I conclude with a poem by participant-teacher A.A., in response to the “The world with its countries... *in the Palestinian way*,” which was assigned to the students as ‘homework’:

Thinking and thinking of what to write
 Thinking of rhythm
 Thinking of rhyme
 What can I say
 A lecture of three hours of living with nature beauty
 My soul was flying with the skylark
 I was like seeing the rivers and the seas
 I was walking under the trees,
 Yet,
 I remember Palestine
 Where is my land
 I feel so sad.

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