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Does English really open doors? Social class and English teaching in public primary schools in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

Most countries in Latin America are extending English language education in their public school curricula by beginning earlier and increasing hours of L2 instruction. The reason for this rapid expansion is encapsulated in the common refrain "English opens doors," which acknowledges the perceived power of global English in affording individuals greater economic and social opportunities. Mexico is a prime example, where English instruction in public education has been expanded from 3 to 13 years. On the surface, the new program represents a broad attempt at acquisition planning that would "level the playing field" by significantly expanding access to learning English among working class Mexicans and opening new doors of economic opportunities.

Drawing on critical theorists' examinations of class, education, and social reproduction, the author examines how English instruction differs in classrooms across social class, and asks if English will actually change the equation for working class children. Presenting classroom observation data from an impact study of the pilot phase of the Mexican program in the primary grades, and from interviews with a variety of the stakeholders, the researcher looks at ways that the reality of program implementation does and does not match its aims.

1. Introduction

In 2009, the Mexican Ministry of Education launched a major new educational initiate to expand English language instruction to 14.7 million public primary school in grades K-6. While conducting interviews with dozens of parents of children in the new English program about their views on the government's new initiative, I was struck that over half used some version of the expression "*el inglés te abre muchas puertas*" (English opens many doors for you) as the rationale for their support of the program. The refrain "English opens doors" is ubiquitous in Latin America, and recognizes the perceived power of global English in affording individuals greater economic and social opportunities (Niño-Murcia, 2003). In developing countries, increasing English proficiency is discursively linked to globally competitiveness and modernization (Clemente, 2007). Consequently, many countries have extended English language education in their public school curricula by beginning younger and including more instructional time for English, or taking the "more & earlier" approach to primary English (Hamid, 2010; Sayer, 2015b). Mexico is a prime example. Mexico has traditionally relied on a model of elite bilingualism, where access to extended English instruction and higher levels of proficiency has been restricted to students in private

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schools (López-Gopar & Sughrua, 2014). The *Programa Nacional de Inglés* (PRONI, or National English Programa) has increased the number of hours of English instruction a student in public schools receives by over 400%, from 3 to 10 years. This has come with a massive concomitant investment in hiring and training teachers. Ostensibly, the new program represents a broad attempt at acquisition planning (Wright, 2016) that would "level the playing field" by significantly expanding access to acquiring English among poor and working class Mexicans and opening new doors of economic opportunities. (see Fig. 1)

In this article, I will examine to what extent the discourse of English Opens Doors is evident in the everyday learning of students in the public primary program in Mexico. My theoretical framework draws on earlier critical theorists' examinations of class, education, and social reproduction (Anyon, 1980; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), as well as recent work in applied linguistics on language and social class (Block, 2014; Vandrick, 2014) in examining how English instruction differs in classrooms across social classes. The main guiding question here is: Does English change the equation for working class children? That is to say, what doors does English really open, and how do the content and the educational processes of English lessons in the new public school program support social mobility and/or social reproduction?

The qualitative data presented are drawn from a larger, mixed methods impact study of the pilot phase of the program (Sayer, 2015a). Here I am relying on extensive classroom observations in grades K-8 and from interviews with a variety of the program's stakeholders gathered over three years. I begin by describing the context and characteristics of the Mexican program, which is more ambitious but generally typical of similar programs in Latin America. From a language education policy perspective, I consider how the program is a response to the inextricable discursive link between the need for English, individual Mexicans' socioeconomic opportunities, and the country's ability to compete in the global marketplace. The data are presented in the form of two vignettes describing a typical lesson for 6th graders in two schools in different socioeconomic levels, illustrating differences in the content and processes of English lessons. The discussion analyzes the vignettes through the theoretical framework, and considers how, even while teaching the same lessons drawn from the same, standardized national curriculum, the teachers' pedagogical approaches are distinctly framed through their social class positioning of their students. From the perspective of applied linguistics, the article speaks to the broader issue of how English programs for younger learners in international contexts ought to engage with issues of access, equity, and social class.

2. Social class and early english programs

In this article, I refer to *social class* rather than "socioeconomic status." SES level is often treated as a variable in quantitative applied linguistics research (cf. Ellis, 2008), a construct measured through annual income, and parents' educational attainment (cf. Kormos and Kiddle's (2013) study of EFL students' motivation across SES in Chile). Block (2014) summarizes

Fig. 1. Students at Escuela Jardines present their role plays.

approaches to categorizing class which are based on individuals' occupations, such as Goldthorpe's and the U.K.'s National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC) categories, ranging from agricultural and unskilled manual laborers to professionals and administrators. In research in U.S. educational contexts SES is often indexed by a school's designation as Title I or the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch (cf. Abedi, Leon, & Mirocha, 2003).

Social class from a Marxist orientation, by contrast, is conceptualized in terms of property, exploitation, market behavior, and domination (Elster, 1986). Jean Anyon, a critical educational theorist, defined social class as a series of relationships to several aspects of the process in society by which goods, services, and culture are produced. That is, while one's occupational status and income level contribute to one's social class, they do not define it. Contributing as well are one's relationships to the system of ownership of physical and cultural capital, to the structure of authority at work and in society, and to the content and process of one's own work activity. (Anyon, 1981, p. 4).

She sees social class as the relationships to the three aspects of production: systems of ownership, of authority, and to the work itself. It is important to note to the central role of *work*, rather than just income level, in Anyon's view social class. Anyon's (1980; 1981) analyses of the differences in how children across social classes are taught highlighted the close alignment between the teacher's expectations of the future work prospects of students, her/his pedagogical approach, and the types of learning experiences these approaches produced for students. In short, Anyon argued that the alignment of pedagogy to the expectations for the children's job prospects based on their social class position constitutes a form of social reproduction.

The current study evidences social class as a construct that embodies the social positioning of students, following Anyon (1981) and Block (2014). This view of class is drawn from the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) seminal work *Distinction,* which "makes the very good and by now generally accepted point that class must be conceptualised not only in terms of traditional indexes of income, occupation and education, but also in terms of status and a range of social practices" (Block, 2014, p. 52). One concern of critical educational theorists is how schooling can contribute to greater social equality. They recognize that, certainly, educational attainment is strongly associated with social class, but does formal education help working class children move up? This is essentially the same "opens doors" question I have asked in relation to English above. While education, public schools in particular, is often seen as an equalizing force that promotes social mobility, critical theorists maintain that schooling more often works as a force of social reproduction. Anyon's and similar work (e.g. Bowles & Gintis' (1976) *Schooling in Capitalist America* and Willis' (1977) *Learning to Labour*) make the argument that school for working class children, in effect, becomes a training ground for children to occupy the same kinds of jobs that their parents have.

In Latin America, higher levels of English proficiency are associated with higher-paying, middle-class jobs, most often for those who have attended private schools. So does it then follow that providing more and earlier English instruction to working class children in public schools give them greater access to middle class employment? The alignment of social relations in the educational system to the social relations of the economic system is called the *correspondence principle* (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). The formulation of the correspondence principle, and the extent to which schooling determines future work possibilities and reproduces class positions and the role of agency and change, is debated by neo-Marxist education theorists (Au & Apple, 2009), but the basic argument is that education tend to reinforce, not disrupt, social stratification: "education is a class-allocatory device, socially creating, maintaining and reproducing […] skills and dispositions which have an *approximate* relevance to the mode of production" (Bernstein, 1977 in Au & Apple, 2009, p. 90, emphasis in original). If the inclusion of English instruction in Mexican public schools does actually open doors and creates new possibilities for students in the labor market beyond their parents' social class (education instead serves as a class *re-allocation* device), then it would defy the correspondence principle and speak volumes to transformative potential of English as a global language education.

3. Schooling, language learning, and social class

The language aspects of the tensions between students' participation in and resistance to an education system that marginalizes them have been documented in applied linguistics. I will briefly discuss relevant literature organized into two themes. First, the work in sociolinguistics and language socialization which demonstrates how social class is strongly related to access to different linguistic repertoires. Second, and most germane to this study, scholars have examined how the participation of students in language programs is structured, to their benefit or detriment, by their social class positioning.

3.1. Variable access to linguistic repertoires

In 1971, British sociologist Basil Bernstein postulated that part of the explanation of poor children's struggle in school was due to their language, or a "code theory". Whereas the language of schooling was closely aligned to what middle class children had been socialized into at home, poor children were at a disadvantage because of linguistic demands they encountered in the classroom. Bernstein (1971; 1990) described the qualitative differences in language across social class, and argued that the middle class used an "elaborated code," whereas poor and working-class families used a "restricted code." "The code theory asserts that there is a social class regulated by unequal distribution of privileging principles of communication […] and that social class, indirectly, effects the classification and framing of the elaborated code transmitted by the school so as to facilitate and perpetuate its unequal acquisition" (Bernstein, 1990; cited in; Block, 2014, p. 84). The terms "elaborated" and "restricted"

to refer to class-based linguistic differences led many subsequent scholars to charge Bernstein with theorizing a deficit view of poor people's language.[1] However, an important contribution of Bernstein is the insight that class differences are, in part, constructed through language differences, and that differentiated access to linguistic resources is one source of class inequality that affects children's participation in schooling.

Another side of the language-and-schooling difference debate has recently been rehashed in a special issue of the *International Multilingual Research Journal* (Johnson & Zentella, 2017). Johnson, Averni, and Johnson (2017) point out that the seminal "Word Gap" study by Hart and Risley (1995), which found that poor children by age 3 are exposed to about 30 million fewer words than their more affluent peers[2] and hence have not acquired language as well, has had a profound impact on how social class is understood to be a main source of linguistic differences. They argue that the "30 million word" explanation has entered the scientific mainstream as cannon, and continues to be regularly cited as fact by scholars and the media. However, they maintain that "calling out the language patterns of minoritized communities as inadequate continues to ignore the fact that widespread academic challenges are historically rooted and extremely complex" (p. 17).

Sociolinguistics who have engaged with social class have shown that class position does give individuals variable access to linguistic repertoires (Rymes, 2010). This is to say, social class plays a significant role in language socialization, and has real consequences for children as they confront academic content and language in school. Heath (2012) shows how literacy practices in three communities in the US, differentiated along racial and socioeconomic lines, follow the cultural logics and values of each community.

3.2. *Participation in schooling structured through language and by social class positioning*

Heath's (2012) argument, however, is not just that one's language socialization into a particular community leads to acquisition of more and less prestigious language forms, a rather obvious point. She shows that repertoires are differentially valued in schooling, and that it is the literacy practices of middle class Anglo American families upon which the school curriculum is based, and hence a particular type of cultural practice that become the default knowledge base of school, to the disadvantage of children from African American and White working-class communities. Bourne (2003) examines discourse in primary classrooms in the U.K. and analyzes how teachers draw on their own social positioning as they construct students as more or less successful learners. She draws on Bernstein's (1990) notion of *framing*, which describes the control of transmission of knowledge in terms of the selection, organization, pacing and evaluation of academic content. She notes that in traditional pedagogies classroom discourse is framed strongly, tightly controlled by the teacher and curriculum. In progressive U.K. primary classrooms, discourse tends to be weakly framed, with more student choice over activities and more apparent control of learning. Even still, however, she notes that teachers' constructions of "good learners" embedded in student-centered approaches are often organized around middle-class discourse and cultural norms.

In the field of TESOL, Valdes's (2001) study of Latino middle school ESL students in California is notable. Although not framed as an analysis of social class per se, Valdes shows how "not learning" English, or actively resisting the types of sanctioned school behaviors that are supposedly designed to move students from "limited proficient" to "fully proficient" English speakers, is a logical response on behalf of the adolescents in her study to the types of marginalization they face of "ESL ghettos, poor teaching, and the isolation of English-language learners in our educational institutions" (p. 159). As Darvin and Norton (2014) explain, social class as an analytic category is bound up with other aspects of one's social identity, notably race, gender, and immigrant status (and see Luke, 2010).

4. Public primary english programs in Mexico and Latin America

English has been taught as a foreign language in public schools in Mexico at the lower secondary level since the 1950s, and is generally regarded as unsuccessful (Davies, 2009). Students typically take three years of English during grades 7–9. In some states children received English classes starting at the primary level, but the amount and quality of instruction and the percentage of students enrolled varied considerably, created a patchwork of local programs. In 2009, the Ministry of Education consolidated local programs within the national program for primary grades K-6, introducing a standard curriculum, textbooks, and pedagogical approach. The new program is gradually being scaled up to reach all 14.7 million primary aged students in 100,000 schools across the country (INEGI, 2010). Additionally, compulsory education has been extended through high school and also includes English; an increase of over 400% instructional hours in just a few years. This means that English is now integrated in all grades K-12. According to the L2 learning trajectory charted by the curriculum, the 2½ hours of weekly lessons students receive during 13 years of schooling, equivalent to over 1060 h. The Mexican program is aligned to the

[1] See Block (2014) Chapter 3 for a discussion of the differences between Bernstein's, Bourdieu's, and Labov's views on the relationship between language and class, and why Bernstein's work became problematic and politicized in the U.S. Pennycook (2015) concludes that "what we really needed were Bernstein's insights into class coupled with Labov's understanding of language" (p. 271).

[2] Hart and Risley (1995) do not address bilingual children, but as Johnson and Zentella (2017) point out, research on L2 learners often references the gap concept as an unproblematic explanation of social class and language learning in school. For example, Carlo et al.'s (2004) study of English learners' vocabulary learning, entitled "Closing the Gap," cites Hart and Risley, though social class is not operationalized in the study design beyond the characterization of participants as Latino/as from "schools serving largely working class students" (p. 193).

proficiency standards of the *Common European Framework of Reference* (Council of Europe, 2001) scale; students should progress from level A0 ("true beginner") in kindergarten to level B1 (intermediate) by the end of ninth grade (*secundaria*).

The general goal of the national program is stated in Ministry's English curriculum document:

> The articulation of the teaching of English in all three levels of Basic Education [grades K-12] has the aim to guarantee that, by the time students complete their secondary education, they will have developed the necessary multilingual and multicultural competencies to face the communicative challenges of a globalized world successfully, to build a broader vision of the linguistic and cultural diversity of the world, and thus, to respect their own and other cultures. (SEP, 2011, p. 55)

The curriculum references the "Equal Opportunities" section in Mexico's 2006-12 National Development Plan, including the goal of having Mexico's citizens develop abilities in additional languages "to insert themselves within a globalized changing world" (p. 58). It also explicitly states that the program is a government measure intended to reduce the disparity in quality between private and public schools (Sayer, 2015b). The launch of an ambitious, large-scale program in a national education system that has a weak infrastructure and suffers chronic funding shortages has experienced problems. The expansion has come in fits and starts, and the coverage is still less than 25% of the school population, with uneven distribution in rural and indigenous areas. The most immediate challenge has been finding qualified teachers who speak English. In order to implement the program successfully and expand it to cover all primary public school students, the ministry has estimated that it will need to hire and train almost 100,000 teachers. Additionally, Ramírez Romero, Sayer and Pamplón Irigoyen (2014) identified difficulties in implementing the curriculum in the areas of teacher training, salaries and contracts, and curriculum and materials development. The problems faced with the program in Mexico are typical of the expansion of English in public schools Latin America; very similar struggles have been documented in the implementation of the National Bilingual Program in Colombia (Cárdenas & Miranda, 2014) and the English Opens Doors Programme in Chile (Matear, 2008).

5. Methodology

The vignettes presented below are based on fieldnotes compiled during a two-year research project in a central Mexican state. The research was supported by the state Ministry of Education, whose Office of English Programs wanted to document the implementation of the program, to evaluate generally the impact of the program on learning in public schools, as well as questions specific to the curriculum, materials, and teacher preparation. The qualitative aspects of the project included school visits, classroom observations, and interviews with students, teachers, parents, and principals. During each school year, the research team visited 12–15 schools; the selection of schools was intentional, both to get a representative sample of students and teachers across the state, but also in order to examine in what ways the social context shaped English teaching and learning in public schools. Hence schools were chosen to represent different SES levels, urban, suburban, and rural contexts, and characteristics specific to the Mexican context (what year the program had been implemented, whether it was morning, afternoon, or all-day school, and the type of training the English teachers had received). The observations and interviews were both semi-structured; protocols were used to gather comparable data across the sites (i.e. we asked the same basic set of questions to all parents, and had a set list of features we were observing in the lessons), but were open-ended, and allowed researchers to use extension prompts and follow-up on unexpected responses.

The observation notes and audio files were transcribed. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, and selected excerpts were translated later by the author; observations were mostly done in English. The dataset was analyzed, first inductively to establish themes, and then deductively across the entire dataset. For this paper, all data initially coded to the theme "SES" were re-analyzed, with the two examples presented below chosen both because they represented typical cases that distinguished the differences found across schools, and also because the matched data from the interviews (presented in the discussion section after the vignettes) clearly illustrated the teachers' own awareness of and rationale for their teaching approaches. In the sample, the socioeconomic status of the school was identified by the Ministry and verified during the school visits by noting dwellings in the surrounding neighborhood, jobs of parents, the resources available to teachers, and the social practices and resources of the students that index class (e.g. if they had an internet connection in their home, or attended private after-school language classes). Importantly, the school spaces index social class. Details included in the narratives such as the types of residences around the school and the presence of stray dogs are based on fieldnotes and my own recollections. The choices of which specific details to include were made to give the reader a good sense of what typical English lessons are like in Mexican schools, but also to highlight certain features of social class and schooling in the country, such as classroom technology and which children wear glasses or dental braces. For example, the mention of the light-skinned boy with freckles in the middle-class school is meant to suggest that the connection between social class, race, and the colonial history in Mexico, what López-Gopar (2016) calls the *colonial difference*.[3] The lighter skin color and physical features (freckles, lighter hair) are characteristics of students in higher SES schools, along with the other markers noted such as the children wearing glasses and braces.

[3] López-Gopar (2016), in his excellent monograph on language teaching and colonialism in Mexico, explains: "In Mexico, the colonial difference has accentuated social class structure. Different social and racial classes emerged during colonial times" (p. 37).

6. Studying english in two contexts

6.1. Escuela Jardines: middle class school

Escuela Jardines, like most urban Mexican elementary schools, is in a walled compound in a residential neighborhood. The large metal gate at the front entrance is painted in multiple bright colors, and has a heroic-looking statue of a general from the War of Independence in the well-tended garden near the principal's office. Around the school are two-story single-family houses, most freshly painted and well maintained. The school has 600 students in grades 1–6, organized into three classes of about 40 pupils per grade.

There are 37 children in Ms. Martinez' 6B (6th grade) classroom. All students are wearing matching school uniforms. Today they have physical education, so they are wearing their bright red gym suits with the school's patch on the chest. Nine students wear glasses and four have braces. Almost all of them have studied English outside of *Jardines;* almost half of them have taken weekend classes at language centers, and about a quarter of the students have studied English at private schools before transferring to *Jardines.* Some of these students have fairly good English proficiency, and a few have gotten certificates for passing intermediate-level international exams, such as the Cambridge *Movers* and *Flyers* certification. A few of the students have visas and have traveled to the U.S.

In the classroom, a computer projector is installed on the ceiling, and a digital smartboard is next to the whiteboard at the front. The walls are covered with student projects, a world map, a poster with diagram of the digestive system, and framed picture with the motivational slogan from Albert Einstein in Spanish "Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds." Ms. Martinez has allowed the itinerant English teacher, Naomi, to hang some flags the students made with the countries' names across the ceiling. These were from students' final projects from the last unit: to present a report on an English-speaking country.

Teacher Naomi arrives pulling her roll-a-cart. Ms. Martinez greets her and concludes the math lesson while Naomi sets up. "Good afternoon students" Naomi greets them. "Good afternoon teacher," they respond in unison. She runs them through a series of questions, "How are you today?" "What is the weather like today?" "How was your weekend?" They respond chorally. She picks out one student, a light-skinned boy with freckles and braces: "Gustavo, what did you do this weekend?" Gustavo blushes and looks to his classmates for help, who shout the translation for him in Spanish. "I go see movie" he finally replies. Naomi asks about the movie, and asks how many students had seen it. After discussing movies for a few minutes, she says "Do you remember our topic? What is Unit 3? Look in the book, what are we talking about? That's right, our *free time*. Good, remember: watching movies, playing video games, hanging out with friends, those are what? Right here, page 37. *Free time activities.* Okay, let's start our presentations. Did you practice? Did you practice your presentation about free time activities? Are you ready? Let's see who will go first." She pulls a popsicle stick from her bag with the students' roster numbers, and calls Victor and Julian. As they make their way to the front, they scan their prepared dialogue again, trying to memorize as much as possible. They stand awkwardly as they perform the role play, occasionally glancing down at the papers:

Victor: Hi. What's your name?

Julian: My name is Julian. What's yours?

Victor: My name is Victor. Do you wanna be my friend?

Julian: Maybe. Do you like to play soccer?

Victor: Yes, I like to play soccer every day.

Julian: Great, let's go to Garden Park to play.

Victor: Okay, what's your cell number?

Julian: It's 55-22-45-97

Victor: Great. I'll send you a Whats [text message via WhatsApp on smart phone].

Julian: Cool. See you later.

Their classmates clap as the students sheepishly return to their seats. Students pass in groups of two or three, presenting their dialogue as short skits. Some are mumbled, but others include some acting or joking references to characteristics of their classmates, which earn greater applause from the group. Some refer to free time activities that clearly index their social standing, such as playing online video games with a computer and high-speed internet connection in their house, or taking vacations with their family to the coast. One pair of girls presents a short script and that they have to read from their papers, to which Naomi switches to Spanish to admonish: "Why are you reading it? You have to put it in your mind. If you're going to learn English it has to be in your head, not on the paper. And yours sounds just like the book; you are supposed to make your own dialogue about what you like in your free time, not just what it says in the book."

6.2. Escuela Las Lomas: working class school

Escuela Las Lomas is perched on a hill. In front of the school are small cinder-block houses, all with identical layouts, though the front portion of many have been converted into closet-sized shops: butchers, cobblers, taco stands. Behind the school is an eight-story apartment complex. The streets are dusty and several brown dogs lounge near the school's front gate. The school has about 750 students in grades 1–6, with four groups per grade level. The classrooms are filled to capacity with metal desks in various states of disrepair.

The sixth graders arrive from lunch. They are wearing the school uniform, a dark blue sweater vest, grey slacks for the boys and a skirt for the girls. There are many empty desks, but of the group of 31 students who are present, no students use glasses or braces. Only a few of the children have studied English outside of school at language centers or private lessons. For a few months last year, some of the students used to stay after school to work with an English teacher that the parents had hired, but he stopped coming and the classes ended. None of the students has travelled to the U.S., except Emilio, who was born in California and came to the schools a few years ago when his parents returned to Mexico. Since moving to Mexico, Emilio says he has lost most of his English, though he also says he doesn't like to admit he knows English because his classmates call him *gringo,* or make him help them with homework.

The room has a projector in the ceiling, but the plastic cover and dangling wires suggest it hasn't worked in some time. The walls are mostly bare concrete, because the school building is shared between a morning and afternoon shift of students, and any posters or student work hung by one group will be torn down or defaced by the other shift. The regular teacher is not present, but Teacher Gerardo, one of three English teachers in the school who rotates between groups, arrives a few minutes after the students do. He manages to settle the group, and begins the lesson by asking them in Spanish to take out their English notebook. Many students do not have the textbook, either because the Ministry of Education did not send enough books to the school or because they've lost their book, so Teacher Gerardo improvises. He is teaching from the same unit as Teacher Naomi on free time activities, but his lesson focuses on grammar and the adverbs of frequency.

Teacher Gerardo does little direct instruction, or even talking. Instead, he has a photocopy of a grammar sheet that he himself had studied English from during his teacher training some years ago. He was trained to teach secondary school, but since the new English program was started in elementary school, the only position he could find was for primary. He hands the grammar sheet to a student in the front row, and she begins to copy it on the front board. Gerardo stands near the open door and keeps a vigilant eye on the pupils as they copy the contents of the whiteboard into their English notebooks (see Fig. 2).

As the students are writing, Gerardo interjects to emphasize the key words. He tells them in Spanish, “These are *adverbs,* remember, because they indicate frequency. Let's go over them. Sometimes … ?” The students who have managed to keep up pause their copying to provide the translation. When they get to *never,* the students respond *nunca,* and the student in front of me ribs his classmate by saying “Iván never make his homework …” This joke is the only English students used during the lesson. The students sitting nearby who hear the comment laugh, but the teacher does not acknowledge him. Iván quickly responds in Spanish, inserting an English adverb of frequency, with a derogatory comment about his classmate's mother. Teacher Gerardo drills the adverbs for a few minutes while the others catch up, and then resumes his place near the door. The student at the front erases the board and begins to write out the second part of the grammar sheet. The students write quickly, most use black ink with some combination of green or red to underline, capitalize, and emphasize key information (see Fig. 3). In 45 min, the student fills and erases the board three times.

Fig. 2. Students at Escuela Las Lomas copy rules from the board.

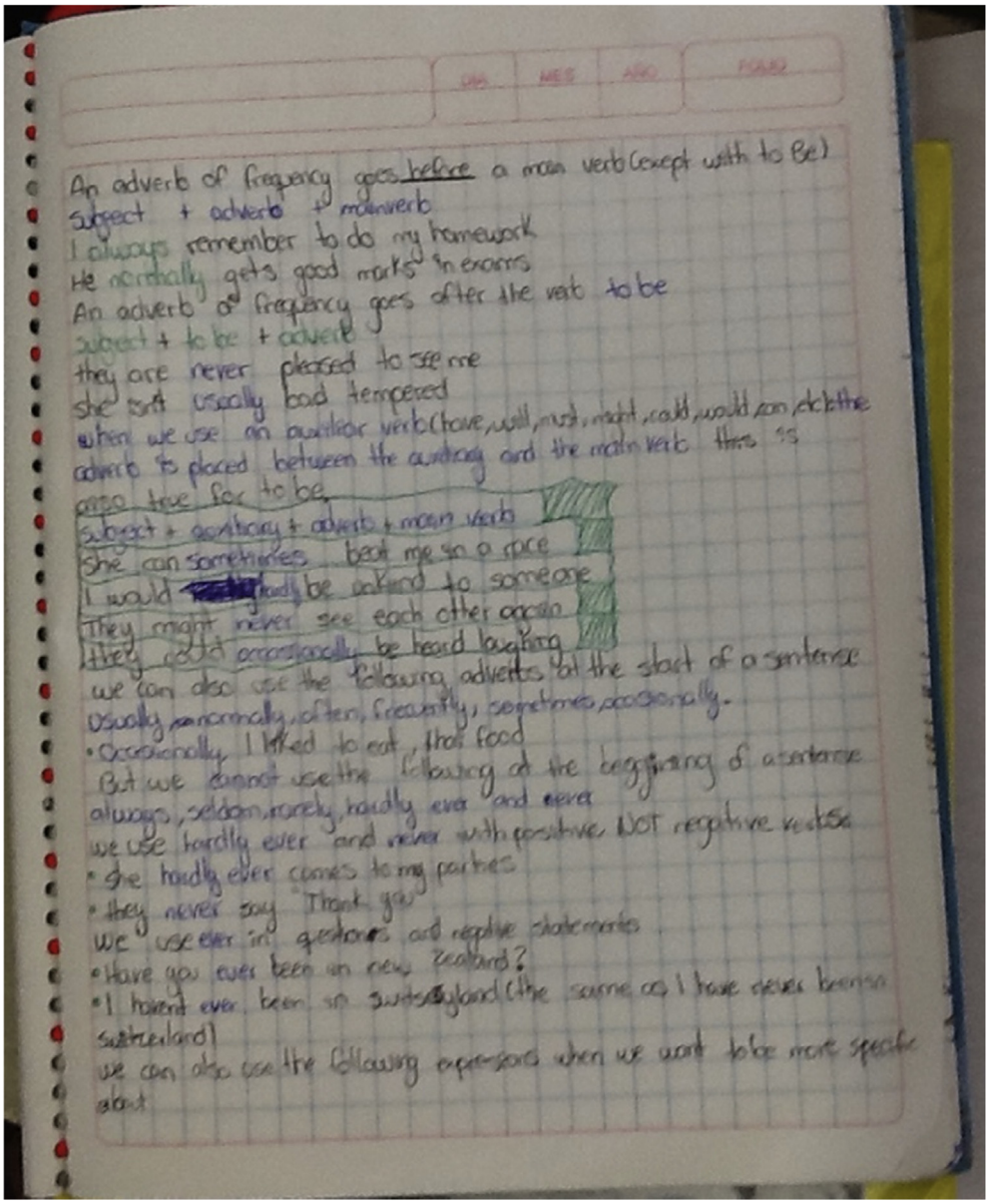

Fig. 3. English notebook with rules about adverbs of frequency.

7. Opening new doors, or the same ones? mobility and reproduction

The discourse of English Opens Doors reifies the notion that studying English leads to greater social and economic possibilities. The rationale for an early-start English foreign language program like the one in Mexico, which entails a significant investment of resources for curriculum and teacher development, is that expanding access to English instruction will support economic mobility – graduates with English skills can get better jobs – and hence greater social equality. However, the portraits of the English lessons in middle- and working-class Mexican schools suggest the presence of English in the national curriculum, in and of itself, may do little to open new doors. This is because, as the vignettes show, introducing English as a new subject does not necessarily change the underlying educational processes.

Teachers in most schools adjusted their pedagogy to fit their expectations for students. Bernstein (1990) refers to the ways the transmission of knowledge is controlled within schools as the *framing* of lessons. The *Las Lomas* lesson is an example of *strong framing*, in that the "control over the selection, organisation, pacing, sequencing and evaluation is located with the transmitter (or teacher)" (Bourne, 2003, p. 498). The middle-class *Jardines* lesson is relatively *weak framing*, since the control of contents is somewhat more distributed. Bernstein (1990) relates framing to the types and control of discourses in the

classroom, and argues that the communicative competencies that students develop in schools emerge from "multi-layered called patterns of communication" and are "likely to be class-based" (p. 83–84). Bernstein's explanation, then, is a more nuanced version of the correspondence principle (Au & Apple, 2009), in that the pedagogical approaches adopted by the two teachers above are not rigidly determined by the social class of the student population, but rather are best understood as the processes through which the pressures of social structures are exerted in ways that tend to reproduce social stratification in favor of the more powerful groups (a point recognized by Bowles and Gintis, 1988; and Moore, 1988).

What was especially revealing about the lessons observed was how each teacher explained their rationale for *why* they taught the way they did. In the interview after the observation, Teacher Gerardo, of the working-class school, characterized his teaching to *Las Lomas* students as a "back to basics" approach, necessitated not by the students' low level of English, but by their general lack of academic knowledge and skills through which to learn an additional language. Other teachers in working-class schools referred to students' "low level of Spanish" or even "low level of language" as explanations for why they had to orient their lessons to grammatical elements, as a prerequisite before they could become more communicative. In the follow-up interview, I asked Gerardo how he adjusted his teaching for the first generation of students coming through the new English program and who, by sixth grade, had studied the language for five or six years:

Excerpt 1: The Step-by-step approach

01 Peter: Now that students are starting [studying English] in first grade, or kindergarten even, and they are supposed to have a higher level, how has this affected your teaching?

02 Teacher Gerardo: Well, the problem is that even when they get here [6th grade], they still lack many of the elements. Some don't remember what a verb is, what an adjective is, so I have to go step by step again …

Gerardo's lesson does not seem like a good example of contemporary TESOL pedagogy, nor did it seem to follow the methodology prescribed by the curriculum. I did not observe anything that seemed "communicative" in his classroom (Brown, 2015), and in the interview he did not use any of the terms like interaction, engagement, negotiation for meaning, comprehension, or concepts that we associate with language teaching based on principles of second language acquisition. He did not refer to educational concepts like critical thinking, multiple intelligences, or sociocultural ideas like the zone of proximal development which figure prominently in the Mexican curriculum guide for teachers. Gerardo may or may not have studied these concepts in his teacher training courses, but he evidently did not see them as relevant to teaching the sixth graders of *Las Lomas.*

His approach does make sense, however, if we understand it within the socioeconomic context of the area. There is a large Nissan factory near the city, and many of the residents of the *Las Lomas* neighborhood work in affiliated companies that supply parts to Nissan, or in the service industry that supports the workers. Most of these jobs require workers to maintain repetitive tasks, accurately, for long hours.[4] For these jobs, having the mental stamina to quickly and accurately transcribe a meaningless list of grammar rules for 45 min straight, adding pointless details like capital letters in green ink, may in fact be a useful skill. Like Gerardo's class, Anyon (1980) described classroom activities in working class schools as predominantly about following the steps of a procedure, usually a mechanical one involving rote behavior and little decision-making on the students' part. Assignments generally had little meaning or coherence, since teachers rarely provide explanation about why something is being assigned or its connection learning goals. Luke (2010) points out that Anyon's analysis is still highly relevant today, and indeed, her characterization of math lessons in US schools was eerily similar to the English lessons in Mexico I observed 35 years later:

A common feature of [lessons] in both working-class schools was that a large portion of what the children were asked to carry out [were] procedures, the purposes of which were often unexplained, and which were seemingly unconnected to thought processes or decision making of their own. An example of this type of instruction was when one of the fifth-grade teachers led the children through a series of steps to make a one-inch grid on their papers without telling them that they were making a one-inch grid or that it would be used to study scale. She said, "Take your ruler. Put it across the top. Make a mark at every number. Then move your ruler down the bottom. Now, put it across the bottom. Now make a mark on top of every number. Now draw a line from …" At this point, one student said that she had a faster way to do it and the teacher said, "No, you don't; you don't even know what I'm making yet. Do it this way, or it's wrong." (Anyon, 1981, p. 8, p. 8).

Anyon (1981) characterizes the focus of learning for working class children as:

It seems to be the case that what counts as school knowledge in these two working-class schools is not knowledge as concepts, cognitions, information or ideas about society, language, math, or history, connected by conceptual principles or understandings of some sort. Rather, it seems that what constitutes school knowledge here is (1) fragmented facts, isolated from context and connection to each other or to wider bodies of meaning, or to activity or biography of the students; and (2) knowledge of "practical" rule-governed behaviors—procedures by which the students carry out tasks that are largely mechanical. Sustained conceptual or "academic" knowledge has only occasional, symbolic presence here. (p. 12).

The *Las Lomas* lesson was clearly contrasted by the lesson in *Jardines,* a pattern that was evident to varying degrees across the schools in the project. For starters, the *Jardines* students were not observed copying anything, and there was little

[4] For poor and working classes in Mexico, a typical work week is 60–70 h, usually 10–12 h a day, six days a week. The daily minimum wage is 90 pesos, or about US$4, the equivalent of 40¢ per hour.

emphasis on grammatical structures. The children indexed their middle-class membership in their role plays with references to using smart phone apps and visiting shopping malls. During the post-observation interview with Teacher Naomi, she explained that in the afternoons she had a second job teaching English at a high school, which was "a very different context" with "a lot of problems." She described how she had to adjust her teaching to fit her afternoon students:

Excerpt 2: They can't create one on their own

01 Peter: So, speaking of those differences that you mention between those contexts [the two different schools where she works], so do you think you change your teaching approach when you're here in this context or in the other [school]?
02 Teacher Naomi: Yes …
03 Peter: How's that?
04 Teacher Naomi: Yes well for example, in this topic [from the class the researcher had just observed about free time activities] I had explained how to express your likes, I gave them the elements, how to talk about what you don't like, and they listened to a recording of a conversation and then I told them "now create a dialogue, talking about what you like." So they chose the theme, they developed their dialogues however they wanted. And in the other school I had to just bring them the dialogue already completed [and they reproduced it].
05 Peter: Mmm …
06 Teacher Naomi: Because they can't create one on their own. So yeah, it's different.
07 Peter: So you're saying that here, on his or her own the student can—
08 Teacher Naomi: —produce more—
09 Peter: —express their own meanings.
10 Teacher Naomi: Exactly. Yes.
11 Peter: And in the other context, it's like you have to give it to them and do it for them.
12 Teacher Naomi: Mm-hm, yes.

The explanations given by Gerardo and Naomi suggest that certain activities in English class, accurately copying and following procedures, are appropriate for students who have yet to acquire basic elements, either in their L1 or L2. Activities that we would associate with communicative language learning, including expressing one's own meanings, creating and improvising dialogues, and responding to open-ended questions, are appropriate for those who are deemed to have the requisite basic knowledge, and are therefore ready less structured activities. This is clear where Naomi explains (Turn 04) that for children in the lower SES school she has to bring a dialogue already completed for them to replicate, whereas in the middle-class school she admonished the students who produced a dialogue that was too similar to the example in the book. Knowledge of English for working class students consists of acquiring the basic elements of language, and the purpose of studying English seems to be oriented towards remediating language skills they have not mastered in their L. Knowledge of English for middle-class students is about "putting it in your mind," so you can use it and not have to rely on what is in the book or on the paper. The teachers' explanations of the differences observed in their teaching across the two contexts therefore do not connect to the English Opens Doors discourse, but rather reflect the "gap" or deficit view of poor children's language (Johnson, Avineri, & Johnson, 2017).

These practices also reflect the teachers' expectations. The differences in the teachers' approaches to teaching English to students across social class positions seem to correspond to how the teachers view their future possibilities. That is, recalling Anyon's definition of social class as one's relationship to the content and process of work activity, the teachers' pedagogy defaults to align with what they understand their students' future work prospects to be, which is in essence the correspondence principle argument (Bowles & Gintis, 1988). This subtly but powerfully shapes what the teacher sees as the students' purpose for learning English. The processes for learning English come to mirror the processes that will be valued in the workplace. For working-class kids, these including rote learning, stamina and repetition, and following mechanical procedures. For middle-class kids, these include using templates to create dialogues, with some amount of creativity and improvisation within limits. Anyon (1981) characterizes knowledge in more affluent schools as more open to discovery, construction and meaning-making. It often has personal value to the students, since they are called upon to think creatively and independently.

8. Interpretation and alternative explanations

The two lessons chosen represent a pattern across the dataset. English lessons in working-class schools tended to be strongly framed, with few communicatively-oriented activities and an emphasis on grammatical elements and copying in notebooks. By contrast, the middle-class schools were characterized by somewhat more weak framing, used relatively little copying, and tended to have students talking more, practicing L2 skills and do group activities. There were exceptions noted with teachers' lessons across the schools, and some lessons which seemed to have elements of both approaches; however, the tendency of the lessons followed the class-based pattern in more than two-thirds of the dozens of the lessons observed during the course of the project.

Nonetheless, we should acknowledge that other interpretations of the lessons are possible, and as noted above, the teachers' class-based positioning does not operate in a vacuum but rather in conjunction with other social factors. Two other

considerations that teachers consistently brought up in the interviews were classroom management and language proficiency. Bernstein (1990) noted that lessons with strong framing, where the teacher maintains tight control over the transmission of knowledge, is characteristic of working-class schools. But this may not depend only on how the teacher positions the students, but also how she positions herself. Many teachers reported that they did not feel confident about their ability to manage classrooms, since they were stepping into the homeroom teacher's space and did not even know all of the students' names. They explained that discipline problems were common in many public schools, few had been trained to teach in public primary school, and they struggled to find effective responses for unruly students. Hence, lessons like the *Lomas* one above are perhaps a sensible strategy that allow teachers to avoid discipline problems with the group, as opposed to group work and activities where students are moving around and talking. An additional consideration is the teacher's own level of English. Whereas we observed that most of the teachers in all schools had enough English to conduct the lessons primarily in the target language,[5] many teachers expressed insecurity about their level of English. For teachers who feel less confident about their English skills, organizing more open-ended, communicative lessons and giving students more control places greater linguistic pressures on them.

One surprise that came out of the interviews with students across the SES spectrum was they all reported engaging with English outside of school in fairly similar ways. Most children reported listening to popular music and playing video games in English, as well as using social media, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Snapchat, to keep in touch with transnational family members in the U.S. (Sayer & Ban, 2014). The ways of accessing these activities were different – working-class children used inexpensive cybercafés whereas middle-class kids had computers and internet in their homes – but the practices themselves were strikingly parallel. It seems that although students from a range of social class backgrounds do fairly comparable things with English in their everyday lives, the pedagogical practices of ESOL lessons tend to reproduce social class differences.[6] Hence, as Luke (2010) points out, class reproduction in schools is not overly determined, but "sometimes fall[s] along the identifiable fault lines of race, culture, language groups, gender—but as readily taking idiosyncratic patterns and discourse forms of student agency[…] The result, Erickson (2007) points out, is not an airtight efficacy of class reproduction but rather "a paper-thin hegemony, always contested and somewhat unstable" (p. 177). The question remains, however, about what pedagogy could work in the English class in a school like *Las Lomas* to tear at the paper-thin hegemony that pushes teachers inexorably towards a "back-to-basics" approach.

9. Conclusions

Block (2014) claims that global English has become a "communicative resource that indexes middle and upper class positions in societies around the world," a phenomenon that he connects to the process of commodification of English (Heller, 2010). Parents and teachers interviewed for this project were well aware (however ambivalent their feelings towards the U.S. might be) of the indexical value of English in Latin America, and were keen to have their children learn enough English to leverage that value. Moving English from the domain of private to public schools, and integrating English through the K-12 curriculum, is an attempt to have, as the Mexican curriculum document cited above states, all citizens "develop the necessary multilingual and multicultural competencies to face the communicative challenges of a globalized world." Elsewhere, I have argued that adoption of an "English for Everyone" approach (Wedell, 2008) in Mexico and Latin America represents a shift in language policy from elite bilingualism to macroacquisition (Sayer, 2015a). At the same time, I noted that the "effects of [English in primary school] in providing opportunities and ameliorate poverty are taken as self-evident [and] the perceived need for English in developing countries is based largely on the construction of the myth of global English, the ideology that equates the language with positive notions of development, mobility, competitiveness, and opportunity" (p. 269, and see Bruthiaux, 2002; Park & Wee, 2012).

On the surface, this would seem to be a positive challenge to the historical role of English education in preserving the existing social order in Mexico, one that is based on colonial relations of race and class (López-Gopar, 2016). It would upset the hegemony of the correspondence principle (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), and unlock the potential of English lingua franca as a force for global equality (Van Parijs, 2011). However, as the portraits of English lessons in two schools in this study illustrate, the discourse of English Opens Doors is difficult to realize in practice. For educators, the question of successful L2 English learning for young working-class students is not primarily a psycholinguistic one, or even a curricular question of figuring out how many hours of instruction will produce a given level of L2 proficiency. It is fundamentally a question of how to reorient educational processes so that PELT programs are not simply inserted into class-based pedagogies and hidden curricula based on our social class positioning of students.[7]

The question posed at the outset was if a national English program for young learners in public schools in Latin America can change the equation for poorer children. This research suggests that Ricento (2013) is right in that English programs

[5] There are no explicit guidelines in the curriculum about which languages, but most of the teachers in the interviews said they aim to make 75–90% of the lesson in English, which follows Shin and Crandall's (2014) recommendation for target language use for younger learners.

[6] A question raised by one reviewer was the extent to which students' interest in out-of-school activities through English may have been motivated in part by exposure to the L2 in the classroom.

[7] One of the reviewers rightly pointed out that in order to answer the "Does English open doors?" question, we would have to follow children longitudinally, and look at whether the English they learned in the program changed their job prospects.

cannot be parachuted like aid packages into developing countries, and that in and of themselves they do not support economic mobility. The English program in Mexico seems to be a program designed to reflect a language education policy as "remedies aimed at inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them" (Fraser, 2008, p. 28, cited in Block, 2014, p. 86). While the Ministry's English program is an affirmative action program, it is not a transformative action one, since it does not disrupt underlying structural inequality. Rather than opening new doors, the early English program in Mexico largely integrates language learning into existing socially stratified processes of teaching and learning. And rather than promote social mobility, it may exacerbate social reproduction by creating a veneer of equality of access to English instruction (López-Gopar & Sughrua, 2014), while further entrenching the reality of the disparate opportunities students have along class lines for meaningful language learning.

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