Cristina Aliagas Marín*

Rap music in minority languages in secondary education: A case study of Catalan rap

https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl-2017-0036

Abstract: This article explores hip hop music as a powerful tool for educational institutions to promote minority languages among teenagers living in multilingual contexts. It reports on an educational experience in secondary education that consisted of a series of rhyme workshops given by a guest hip hop artist in a secondary school in Catalonia, where two main languages (Spanish and Catalan) coexist in an unbalanced situation that favours Spanish for peer-communication. Drawing on two articulated pieces of fieldwork (the first one in the classroom and the second outside school with three students who were emergent rappers), the study shows a rift between language practices in the classroom and hip hop language practices in the teenagers’ lives. It also shows the powerful effect of bringing a professional musician into the classroom and how the school can have an impact on the language practices of the students outside school.

Keywords: Catalan, hip hop in education, language choice, vernacular literacies, youth culture

1 Introduction

In this article I explore hip hop music as a legitimate, powerful tool for educational institutions to preserve the linguistic and cultural diversity represented by minority languages among young people in multilingual contexts such as Catalonia. As part of the establishment of an autonomous government in Catalunya at the beginning of the 1980s, school has become one of the most important sites in which to carry out El pla de normalització lingüística [the normalisation plan], aimed at normalizing the Catalan language in a socio-linguistic scenario of substitution where the Spanish language was de dominant one (Generalitat de Catalunya 1983). Catalan was recognised by the local Government Statute as the language of education and the language of

*Corresponding author: Cristina Aliagas Marín, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain, E-mail: cristina.aliagas@upf.edu
knowledge, which implied giving predominance to standard uses of the language. As explained by Pujolar (2010), around the mid-1990s, however, the implementation of the law came up against difficulties following the arrival of students of diverse backgrounds, including not only other regions of the Spanish state, but also many countries around the world (the newcomers were mainly Moroccans, Latin Americans and Asians). The presence of these students, as well as some questioning of the standard forms of language education in existence (Unamuno 2008; Codó and Patiño-Santos 2014) have encouraged teachers and researchers to design curricular activities that include a range of registers and varieties of Catalan in the classroom; not just the standard but the normalised form as well. As I would argue, this integration is consistent with the inclusion of youth vernacular literacies within a formal learning setting, a sociocultural proposal for the classroom reflected in some work in the field of New Literacy Studies (NLS; e.g. Pahl and Rowsell 2005).

I bring together the fields of hip-hop-based Education (Petchauer 2009) with studies on Youth Literacies in Education (Pahl and Rowsell 2005) in order to reflect on the interplay between rap music in minority languages and education. I draw on literature on language socialisation processes within education in Catalonia (Unamuno 2008; Woolard 2009; Codó and Adriana 2014) in order to analyse the effects of using Catalan rap music in the classroom as a way to promote the use of the Catalan language. Through a case study in a classroom, I show that hip-hop music might be a useful cultural phenomenon to motivate younger generations to use, maintain or revitalise the language of their communities, above all when it coexists within a situation of conflict with another language, as in the case of Catalan, which, together with Spanish and Aranese, is an official language of Catalonia. Moreover, other studies have also argued for its benefits in the case of endangered languages such as the Mayan languages in Guatemala (Barrett 2016).

The data discussed in this article come from two interrelated pieces of fieldwork. The first (2012–2013) consisted of a qualitative study on a series of rhyme workshops whose target project for the students was to perform a song in a rap-based Christmas concert. It was performed in a secondary school in Catalonia (75 students, 2012–2013) by Pau Llonch, lead vocalist of At versaris, one of the few contemporary groups that rap in the Catalan language. This linguistic singularity should be framed in music industry context in Catalonia, in which Spanish carries more prestige as a language for rapping than Catalan (Palà 2010). The analysis focuses on how this educational initiative was

1 Aranese is a variety of the Occitan Language spoken in Vall d’Aran, a region of northwestern Catalonia.
“breaking” the “language regime” of rap music in Catalonia whilst maintaining its own “linguistic regime” (Kroskritt 2000). The second piece of fieldwork (2013–2014), conducted outside of school, used an ethnographic approach and focused on the case-study of three students involved in the local hip-hop scene, who had produced rap music in Spanish but who did their first ever rap in Catalan in the rhyme workshops. Data used herein focus on the students’ ideas about Catalan rap and the impact of the school initiative on the language choices of one of these emergent rappers who, after the workshops, decided to include Catalan in her linguistic repertoire for rapping.

This article is organised as follows. In the following section, I provide a brief picture of how rap music has been recently integrated as a pedagogical resource in language teaching. In Section 3, I introduce the sociolinguistic contexts layered in the rhyme workshops: the educational institution and the world of rap in Catalonia, each with its own historically constructed language ideologies. In Section 4, I give the context of the study and the methodological approach applied. Section 5 is devoted to an analysis of the clash of language ideologies that occurred during the course of the rhyme workshop, taking into account the participants’ points of view, goals and expectations around rapping in Catalan on the part of the teacher, the invited rap artist and the students. Finally, Section 6 provides a reflection on the significance that this study has for education in minority language more generally.

2 Rap music and language/literacy learning in the school setting

MCing or rapping is one of the pillars of hip-hop culture, together with DJing or scratching, break dancing and graffiti writing. In particular, Rhyme and Poetry (RAP) consists of spoken lyrics based on rhymes that can be delivered over a beat or without accompaniment. It originated during the early 1970s in the streets of the Bronx, New York, and has evolved from a local, revolutionary youth movement to an international phenomenon. It involves a sort of storytelling, dealing with personal and social narratives, usually with social or protest-based content. The focus on the struggle has triggered a range of subgenres such as underground rap (outside the commercially-oriented sphere), hardcore rap (characterised by aggression and confrontation), gangsta rap (focused on street gang life and drugs), freestyling rap (improvised music), conscience rap (discussing social issues and conflicts) or political rap (more focused on challenging the socioeconomic status quo). As described by Gerard
(17 years old), one of the participants in the rhyme workshops analysed herein, in English:

"rap is making something beautiful out of shit, you talk about all you’re suffering but you use it to write something and then let go of it, and you laugh, I’ll spit this in someone’s face and they’ll flip out." Rapping is a form of expression closely related to the rapper’s mind set: en el rap puedes escribir libremente lo que quieras, sin pensar si te van a criticar o no sé qué. Expresándote sin más. Solo te tienes que llenar a ti mismo ¿sabes? Y ya está. Cada uno tiene su verdad ‘with rap you can write freely whatever you want, without thinking whether they’re going to criticise you or whatever. You express yourself and that’s it. You just have to fill yourself, you know? And that’s it. Everyone has their own truth.’

Hip-hop has become relevant to the field of education, particularly in North America, in terms of its alignment with a culturally responsive teaching that acknowledges the student’s literacies and ways of learning in the classroom as a resource for teaching and learning (Morell and Duncan-Andrade 2004; Petchauer 2009). Scholarly work on the strand dubbed by Petchauer (2009) as “hip-hop-based education” is in line with the perceived need, felt over recent decades by the researchers on the home/school literacy gap (Hull and Schultz eds. 2002; Pahl and Rowsell 2005), to “bridge” home and school learning experiences, above all in relation to the learning of language and popular culture. Oddly enough, although nobody would question the integration of children’s home literacies in early years and primary education, since it is well-known that children learn through their own worlds, youth literacies seem not to be considered a possible resource for learning in secondary school classrooms. This difference highlights the fact that the higher pressure of curricular goals in secondary education can thwart the opportunity to enhance formal learning with different educational experiences based on teens’ literacies (e.g. rap, fanfiction, manga comics) that might make some curricular contents more meaningful for the learner, thanks to the attractions of the form and the language.

However, the influence of hip-hop on the lives of young people today is such that it somehow penetrates the formal practices of the school. This has been shown recently by Morgade et al. (2016) in the analysis of a corpus of soundscapes (a multimodal, digital narrative using image, video, sound and...
music) produced by secondary students working collaboratively in groups in an educationally innovative project, in which they found traces of hip-hop aesthetics in musical artefacts such as sound-breaks and beats, cycles, organisation into 4/4 rhythms and 16-beat structures, electro-beat bases and particularly the role of lyrics, which are central in rap music, since the message is its substance. In another educational study, Mahiri (2006: 58) found that eighth-grade students, in a school digital project on poverty, used “technological resources to source, sample, and cut and paste multimedia texts for replay in new configurations, just as hip-hop DJs reconfigure sounds, words and images to play anew”. Both studies are a testament to the idea that teenagers import their literacies into school with or without the permission of their teachers. The “infiltration” of rap-based youth culture into the school also affects the social order, as shown by Forman (2001) in an ethnographic study on Somali immigrants and refugee students in two schools (one in the north-eastern United States, the other in central Canada), where they negotiated Somaliness and Blackness through styles of hip-hop clothing.

For those researching the home/school literacy gap, the fact of not considering the student’s out-of-school interests and literacies as valid resources for learning in the classroom implies that the gap between the language of the school and the languages of their home and peer-social networks becomes wider. It also contributes to the perception of “dominant” and “vernacular” literacies (e.g. Pahl and Rowsell 2005) as opposing and competing models of language. In this regard, Brown (1995) argues that Education has historically discouraged the integration of certain aspects of popular cultural into classroom practice in order to perpetuate the homogenous discourse practices of the dominant culture. From this perspective, his work is developed around a defence of the pedagogical use of the language of rap music as something capable of breaking down traditional pedagogical barriers and tackling the growing gap between the classroom and the community of students, between standard language and their home languages, between formal and informal discourse, between the language of the power elite and the language of the streets.

In connection with the home/school literacy divide, research within Sociocultural Pedagogy argues that pedagogy should focus on bringing the student’s family, community and personal life and the school’s agenda closer together in order to create “third spaces” (Gutiérrez 2008) of knowledge and identity in the classroom. In that regard, Third Space Theory acknowledges the student’s “funds of knowledge” (González et al. 2005) and ways of speaking as key resources for learning in the classroom. It also assumes that young people learn by constantly crossing boundaries between practices, discourses and literacies and so it sees the student as the nexus who actively articulates the
different discourses, practices and knowledge she or he encounters in everyday life and in the classroom.

Within educational research, hip-hop practices (e.g. rap lyrics, songs, graffiti) have been used in classrooms, above all in the United States, for a variety of purposes that include literacy and language, under the assumption that rap culture can be used to scaffold certain school curricular goals such as:

- to strengthen critical and analytical skills (Hill 2009), considering that rap lyrics constitute interesting resources to learn to question assumptions about the world, given that they are usually crossed by themes of race, class, gender and political ideologies;
- to bring poetry closer to the world of the students (Leigh 2013) by fostering literary skills (e.g. text analysis and interpretation) through stylish, well-crafted vernacular texts, something that presumably provides students with the confidence to transfer such skills to canonical texts;
- to improve academic literacy (Morell and Duncan-Andrade 2004) with hybrid texts in-between oral and written language, on the assumption that hip-hop textual hybridity might help students to appropriate the discursive codes of formal writing, but through a more flexible, ductile discourse than the academic one;
- to learn language, based on the argument that music helps to incorporate prosody and pronunciation, and to mobilise the multilingual consciousness of young people (Garrido and Moore 2016; Pennycook 2007; Sarkar and Allen 2007).

Rap music has been disdained in Spanish Research and Education to an extraordinary extent. Research drawing on hip-hop as a resource for learning is almost non-existent in Catalonia and Spain, and only recently has a focus on this topic begun to emerge within the local education field (Aliagas et al. 2016; Garrido and Moore 2016; Morgade et al. 2016). In school practice, there are some local initiatives such as the one that will be analysed herein, but they tend not to be visible or shared beyond the school community. The rejection of rap as a pedagogical resource is related to a particular conception that sees rap music as a genre characterised by its inappropriate, explicit and vulgar language, full of references to drugs, sex, violence and misogyny. Although this may be true of certain subgenres (e.g. gangsta rap), and probably of the most high-profile ones, it is not true for all rap music, some of which can focus on feelings and viewpoints on life and society (e.g. conscience rap). However, a key number of studies in the field of hip hop pedagogies has analysed the multilingual base and hybrid language practices of some hip-hop and shown its possibilities as a pedagogical resource for challenging monolingual norms (Pennycook 2007; Sarkar and Allen 2007).
3 Sociolinguistic background

Before I turn to the specific ethnographic context and our data, I will provide some contextual information on the sociolinguistics of Catalonia, both in secondary schools and in the rap scene. This preliminary information will provide a useful entry point for the discussion of data.

3.1 The role of education in the normalisation plan for the Catalan language

Catalonia, located in Northeast Spain, bordering France, is one of the 17 autonomous regions of Spain; the second most densely populated community, with over 7.5 million inhabitants. One of its most well-known sociolinguistic particularities is the coexistence of two languages (Catalan and Spanish), recognised during the Spanish transition to democracy in the early 1980s as co-official by the Estatut d’Autonomia, a legal framework that later, in the 2006 reform, added a third co-official language, Aranese, a variety of the Occitan language spoken in the north of Catalonia. Apart from its co-official status, Catalan is legally considered as Catalonia’s llengua pròpia ‘own language’ and accordingly is used as the main language in institutional domains and in education (Woolard 1989). Daily life is certainly more complex. The co-official languages in Catalonia rub shoulders with over 200 languages as a result of different demographic movements, mainly European tourism, which has exponentially increased since the 1960s, transnational migration, which peaked in the early twenty-first century and included mainly Latin American and North African migrants, along with the educational-based mobility (e.g. students, researchers). This has resulted in a complex, multilingual sociolinguistic landscape.

A history of suppression as a minority language during Franco’s dictatorship (1939–1975) – a period when Spanish was the only permissible language in the institutional domain and where Catalan was restricted to use in the private sphere – explains the subsequent period of linguistic activism that sought to redress the power imbalance between Spanish (considered the dominant, privileged language) and Catalan (considered the minority language, with low prestige). During Spain’s transition to democracy in the early 1980s, the Law of Linguistic Normalisation of the Catalan Language (Llei de Normalització Lingüística de la Llengua Catalana, 1983) sought to re-establish the Catalan language in the Spanish territories where it was spoken
by making Catalan a co-official language in society and the official language of Catalonia’s schools, and so it became a compulsory subject from Year 1 in primary schools, and the language of instruction and communication at all education levels (Woolard 2009). Three decades later, a shift in linguistic uses has been achieved with a certain degree of success, thanks to language policies in Catalonia and the introduction of Catalan in all spheres of life (public institutions, education, media, etc.). According to a recent survey of language uses in Catalonia (Generalitat de Catalunya 2013), although the majority of the population in Catalonia is nowadays bilingual to varying degrees, around 50% of people (above all inhabitants of the metropolitan area) mainly use Spanish in everyday life. This figure contrasts with the relatively low usage of Catalan as a main everyday language (35–40%), a percentage that has nevertheless remained steady since 2008 thanks to the centrality that Catalan now has in schools, public institutions and local media, as well as the fact that Catalan is a requirement for accessing certain jobs. Despite this progress, Catalan is still perceived by Catalan language policies to exist in an unbalanced relationship with Spanish, the language associated with political power, and therefore in need of positive discrimination, since, as pointed out before, Spanish is extensively used in everyday life.

As documented in other contexts characterised by situations of language contact between a dominant and a minoritized language, such as that of Corsica (Jaffe 2009), language typically plays an important role in educational institutions, not merely for pedagogical reasons but also for political ones. In Catalonia, and particularly since the period of linguistic activism began during the 1980s, the area of education has become a leading instrument for the normalisation of Catalan through the Programme of Linguistic Immersion (Programa d’Immersió Lingüística, PIL), through which children from all language backgrounds are immersed in Catalan as the vehicular language for all subjects of the curriculum, except Spanish and those focused on foreign languages, such as English, French or German. Thus, the school assumed a leading role, particularly in transmitting Catalan to children who did not use it in their family life, but also in legitimating the minority language by promoting the social uses of Catalan in and out of school. Certainly, this institutional linguistic agenda in bilingual or multilingual school settings interacts with many other sociolinguistic factors that sometimes support it, but sometimes resist it. These include, for instance, the teacher’s and student’s language choices in the classroom. This “linguistic ethos” of promoting Catalan is still very much alive in many schools, including the school in which the rhyme workshops considered here took place.
3.2 The emergence of Catalan rap and the challenge of youth language ideologies

Although rap music articulates influences from the US and the traditions of the Caribbean and African diasporas, it has been adopted and refashioned to respond to the tastes of young people across the world, an adaptation that allows complex forms of identity to emerge. In terms of language, rap, which was originally in African-American slang, has now encompassed other languages and varieties. On the one hand, it has been spread to the realms of national language varieties, such as Brazilian Portuguese (Pardue 2004), Japanese (Condry 2006) and Spanish (Toner 1998). All these have appropriated and reconstructed the global hip-hop movement (or Hip-Hop Nation) locally, leading to the formation of new cultural forms that include local sound elements, vernacular speech (with its rhyme properties) and references to local topics when drawing on resources in English (Androutsopoulos and Scholz 2003). On the other hand, rap music has also been used as a central strategy for the revitalisation of endangered languages. For instance, Barrett (2016) describes a school in Guatemala run by the group B’alam Ajpu that uses hip-hop (i.e. rapping, break-dancing) to promote Mayan languages among children. Since orality has traditionally been the main mode in preserving the culture and rap music is based on an oral tradition, this point of intersection has lent rap cultural practice a particular role in encouraging younger generations to use their mother tongue actively and motivating them to maintain the vitality of the language of their community. Moreover, there is a sense of connection with what rap originally aimed to do, when taking a traditionally disempowered language variety (African-American vernacular English) and transforming it into a positively valued linguistic code for the production of lyrics.

Catalan rap is a local realisation of rap music in a new sociolinguistic context. Catalan rap has a short history in comparison with the development of the national markets for the genre in Europe, which were already consolidated in the 1990s. This is reflected in the publications on Catalan rap, that are restricted to a few articles in the music press (Soriguera and Palà 2009; Palà 2010), whilst other European varieties have given rise to a longer sociolinguistic tradition that has analysed hip-hop from an historical and textual point of view. The Catalan language was not represented in rap music until the beginning of the twenty-first century. During recent decades, the rap industry in Spain has become well established and rappers in Catalonia have played a key role in it (e.g. 7 Notas 7 Colores, Solo los Solo, Arianna Puello). Some of these bands or artists, who have chosen Spanish as their language, have achieved success
outside of Spain. Palà (2010) argues that there are three main reasons that explain why these first rappers from Catalonia, usually bilingual and sometimes with Catalan as a mother tongue, preferred to rap in Spanish. Firstly, it may be due to the importance that mastery of the language takes on when rapping, since rap plays with rhymes and sounds, especially when improvised, and many of these rappers were educated in schools that, during the transition to democracy, were going through a language shift. Secondly, the absence of slang in Catalan, the result of a determined process of normalisation of the language. Thirdly, because of the prejudice of certain artists against the language, partly incited by the Catalan music criticism during the 1990s. This was based on a dominant language ideology that viewed Catalan as a dialect that had no place in contemporary global society. In sum, the participation of Catalan rappers in global hip-hop was initially in the face of ideologies that viewed Catalan as a non-international language, as opposed to Spanish, whose scope was seen to be acknowledged internationally. This finds a parallel in the hardcore music produced in Catalonia during the 1980s, which was English driven for the same reasons. Thus, the emergence of hip-hop in Catalan challenged dominant ideologies of language and identity in the music industry in Catalonia and Spain, having a particular influence on young people. In addition, Catalan rap has also become a site for the nationalist struggle, with many lyrics elaborating on the tensions between the Catalan national agenda and that of the Spanish state.

Strictly speaking, rap in Catalan began at the turn of the twenty-first century in isolated examples of established MCs who rapped in Spanish but decided to publish a one-off song in Catalan (El Disop in 1999 and Geronación in 2004). Subsequently, Catalan rap evolved little by little with bands such as Pirat’s Sound Sistema or La Pupil·la (to mention but two), who produced demos within an underground scene and distributed them hand to hand. A local record company, Propaganda pel fet! gathered some of these songs together into an album, without success. It was the band At versaris that, in 2007, turned a corner in the history of the genre in Spain, thus far dominated by Spanish and Latin American rap, and, consolidating themselves as a band of sufficient prestige, were followed by other groups such as El Nota. At versaris was the first group to demonstrate that rapping in Catalan was possible (Palà 2010). One of its members, Pau Llonch, offers rhyme workshops to secondary schools in the metropolitan area of Barcelona, and it is one of these projects that will be analysed in what follows.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Catalan rap was seen by the Catalan government as a complementary strategy to promote the Catalan language among young people, above all in a moment when globalisation was bringing multilingualism into schools and society in general. In 2009 a
competition called “hip-hop.cat” (“cat” being the internet domain name suffix of Catalonia) was launched in schools to find new talent, as a result of the collaboration of different local institutions (the Propaganda pel Fet! record label and Cases de la música popular), and with the support of the Department of Education (Departament d’Educació) and the General Secretariat of Linguistic Policy (Secretaria General de Política Lingüística), who saw the initiative as a strategy to consolidate the goals of the language normalisation policy through an expressive practice central to the socialisation processes of adolescents. Their support was based on (a) the assumption that adolescence is the stage when norms of language choice finally become established, (b) the belief that one of the social functions of the school is to even out social and linguistic inequalities, and (c) the idea that rap is an educational medium that can influence the values and attitudes of teenagers. The hip-hop.cat competition sought to capitalise on the momentum of bands that had already opted to compose in Catalan in order to foster an emergent style within the Catalan music scene and give new opportunities to artists who produced music in Catalan. At the same time, the initiative sought to promote the recognition of Catalan rap amongst music consumers, especially in a scenario in which Latin rap was becoming very popular among young people. This initiative might also be related to the fact that immigrants (above all Latin American students) are sometimes seen in education circles as a “threat” to the transmission of Catalan in schools (Newman et al. 2013). It was, therefore, aimed at schools as an educational, cultural and musical programme, but with broader implications for language socialisation and the music industry. Despite the strength of the initiative, in the following year, the economic recession deepened and the organisations investing decided to cut the funding.

4 A rhyme workshop in Catalan

This article draws on data from an educational case study gathered during the school year 2012–2013, consisting of a series of rhyme workshop given by a hip-hop artist in a multicultural state school in Catalonia (see previous works: Aliagas et al. 2016). This educational initiative was partially funded by Casa de la Música [Music House] in Manresa – an institution leading a social project devoted to the creation, public performance, teaching and dissemination of modern music – whilst students’ families contributed an additional four euros. It built on collaboration between the rap artist and the class music teacher. The rhythm workshop was integrated within the educational agenda as helping the
students to find their own balance between rhythm, verse and their critical viewpoints on society. During the course of the workshops, each student wrote his/her own rap lyric in Catalan and performed it at the school’s Christmas concert. The project involved 75 students, taken from two groups in the 3rd year of Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO) (13–14 years old) in the compulsory subject Music and one group of 2nd years from the Bachillerato (17–18 years old) in the optional subject Fem un musical [Let’s make a musical].

The secondary school where the rhyme workshops took place is a state Institute of Secondary Education (IES) located in Manresa, a mid-sized city of approximately 80,000 inhabitants, situated in the heart of Catalonia. The secondary school is located in the very centre of the city, in an area comprising a mixture of working-class Catalan families and migrant families from the south of Spain and various international places of origin, chiefly from Latin America and North Africa, the majority of whom settled in the neighbourhood during the second half of the twentieth century, attracted by the local textile industry. This ethnic and socioeconomic heterogeneity is reflected in the demographic mix of the school, which is clearly multilingual and multicultural, and has developed an “ethos” in accordance with this student base. They are explicitly committed to raising social awareness and equality in the city, a goal that they pursue actively by organising social events such as campaigns to collect food, the painting of a mural promoting world peace and putting on a musical to raise money for the education of a child in Ruanda. This cultural and linguistic diversity is also visible in the city’s emergent rap groups, which are culturally heterogeneous and usually use Spanish as a lingua franca.

The workshop was delivered in four weekly sessions. Over the sessions, the students produced a draft, wrote and then performed their own freely-themed one-minute rap lyrics in Catalan. The first session was devoted to the history of rap music, and to describing its rhythmic basis (e.g. flow, beat, loops) and its poetical basis (e.g. literary devices such as metaphors, metonymy, alliteration), a task that the rap artist achieved by drawing on examples and the students’ own funds of knowledges. The second session focused on the rhetorical analysis of some lyrics in a range of languages (Catalan, Spanish and English), and then the students engaged in some improvisation exercises. In the third session the students had free time to finish off and practice their lyrics in a classroom where a background instrumental beat was sounding. Both the rap singer and the class teacher assisted the students individually. Finally, the students took the stage to do a rehearsal of their songs and a Christmas concert organised for the other students and teachers of the school. Overall, it was a lengthy period of apprenticeship that gave the students repeated opportunities to seek inspiration and to craft and re-write their lyrics in a complex process where oral and written...
language was continuously recycled. This extended build-up helped to prepare the students for the final performance. A very important part of the creative process of creation was their verbal mastery of their lyrics, since good rap technique has much to do with showing off the rapper’s verbal skills.

My role focused on a qualitative documentation of the workshops, considering both the practice and the participants’ reactions to it. I talked to the rap artist and the teacher before and after the workshops, and I witnessed their conversations during breaks. I was also very attentive to the students’ reactions before, during and immediately after the sessions, when I conversed with some of them informally both in the class and in the corridors. An informed consent to participate in the research was signed by the students and their families or legal guardians. They could choose not to be recorded during the fieldwork. Obviously, the presence of a camera and a researcher had an impact on the students’ behaviour, above all in the first session, perhaps causing a degree of self-consciousness, but this seemed to normalise by the second session. I relied on qualitative case-study procedures (Yin 1984) to document the workshops, taking into account different layers of meaning (the practice, the participants’ insights, the texts produced), resulting in a sizable and diverse corpus of qualitative data:

- 12 video recorded sessions (four for each participating group).
- 12 audio recordings of the song writing period in each session, where the students were allotted time to write and rehearse their lyrics. The digital recorder was held by the singer or sometimes located on top of particular students’ desks.
- Draft versions of the lyrics (up to two drafts and one final version from each student, 138 in total).
- Brief unstructured conversations with some students after the lessons.
- Informal meetings between the teacher, the singer and the researcher during break times and class displacements.
- Field notes of the researcher.
- A reflective diary written by the teacher.

In terms of the research goals, I was initially interested in the workshops to study the effects of vernacular literacy in a classroom activity. During the sessions, some issues became more central in terms of the research perspective, such as the issue of the language, since rapping in Catalan was not initially seen by the students as a “legitimate” way of rapping. The goal of this article is to analyse the workshops from the point of view of the language and study its effects in the local emergent rap community in the city, beyond the workshops.
Some months later, I began a second piece of fieldwork outside of school, in which I focused on the case-study of three students (one boy and two girls) involved in the local rap scene and who had participated in the rhyme workshops. For one year, I documented their out-of-school hip-hop-based literacy practices, including their online and offline spheres of practice. This complementary fieldwork aimed to understand how rap-based musical knowledge/skills in song writing and delivery are transmitted among emergent rappers and the particular dynamics of socialisation, knowledge sharing and identity construction in teen rap communities. Moreover, it helped me to understand the impact of the workshops on the language choices and repertoires of these young rappers.

5 A clash of language regimes in the classroom

In the context of the rhyme workshops, a clash of “language regimes” (Kroskrity 2000) occurred as a result of proposing to the students that they rap in Catalan, a minority language in the musical landscape of hip-hop music. Language regimes have to do with the social organisation of language ideologies, how language practices have historically been associated with particular sociocultural contexts and events and how the sociolinguistic order is embedded in power relationships. In that regard, a language regime is a set of sociolinguistic constraints that influence people’s language choices in particular situations. In this section I will analyse the clash of language regimes that occurred during the rhyme workshops, since the language ideology of the school (prioritising Catalan) and the language ideology within the world of rap (which in Catalonia favours Spanish) were somehow incompatible. This language clash must be understood in relation to the historical linguistic tensions within the musical genre in question, in which Catalan has been deprecated as a language for rapping. When the students were asked to rap in Catalan, the language clash in the classroom thus reflected a clash intrinsic to the genre. I will particularly take into account the participants’ aims and opinions, and I will argue that this very clash of language regimes led to a “third space” (Gutiérrez 2008) where new language choices and possibilities emerged.

5.1 The teacher’s linguistic agenda: to empower the students linguistically

Classroom practice is embedded in an institutional order that shapes the participants’ roles, the participation structures and their linguistic choices. In
particular, in bilingual or multilingual contexts, the teacher’s stance is a key element that shapes the realisation of the institutional agenda, since his/her language choice can demonstrate alignment or disalignment with the linguistic normative expectations of the school (Jaffe 2009). The music teacher who organised the rhyme workshops with the rap artist saw them as an initiative to promote Catalan among the students, who showed great diversity in terms of their mastery of the language (around 40–45% of the students in the 3rd year of ESO were Latin-American or had a North African background, a percentage that dropped to 5% in the 2nd year of Bachillerato). With this initiative, she was aligning learning in the music class with the institutional linguistic order, but not with the linguistic normative order. In integrating the rhyme workshops within the school curriculum, the teacher was not merely promoting the acquisition of a breadth of musical knowledge and range of musical skills, but also pursuing goals related to literacy and language skills. This is shown by the learning objectives she established:

- to learn more about the history of rap music worldwide and locally, its style and expressive capabilities;
- to help the students to express their own ideas through music, trying to find their own balance between the rhythm, the verse and their critical viewpoints on the world;
- to contribute to other basic cross-curricular communicative competencies, such as instrumental competences (oral and written expression in Catalan), interpersonal (critical thinking, ethics and commitment, self-motivation) and systemic (creativity, personal initiative, management by goals, concern for quality).

The contribution of the rhyme workshops to the students’ oral and written expressivity in Catalan was a key issue for the teacher and actually became even more central during the sessions and indeed in this research. The teacher believed that bringing a Catalan hip-hop artist into the classroom was a way to legitimate the language among the students: “Bringing Pau into the classroom generates motivation and a positive attitude towards the contents in terms of music and language. The students’ expectations change when they see Pau walk through the door. His language is not like a teacher’s. He is more approachable, more fun and he knows how to win their trust” (Teacher’s diary, 8 November 2013)

3 In the Catalan educational system, ESO (Educació Secundària Obligatòria) comprises a four-year period of compulsory education for 12 to 16 year-old students. The next academic step is bachillerato (batxillerat in Catalan), a two-year non-compulsory education period in which students of 17–18 years are prepared for the admission exam to higher education.
2012). The teacher was conscious of the role of Catalan in the context of the school, which, for the students, was typically restricted to class activities and interaction with the majority of the teachers. As I observed during the fieldwork, Spanish (in a range of varieties either from the Spanish Peninsular or from Latin America) was the language that dominated peer-talk among the students, although other languages, such as Moroccan Arabic also had a presence in the school’s linguistic landscape. This observation reinforces the findings of other sociolinguistic-based fieldwork in similar urban schools in Catalonia (Woolard 2009; Codó and Adriana 2014), where newcomers are prone to see Spanish as the international language, more useful as a lingua franca and significantly more embedded in popular music, whilst Catalan is seen as an institutional language with less presence in their social circles. By bringing Catalan rap into the classroom the teacher was discriminating in favour of Catalan in that particular context and the idea of promoting a single language might be seen as incompatible with the tenets of new literacy, which, as shown in previous works (Pennycook 2007; Sarkar and Allen 2007), would emphasise plurilingualism. However, the teacher’s final goal – to empower the students linguistically in the school context – was in alignment with the new literacies framework.

From the teacher’s point of view, language, literacy and freedom were interwoven aspects. Before the workshops, the teacher told me that during her years in secondary classrooms she had seen students expressing themselves powerfully in Catalan in musical contexts but then systematically failing in the language lessons, a discrepancy that she explained in relation to the degree of freedom they felt to express themselves in Catalan. In the diary she reflects on the idea of freedom several times and that the rhyme workshops generated a space of communicative freedom in Catalan for the students. In the next excerpt, she relates the idea of having the freedom to express personal ideas in Catalan with the students’ potential gain in linguistic self-esteem within the academic context.

Al taller es treballa a partir de la idea “full en blanc: omple’l”. No pas a partir de la idea, “omple el full bé i d’una forma determinada i tindràs un punt positiu”. En el moment que deixem plena llibertat per expressar-se i que partim del punt en el qual no hi ha una resposta correcta, no els estem dient què han de posar, no parteixen d’allò que ells esperen que sigui puntuat de forma positiva, la creativitat es dispara. Si la creativitat es dispara, la valoració pel seu treball i les ganes de fer-ho bé augmenta i per tant, la seva autoestima també, l’acadèmica però sobretot la lingüística en català.

[In the workshops we start working from the notion of “here’s blank page: now fill it”, rather from the idea of “fill out this page correctly and in a particular way and you will gain a point”. As soon as we grant them total freedom to express themselves and we adopt the starting point that there is no correct answer, we are not telling them what they have to write, they do not start from what they expect we will give high marks for, then their
The teacher’s agenda extended the musical curriculum to other cross-curricular competences such as literacy and the Catalan language. Apart from asking the students to rap in a particular language, she believed that the rap genre was giving them the freedom to show their language skills in Catalan. The idea of finishing the workshops with a Christmas rap concert was also related to the idea of giving a space to the students to demonstrate to others in the school (teachers and peers) that they could speak and indeed rap in Catalan – a public demonstration of the verbal dexterity the genre demanded.

5.2 The rapper’s linguistic philosophy: the search for “street cred”

The rhyme workshops were given by Pau Llonch, lead vocalist of At versaris, the best established band offering rap in Catalan within the contemporary Spanish music scene. The five albums they have published since 2007 are a testament to the recognition they have received. Within the world of rap music, At versaris have challenged the dominant ideology according to which Catalan is not a suitable-sounding language for rapping, given that it is socially constructed as a politically imposed or artificial language, highly regulated by linguistic normalisation, in comparison with Spanish, which is seen as less rigid (Soriguera and Palà 2009). From the outset, the group’s linguistic philosophy was to rap using the language that young people speak in the streets, that is to say, including colloquialisms and Spanish linguistic structures, and it was this philosophy that the rap singer tried to transmit to the students in the workshops. The following extract from an interview with singers from At Versaris, published in a local music journal, shows the band’s language ideology.

Interviewer: Is it very difficult to rap in Catalan when there are no points of reference for you to reflect?

Rodrigo Laviña: According to the language, you have certain resources and certain limitations. Finding a credible language is a basic requirement to make the whole thing work. The Catalan of an old man of 60 and that of a kid of 15 are not the same. We have to rap like we speak.
Interviewer: Do you have any qualms when incorporating expressions from Spanish in your lyrics?

Pau Llonch: It’s not a question of “incorporating” them. That’s just how we speak. I don’t know whether it’s good or bad, but that’s what we do. If a Spanish-ism rhymes, looking for a synonym might make the song sound forced.

(Interview with Pau Llonch and Rodrigo Laviña in Soriguera and Palà [2009: 42])

However, the informal Catalan that At versaris’ use in their lyrics is less explicit or vulgar than the language of some other bands. They have something of a tendency to combine informal and more standard uses of the language and they usually include references in their lyrics to the literature of high culture. As documented in an ethnographic study with young local rappers in Denmark (Staehr and Madsen 2015), this untypical shift to standard language in urban rap is related to a language ideology based on the belief that links the standard linguistic register to intelligence. In the classroom, the band’s sensibility towards high art, combined with informal and more colloquial uses of language, was the basis for a focus on textual analysis during the workshop, something that implicitly orientated the student’s own lyrics. In that regard, the activity contributed to the students’ academic writing, something that reinforces Morell and Duncan-Andrade’s (2004) argument that hip-hop culture can be a path to mobilise the student’s engagement with texts, including in the academic domain.

Pau’s agenda in the workshops was framed by the idea of helping the students to express themselves through rap music and, since language is a key part of this, he also took the students’ attitudes towards language very seriously. He brought his own conceptions of language into the classroom, conceptions more flexible than those upheld by the school institution and the teacher. Pau advanced the notion that rapping in Catalan is as legitimate as rapping in Spanish, but also that rapping in Catalan should be done with the Catalan that is genuinely spoken in the streets and not with “the Catalan spoken by the mayor or the President”. However, the use of standard language was never discouraged but rather recognised as another legitimate way of speaking. In addition, as the students wrote and recited their raps repeatedly, their writing and speaking became more similar. All these aspects favoured the emergence of a “third space” of writing that enabled the “mash up” of marginalised and conventional linguistic repertoires and forms of language.
5.3 The linguistic claims of the students: being true to one’s roots

Catalan was the vehicular language of the rhyme workshops, since it is the official language of instruction in the Catalan education system. It was an implicit rule that was taken for granted by the teacher and the hip-hop artist, who initially did not verbalise the fact that the rap lyrics were expected to be written in Catalan. Regardless of this, some of the students, including speakers with Catalan as their mother tongue, opened the floor for negotiation. During the initial sessions, the question “Can we write the song in Spanish?” arose repeatedly. At that point, the students were asserting their notion of “authenticity” (Woolard 2009), based on the idea of being true to one’s roots, as well as the wish to maintain street cred. They associated the Spanish language with a more authentic form of rap, whereas rapping in Catalan was initially seen as an artificial imposition (see the quotes from Yousra and KlaRa, below). This association built on their experiences as consumers or producers of rap, since rap in Catalan is barely visible in the music industry in Catalonia (Palà 2010). It also built on the idea of Catalan as a highly normalised language, associated with school and lacking street cred. Moreover, rap in Spanish was seen as enjoying more ethnic and cultural proximity to the urban African American communities where hip-hop was born.

The second piece of fieldwork, outside school, helped me to delve into the emergent rappers’ linguistic practices, their points of view concerning language and their notions of authenticity regarding rap and language. In the interviews, the participants argued that there was a sort of straight relationship between listening to lyrics in Spanish and producing rap in that language, resulting in greater “fluidity” in terms of expression, something that increased their “confidence”. This was Yousra’s argument (14 years old, born in Catalonia to a family originally from Morocco). It was in the rhyme workshops that Yousra first discovered that she liked to rap and, although her first rap was therefore in Catalan, she continued rapping outside school in Spanish:

(1) Yousra: *La primera vegada que vaig rapejar va ser en català, al taller*  
‘The first time I rapped was in Catalan, in the workshop’

Researcher: *I ara, a fora, a la teva vida, quina llengua esculls?*  
‘And now, outside the classroom, in your life, what language do you choose?’

Yousra: ‘*El castellà, perquè ... flueix més. En el meu cas, podria fer-ho en català però ... estàs tan acostumada a escoltar en castellà* ...’
Spanish because ... it flows better. In my case, I could do it in Catalan but ... you’re so used to listening in Spanish that when you write in Catalan you’re not sure if what you’re writing is really what you want to say
(Y1, 5 April 2013)

KlaRa (17 years old, born in Catalonia to a local family), a more experienced rapper who had written rap lyrics in Spanish since she was 13 years old, argued that fluidity depended on quick access to linguistic resources and that this builds on a kind of intuition that is derived from the music you hear:

(2) KlaRa: 

‘My theory is that when you listen to a lot of rap with lots of rhymes in a language, something ... stays with you, it is like building up associations, and then it’s not like you copy or anything, it’s that then, when you want to do your own stuff, since you’ve listen to and noticed other rhymes and stuff, you’ve got more rhymes associated, or a wider range of things that might rhyme. I don’t know how to explain it, but it’s like you associate things pum pum pum’
(K2, 5 April 2013)

KlaRa recognised that in the past she had tried to write in Catalan without success and that in the rhyme workshop she did her first ever rap in Catalan. The demotivating factor was feeling blocked with the language in that particular writing situation; although she reported that Catalan was her family tongue.

(3) KlaRa: 

El taller m’ha ajudat a escriure en català (...) abans havia intentat escriure algo, però al veure que no em sortia alguna frase, havia dita “venga va!” (...) quan comences a rimar arriba un punt que se
The reasons KlaRa gave for rapping in Spanish echoed the reasons that the first bilingual rappers from Catalonia gave when, at the beginning of twenty-first century they too preferred to rap in Spanish (Palà 2010). She referred to the linguistic reason, the importance that mastering a language has when rapping, since rappers need to feel a verbal mastery to make their ideas ‘flow’. She also offered the commercially based reasoning that Spanish songs have greater scope (“Spanish reaches more people”, “you have a wider audience”). The commercial reason was also imbricated with a social reason related to the multicultural formation of the rapping cliques in Catalonia, where Spanish has been consolidated as the social language of communication between members with different sociocultural and linguistics backgrounds. In that regard, KlaRa’s language choice indexes a way of affiliating with a social group, where, as an emergent rapper, she needed to construct her identity as a legitimate rapper within the community.

5.4 From clash to change and transformation

The teacher took a conscious and strategic decision regarding the choice of artist to invite. By inviting a Catalan rap singer into the classroom, she was legitimating Catalan rap among the teenagers, whilst simultaneously reproducing the language regime of the school, based on a positive discrimination of Catalan. As a result, the teacher was framing the language choices of the students, with the aim of empowering them linguistically. However, the choice of Catalan initially created amongst the students a rift with the rap music they knew and liked. The students, in asking to rap in Spanish, were defending the authenticity of rap,
according to criteria linked to their experiences and funds of knowledges. In that regard, the school’s choice of Catalan for a vernacular literacy practice conflicted with the students’ (both migrant and local) sense of identification with rap culture, which in Catalonia is dominated by Spanish and Latin rap. The idea of rapping in Catalan seemed particularly odd to the migrant students, who tended to see Catalan as the language of school – rather than of a vernacular practice such as rapping.

In bringing the two language regimes together, a sort of “third space” was created where compatibility was possible. Both language regimes were articulated, negotiated and reappropriated through the figure of the guest rap artist. The construction, in the classroom, of the idea of Catalan as an organic language in contact with Spanish and therefore showing unashamed traces of Spanish linguistic forms relaxed many of the students. Pau encouraged them to “play” with the aesthetic sounds of Catalan and Spanish during the writing process, affirming a sense of authenticity based on having street cred. As a result, code-switching in both oral and written forms was legitimated in the classroom, which is something that has been claimed in the literature to help language learners to re-define the learning context and their own learning identity (Unamuno 2008). This language ideology, based on the idea of rapping in the language that people actually speak, was somehow combined with the idea that rap is a practice where singers show off their intelligence through content and language. These two aspects went hand in hand in the context of the classroom, finding common ground between the teacher’s desire to empower the students in their use of Catalan and the students’ defence of Spanish as their preferred language for rapping.

In the class there were students such as Byron (Peruvian, 17 years old), who were not interested in rap music and felt inhibited by the activity. On the first day of the workshop, Byron handed in a blank page. As he expressed in a conversation with the teacher, he felt that both the genre and the language were beyond him. However, in subsequent sessions, with Pau’s assistance, he managed to write a short but well-written rap about unconditional love for a girl and his desire to protect her like an umbrella on a rainy day. Pau suggested that he explore the aesthetic dimensions of Spanish and Catalan with a verse paying attention to the sounds of the words, and this is what Byron did in Figure 1, where he wrote lines first in Catalan, then in Spanish and then in Catalan again. In the course of the translations, the content of the verse was modified and the final version, in Catalan, ended up being the title of his lyrics: “Each time that someone falls in love with the image of a woman”. In sum, during the course of the rhyme workshops, he progressed from a situation of feeling shackled by linguistic and discursive constraints to one of feeling free enough to express his
story. This change was catalysed by Pau’s encouragement to “play” with the sounds of both languages.

Other students in the class who were regular consumers of rap music also complained initially about the language, but they quickly agreed to work in Catalan, since they preferred to rap in Catalan than to feel left out of the activity. Emergent rappers such as KlaRa, who were used to rapping in Spanish outside
school, accepted the language imposition as a challenge and used it as an excuse when they felt blocked or made a “mistake”: *En català és més difícil* ‘In Catalan it’s more difficult’, claimed KlaRa in front of the class, during one improvisation exercise. In the course of the second fieldwork I learned that she had improved on the rap she wrote for the rhyme workshops, recorded it and uploaded it to her profile on SoundCloud, an online site for sharing original songs that is particularly popular among aspiring rappers. One year later, she published a full album that included one song in Catalan. Beyond the rhyme workshops, she had decided to extend her linguistic repertoire in rap to take in Catalan. The workshops triggered a process of re-evaluation and reconfiguration of her musical identity; these language choices lent an additional mark of individuality to her musical output. Her new bilingual approach indexed a process of learning but also a way of asserting an identity within her social group.

6 Significance of the study for education in a minority language

Schools often ignore the complex literacy and language practices that teenagers develop in their out-of-school communities of practice, such as, in this case, the rap community (or others such as the role game community) and how these might be harnessed in pursuit of the school’s language learning endeavours. Rappers develop language resources and literacy skills to accomplish practical goals and satisfy identity concerns within the communities in which they reside. This occurs in a complex process of socialisation where some language ideologies are more dominant. As this article shows, educators can take advantage of these language and literacy skills in order to empower students in the classroom, both linguistically and academically.

This article reports on a school initiative aimed at promoting Catalan among teenagers in a diverse sociolinguistic context by using hip-hop literacies as the target of the learning/teaching process. The analysis of the experience shows that bringing a professional Catalan rapper into the classroom challenged both the language ideologies and identities associated with the school and those typifying the rap community in Catalonia, which is dominated by Spanish and Latin rap. On the one hand, the experience of rapping in the classroom challenged how language is typically learnt and used in the school, usually with printed, officially sanctioned texts, and the literacies and discourses that are legitimated, projected and made available to teenagers for learning or mastering Catalan – typically texts demonstrating a standardised form and language. Rap brought
into the classroom the value of orality as an important mode in creation and learning, as well as the relationship between “dominant” and “vernacular” texts (e.g. Pahl and Rowsell 2005). On the other hand, the suggestion of rapping in Catalan showed the students that this minority language, traditionally subjugated to a position of secondary importance within the national music scene, one typically seen as the institutional language of school and not the preferred language for peer-communication, can nevertheless be a legitimate language in which to write and perform rap lyrics and can even offer a positive advantage in gaining status and identity in the rap community. In the case of KlaRa, who, as a result of the workshops, decided to expand the linguistic repertoire of her rapping practice and published online some lyrics in Catalan, we see the influence that a school initiative can have in the language practices of teenagers – in this case, an aspiring rapper – outside school. It also shows to what extent language choice is related to processes of inclusion and exclusion; KlaRa began by using Spanish to affiliate herself to the rap community, but later explored the use of Catalan as a means to reconfigure her identity within that group. This is a process of transformation that reflected a redistribution of the values assigned to the languages involved. However, further studies are needed to explore the question of social and linguistic identities in transition in the lives of teenagers, and the role language shifts and choices might have in such processes.

In relation to previous literature on rap music as a pedagogical tool, this article also shows the strengths of connecting formal education with practising artists, since they have the potential to foster new literacy and language ideologies that can bridge the student’s curricular and extracurricular worlds. In this project, the guest rap artist was the bridge that successfully linked the language regimes that clashed in the classroom. Simply by performing in Catalan, he problematised the clash of language ideology typical of the particular musical style, and as a consequence an analogous linguistic clash within the academic order was awoken.

The guest rap artist sought a negotiation of the language regimes, opening up a “third space” in which new language ideologies could emerge in the classroom and have an impact on out of school identities. In that regard, the integration of rap discourse and language in the classroom context contributed to the creation of “new speakers” (O’Rourke et al. 2015) of Catalan outside the classroom by encouraging the formation of new leisure and social spaces in which the minority language is used. In short, this article shows to what extent rap-based educational experiences can contribute to language policy initiatives promoted by the Catalan government and conversion of positive attitudes into increased language use, something which language policy have been struggling to achieve over the past number of decades.
Acknowledgements: With the support of the Secretary for Universities and Research of the Ministry of Economy and Knowledge of the Government of Catalonia and the Co-fund programme of the Marie Curie Actions of the 7th R&D Framework Programme of the European Union (Beatriu de Pinós 2011-A). Moreover, the author takes part of two R&D research projects financed by the Ministry of Science and Innovation in Spain for the period 2015–2018 at Pompeu Fabra University: “Digital identities and Cultures in Language Education – ICUDEL” (EDU2014-57677-C2-1-R, directed by D. Cassany, https://sites.google.com/site/icudel15/research-team) and “Translingual and transcultural processes in students of local and foreign origin” (FFI2014-52663-P, directed by M. Trenchs). I am grateful to the participants in this study, the students, the rap artist and the teacher, and to Peter Skuce, who has contributed a helpful linguistic revision of this article.

References


