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Co-constructing Social Justice: Language Educators Challenging Colonial Practices in Mexico

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This article involves the work of four language educators/researchers collaborating on an ongoing longitudinal multilingual participatory action research (PAR) project in a Bachelor of Arts (BA) language teaching program in Oaxaca, Mexico. Overall, this PAR project aims at the co-construction of social justice in ELT in Mexico. In particular, it explores an approach that would encourage learners to make full(er) use of their language resources to challenge the colonial othering discourses of inferiority, disability, and backwardness inherent in ELT in Mexico. The analyses reported in this article zooms in on the English learning experiences of three Indigenous background, low-socioeconomic status, female undergraduate students, and their alleged struggle with speaking English in teaching–learning and assessment activities. The purpose of this article is to illustrate how a local English teacher co-constructed social justice with these three students. To fulfill this purpose, we succinctly present the focal students life stories and address three emergent themes: (i) unveiling alienating practices in the classroom; (ii) carving out spaces for multilingualism in the English classroom; and (iii) authoring assessment as a way to enact social justice.

This article reports on a participatory action research (PAR) project situated in a Bachelor of Arts (BA) language teaching program in Oaxaca, the economically poorest and most culturally and linguistically diverse state of Mexico. This article focuses on Julio, a local English teacher (coauthor of this article), as he worked with three Indigenous background, low-socioeconomic status (SES), female undergraduate students (Marcela, Yolanda, and Laura, pseudonyms), and how they claim their 'right and space' to speak and use English and other languages in an English course. These three female students volunteered to share their stories and provided insights during the research process but did not participate in the final analysis of the data and writing up of this article. This project could be considered *Teacher* PAR (Stapleton 2021) as Mario, Jamie, and Constant (language educators/researchers and coauthors of this

article) have been collaborating with an English teacher (Julio), who may be under additional scrutiny in his work 'with student populations deemed "underperforming" by accountability standards' (p. 166, quotations in original). Nevertheless, in this article, our project is referred to as PAR only since it is open to the participation of other actors such as students in later stages.

This PAR project is situated within Mexico's Eurocentric matrix of modernity/coloniality rooted in the Spanish invasion of Mexico (ca. 1519–21), which has shaped a state of 'colonial difference', the discourse that equates otherness (e.g. Indigenous groups in Mexico or so-called nonnative speakers of English) with inferiority, disability, and backwardness (Mignolo 2000; López-Gopar 2016). Currently, these Eurocentric narratives are invigorated by connections with the USA and UK with English. The English language is believed to provide 'a high-end-middle class distinction that contrasts Mexico's "coloniality" with the United States' "modernity"' (López-Gopar and Sughrua 2014: 107, quotations in original). This has positioned the English language as a 'modern' and 'desirable' commodity (Motha and Lin 2014) at the expense of *othered* Indigenous languages (López-Gopar 2016). In addition, relying on these Eurocentric values, most Mexican universities have adopted British/American English-only pedagogies and standardized examinations, especially in English language teacher preparation programs (Clemente and Higgins 2008). As a result, most Mexican English teachers are encouraged to follow monolingual practices reproducing deficit positioning of students' multilingualism (López-Gopar 2016). Nevertheless, many Mexican teacher educators and English teachers have attempted to resist such practices (Clemente *et al.* 2006). An example of this resistance in the form of decolonizing pedagogies is presented in this article.

As previously mentioned, this article involves the work of three language educators/researchers and a local English teacher collaborating on an ongoing longitudinal multilingual PAR project. Overall, this PAR project aims at the co-construction of social justice in ELT in Mexico. In particular, it explores an approach that would encourage learners to make full(er) use of their language resources within classroom-based language assessments and challenge the colonial difference inherent in ELT in Mexico. In this PAR project, *we*[1] have worked with different groups of undergraduate students taught by Julio. The analyses reported in this article focuses on one of these groups, zooming in on the English learning experiences of Marcela, Yolanda, and Laura and their alleged 'struggle' with speaking English in teaching–learning and assessment activities. Originally from Oaxaca, Julio is a young teacher and a role model for the BA students, as he is a graduate from the BA program from a low-SES background.

Our PAR project is inspired by Rawls' (2003) argument that social justice is a shared belief system that disqualifies and looks beyond colonial inheritance of social and cultural/colonial differences (e.g. race, ethnicity, gender, and linguistic ideologies) that perpetuate English superiority. We have an explicit decolonizing commitment to unconditionally see Marcela, Yolanda, and

Laura, and indeed all students as free and equal, and their multilingual language practices as assets. As such, the purpose of this article is to illustrate how Julio co-constructed social justice with these three students. To fulfill this purpose, we succinctly present the focal students' life stories and address three emergent themes: (i) unveiling alienating practices in the classroom; (ii) carving out spaces for multilingualism in the English classroom; and (iii) authoring assessment as a way to enact social justice.

SOCIAL CLASS, INDIGENOUS PEOPLES, AND WOMEN IN MEXICO

Our PAR study is entangled in Mexico's social class inequalities and discriminatory practices endured by Indigenous peoples. In Mexico, 60 million people, 46 per cent of the country's population, live in poverty, and 51.5 million experience food shortages (López-Gopar and Sughrua 2014). Internationally, Mexico has the second-highest poverty rate among Indigenous peoples (Vásquez Parra and Campos-Rivas 2016), which is strongly associated with limited access to high-quality education and low-paying jobs. Within this socioeconomic scenario, access to English in private elite bilingual schools and English institutes excludes 95 per cent of the population, as only 5 per cent can afford private schooling in Mexico. Thus, social class is a paramount factor in access to different types of schools and instruction. Most students living in poverty only have access to publicly funded schools. In these schools, English teaching 'produces poor results due to the limited hours of instruction, inadequately prepared teachers, and incongruous curricula' (López-Gopar & Sughrua 2014: 107).

In addition to social class, our project situates race, ethnicity, gender, and language within the matrix of contemporary modernity/coloniality grand narratives. An overarching 'mestizaje' racial identity (i.e. the cosmic race) allied to colorism that indexes privileges and/or 'desirable' characteristics with persons of fairer or whiter skin (Hunter 2007) has continued throughout Mexico within pervading coloniality. Such colonial schemas are reflected in the treatment of the complex diversity in Mexico along linguistic and ethnic designations. Nationally, Mexico officially recognizes 364 Indigenous languages, and in Oaxaca itself, there are 16 official ethnicity categories of Indigenous peoples (e.g. Mixe, Zapotec)—albeit mostly recognized as perfunctory rhetorical acknowledgments. Indigenous women receive further discriminatory practices. Motta (2014: 22) states, 'Indigenous women of color ... are subject to multiple oppressions, including political and epistemological invisibilization'. Nonetheless, Motta (2014: 22) argues that Indigenous women (writers, poets, and rappers) have resisted by 'articulat[ing] a voice from the margins'. Through the dissenting voices of researchers, teacher educators, teachers, and students, it is in these margins where decolonizing language teaching finds its breeding ground, and where social justice can be co-constructed. Both

decolonizing language pedagogies and social justice principles have theoretically framed our PAR project, as we discuss next.

DECOLONIZING LANGUAGE TEACHING AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

A founding principle of social justice research projects in applied linguistics is acknowledging that marginalized peoples' ways of knowing are often erroneously undervalued by mainstream institutions that have the power to legitimize and regulate knowledge in society. Aligned with decolonizing theories (López-Gopar 2016; Macedo 2019) stemming from the Global South (Pennycook and Makoni 2020), our research project views knowledge as co-constructed, and not owned or discovered only by the privileged researchers and institutions. By working with the aforementioned principle, we can enhance the quality of our research across epistemological, methodological, and analytical lines. This understanding of knowledge construction was realized in our decisions to employ longitudinal, PAR methods (Fals Borda 2001). Together we co-constructed and redefined all aspects of the research project in dialogue with our collaborator, Julio, and the input of his undergraduate students like Marcela, Yolanda, and Laura. These approaches add to the rigor of the contributions to the field through robust relationships of mutual recognition.

Aiming at the co-construction of knowledge, our PAR study has also made us aware that if research projects in applied linguistics do not consider the agentive positionalities of the collaborator (i.e. 'participant'), they would then contribute mainly to academic discussions within established paradigms, and less tuned to the day-to-day struggles of the peoples involved. Specifically, for our focus on the classroom and assessment practices of Julio and on the lives of three Indigenous background, low-SES, undergraduate female students, a social justice orientation has allowed the conversations with Marcela, Yolanda, and Laura to foster analyses conducted by the four coauthors of this article, producing time- and context-relevant findings that can help make a difference in their lives (e.g. understanding that multilingual practices do contribute to learning English appropriate to their needs). In other words, in our project, social justice is not a broad, exo-normative goal; it is grounded in day-to-day research practices.

Taking a decolonizing approach and a heteroglossic view of language in our study, we not only promote multilingualism in the classroom for language's sake but also challenge the colonial difference inherent in social class, gender, and race, to claim legitimacy and self-author our place in the world and work toward more just and fair societies. In our project work, decolonizing English teaching is an ideological stance that transgresses the logic of coloniality and colonial difference and uses 'the English language classroom as a space in which all the actors' identities . . . are renegotiated in order to value the different ways of being, speaking and knowing . . . and to transgress the inferiority imposed by coloniality' (López-Gopar 2016: 10). Aligned with a heteroglossic

view of language, in our PAR project, multilingual practices, often referred to translanguaging, go beyond linguistic aspects, as the 'trans' for us relates to not only how teachers and students move in and out of different language practices (García 2009), but how they also *trans*gress the imposed languages and cultures (such as English and Spanish in Mexico) and speak back against them. Moreover, we embrace decolonizing theories that claim that by working to co-construct classroom practices and assessment approaches that recognize, value, and promote the language practices of marginalized groups, one can promote greater sociocultural equality by moving away from entrenched monolingual/monoglossic and modernist views in language education. Finally, in our project work, transgressing the borders of coloniality involves problematizing the washback of externally engendered assessments, which is often the driving force behind decisions about teaching and learning by different institutions (Leung and Lewkowicz 2017; Schissel 2019). This washback has consequences that disproportionally impact peoples whose ways of knowing are undervalued in education generally and in our context of language education, the BA program in teaching languages at a public university, which we describe next, along with our project methodology.

OUR PAR PROJECT AT A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

With a decolonizing and social justice stance, our PAR project explores language classroom pedagogical and assessment practices rooted in, and stemming from, the lives and critical perspectives of Julio, as a local English teacher, and Oaxacan undergraduate students impacted by coloniality. It also critically interrogates so-called best practices by 'good' teachers, including some students while marginalizing others as we will later see in the emergent themes. The BA Program in Teaching Languages, where our PAR project took place, is housed at the Faculty of Languages at a public university in Oaxaca. Because of its multilingual, multicultural reality and social class inequalities, Oaxaca is uniquely situated to provide insights into the theory and practice of multilingual teaching, learning, and assessment as well as social justice and decolonizing research projects. Along with multiple Indigenous language varieties and Spanish-speaking people, the state of Oaxaca is host to return migrants who grew up in English-speaking environments. The undergraduate student population in the BA program of around 800 students (70 per cent female and 30 per cent male) represents this linguistic diversity, and most of the students share a low-SES and/or working-class background and minimal background knowledge of English.

Our project team comprises a group of individuals including two locals from the public university where this research was conducted: Julio, an English teacher, and Mario, an English teacher educator. They collaborated with two professors, Jamie from the USA and Constant from the UK. For the analyses reported here, we collected and analyzed a corpus of data consisting of approximately 100 hours of participant classroom observations, debriefing

sessions, interviews with all students, collection of students' work samples, and the co-creation of assessments applied to 28 students during the 2017–18 academic year. Responding to Esterman's (2014) urgent call for decolonizing research and educational projects to critically engage in a reflection that can articulate the discussion regarding social class, gender equality, and culture/ethnicity, we focused this article on three individuals, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Marcela, Yolanda, and Laura, who dealt with different issues related to speaking English in class, poverty (social class) and discrimination suffered by Indigenous (culture/ethnicity) women (gender) in Mexico. The interviews were conducted in Spanish and lasted approximately 1 h per interview. Enacting this agency within the context of this larger PAR project, Marcela, Yolanda, and Laura volunteered to tell their life story including experiences and challenges in speaking English.

In our study, PAR is research *with* participants rather than *for* (Whyte 1991). We, Mario, Jamie, and Constant, joined and accompanied (Bucholtz *et al.* 2016) both Julio and the three female students, who were particularly interested in dialoguing about speaking since this skill, when promoted by a 'native-like' accent, is overly valued and un(der)problematized by Oaxacan undergraduate students, English teachers, and employers. We pursued their interest as we all took to heart the PAR-related ontological assumption that the involvement of participants in all key aspects of the research process is crucial because their knowledge is intrinsic to the production of the research (Fals Borda 2001; McIntyre 2008). All interviews were transcribed and analyzed by the coauthors of this article. During our analysis, which took account of local and global issues, and the drafting of this article, we consulted with the three students about the themes that emerged—which we regard as adding insights to our interpretations and understandings. Our themes in this article aligned with themes from the full dataset. We present the interviews to describe the depths of experiences necessary to understand the participant students' views and perceptions. Following the triangulated and iterative analysis of the data, we introduce the three female students in the following section.

MARCELA, YOLANDA, AND LAURA: INDIGENOUS-BACKGROUND UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

Marcela, Yolanda, and Laura were students in the sixth semester of their eight-semester language teaching preparation program at the time of the study. Both Julio and Mario had taught them in different courses throughout their program. Marcela, Yolanda, and Laura are all from small communities around the state of Oaxaca. They were all considered *estudiantes foráneos* ('foreign' or 'outsider' students), as they had moved from other areas of the Oaxacan state to the City of Oaxaca to pursue their BA program. The experience of financial struggles, disconnection from community and family, psychological and academic issues, and adjustment to the city created a sense of pride in these three students, as in the interviews, they all self-described themselves as 'independent' women.

'I have been on my own from a young age',[2] stated Yolanda, who left her community to go to high school as there was not a high school in her community. The three students shared close connections to Indigenous communities and Indigenous languages. Marcela self-identified as an Indigenous person because some of her family members spoke Zapotec: 'I understand some words only, but I still consider myself an Indigenous speaker.' Yolanda was a fluent Chatino speaker, whereas Laura, similar to Marcela, had only learned a few words in Chinanteco from her grandparents and uncles. Adding to their Indigenous linguistic repertoire, they all studied French as a third language in the BA program, and Yolanda joined a Zapotec class.

Marcela, Yolanda, and Laura came from a low-SES background, and none of them referred to their fathers in the interview. 'I was raised by a single mom', stated Yolanda, and the two others mentioned living with their mom and grandparents. 'I grew up in a small community with my mom and my *abuelitos* (grandparents)', mentioned Marcela. Having been raised in small communities with financial struggles, they all joined the program with a basic level of English, which they picked up in their public school education. 'I did not know much English when I joined the BA program', said Laura. This situation positioned them at a disadvantage in the English class in the BA program compared to other students who had been raised in the city with access to low-cost English courses offered by the public university, private English institutes if they could afford them, and/or more access to English through media, entertainment, or contact with English-speaking tourists visiting the city. We now turn to the themes we have identified. These themes emerged from the data as we documented and analyzed Julio's classroom practices as a way to bring a self-critical eye into our PAR study.

UNVEILING ALIENATING PRACTICES IN THE CLASSROOM

Marcela, Yolanda, and Laura were considered 'struggling' speakers both by Julio and themselves. At the beginning of the study, both Julio and the three students considered this a 'personal' issue. Yolanda mentioned, 'I think your personality has a lot to do with it [speaking in class], right? Because I mean, I am a bit insecure'. Marcela said, 'When you [teacher] ask me to speak in class, I feel scared. I have always had this fear that my sentence won't be correctly structured.' Laura understood her and her two classmates' struggle regarding social evaluations and relations:

> There are people who have a very high level compared to mine. Then, if these people notice that you mispronounce something, they laugh at you. Even though they don't laugh out loud, you can notice that they are making fun of you.

Marcela echoed this: 'Well, really, it [problems with speaking] is about the person you are speaking to.... I speak it [English] with my friends.' Finally, Yolanda mentioned:

> I don't feel nervous [speaking English], well because I think, they [my close friends] are not going to say anything [about my English]. They might correct me . . . but when it comes from people you feel comfortable with, you don't feel bad.

Listening to Marcela's, Yolanda's, and Laura's experiences and views about speaking in English and having learned about their social and financial struggles before joining the BA program made Julio reflect on the stress that speaking this language represents. Julio realized that 'struggling' speakers were not 'uninterested', 'unmotivated', or 'disengaged' on which students were to blame for their lack of success. 'I try not to label students negatively anymore, as there is a lot underneath their performance in the classroom', stated Julio in one of our debriefing meetings. All these 'personal' issues are, in fact, ingrained within the matrix of coloniality (Mignolo 2000; Esterman 2014).

According to López-Gopar (2016), who argues that decolonizing language teaching should be historically grounded, learning about the students' life stories was the first step to unveil classroom alienating practices. These three female students faced many social inequalities in their short lives, which put them at a disadvantage compared to the other students, with whom they did not feel comfortable. In their middle school and high school years in public schooling, all of them reported having English teachers who 'focused on the grammar-translation method' (Laura), or who 'spent most of the time talking to us about their trips . . . [they] had taken instead of teaching us English' (Yolanda). Even at the Faculty of Languages, they reported that they had teachers who did not give them the chance to think before speaking: 'I've had teachers who ask you things, "Let's see, you Yolanda. You don't know? Well, you don't, next"' (Yolanda). Julio, considered one of the best and most dynamic young teachers at the Faculty, realized that his own striving to maintain an English-only class benefited mainly the students who felt comfortable with everybody, but not the students who needed to find niches of trust among other so-called struggling speakers. Marcela, Yolanda, and Laura were, in fact, multilingual speakers who were judged by their English performance only, which consequently reinvented their colonial difference (López-Gopar 2016). In other words, they were usually positioned as students that 'needed' extra help in class, who needed to work 'harder' to improve, and who usually got lower grades in comparison to other students. As the study progressed and our discussions focused on this issue, Julio started to carve out spaces for multilingualism in his English classroom. He focused on building relationships of trust among all students to challenge the colonial difference and co-construct more just practices in his class, as we discuss next.

CARVING OUT SPACES FOR MULTILINGUALISM IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

As previously mentioned, Marcela, Yolanda, and Laura did not feel comfortable in their English class. Learning this from the students helped our PAR project realize that decolonizing and socially just courses are rooted in students' feelings and personal lives so that *everybody* feels included. In one of our debriefing and analyzing sessions, Julio stated,

> This made me think about the feelings of Marcela, Yolanda, and Laura.... [T]he aspects they mentioned were emotions, with a lot of weight, that modify people's performance when they [emotions] show up while we are performing tasks, like speaking, in front of other people and when we feel observed. These are aspects that subconsciously interact with the academic development of linguistics skills inside the classroom. That's why interpersonal relationships are so important.

In the previous quote, Julio emphasizes the role of emotions and their connection to the inclusion of Indigenous women as they relate to other students in the classroom. He also highlights the importance of building interpersonal relationships so that everybody *feels* welcome, unjudged, and valued in the classroom. Building on these emergent understandings and realizations, Julio started talking with his students about the importance of everybody feeling comfortable in class and the detrimental effects of laughing at and/or making fun of each other. 'When I was learning English like you, I did not speak much in class. I felt observed and thought that people would laugh at me if I mispronounced things', shared Julio with the students in one of his classes. Other students in class shared that they had similar feelings, like those of Marcela, Yolanda, and Laura. These discussions resonated well with all students as they were all becoming language teachers.

Stemming from our collaborative PAR reflections with Julio, he discussed and established a multilingual policy and practice in his English class. In one of his classes, Julio told his students,

> There are hundreds of accents in English. Also, people speak other languages they can use. I speak Spanish, English, and German. So please, when speaking English, remember there is no perfect English, and feel free to use all the languages you speak in class. We are multilingual!

Julio combined his multilingual classroom policy with classroom activities. For instance, he would create multilingual small groups, making sure different Indigenous and other foreign languages such as French and Italian were represented. In one of his classes, he instructed his students, 'Ok, now that we are in groups, let's focus on all the languages that we know. You can focus on their grammar, their vocabulary and contrast all these things with English.' In other activities, he would also pair up the students in English-speaking

activities, emphasizing that the conversation should not be restricted to English only and that students were welcome to use phrases and/or sentences in any language if they did not know it in English. Not only did Julio focus on linguistic aspects, but he also started to tap on his students' funds of knowledge by bringing materials and readings about current and important events in students' lives (see, e.g. Morales *et al.* 2020). These types of classroom practices led more naturally to the use of Spanish first and then other languages in the classroom. Finally, and most importantly, Julio started using multiple activities to develop collaborative and trusting interpersonal relationships in the classroom. These classroom practices contributed directly to Marcela, Yolanda, and Laura's speaking performance in class. We observed they felt more comfortable, not only with their closest friends but with other students, and started speaking in English and their other languages more while engaging in classroom activities. Even though we felt that our PAR study was making a difference in these students' lives, we were aware that our decolonizing and social justice project needed to impact students' grades, which ultimately excluded many students, reinforcing the colonial difference. We now discuss classroom assessment practices, which have historically played a significant role in the hierarchization and exclusion of people.

AUTHORING ASSESSMENTS AS A WAY TO ENACT SOCIAL JUSTICE

Across these different activities taken on by Julio within Marcela, Yolanda, and Laura's class, we remained keenly aware of the lack of critical accounts of assessing English and that the default protocol for assessments in language classrooms was monolingual or monoglossic in orientation (Shohamy 2019). In one of our debriefing sessions, Julio stated, 'It is great that Marcela, Yolanda, and Laura are feeling more comfortable speaking English in class. I now want them and all my students to get better grades in English in my class and other classes where English is used.' To extend the values on multilingualism within classroom and community practices into assessments, in our project, we brought 'the focus of the assessment beyond an individual student's proficiency to a recognition of students' ongoing, dynamic engagement in diverse contexts and communities' (Avineri and Perren 2020: 70). With Marcela, Yolanda, and Laura's and other students' input that English tests in their BA program were primarily monolingual (English only), our collaborative team working on the PAR project undertook multiple efforts to ensure that these assessments reflected students' multilingual repertoire while engaging with topics and themes that were part of students' daily realities. For example, Julio included a multimodal, multilingual task that asked students to make suggestions for improvements for rebuilding and redistribution of aid for the major earthquake that occurred at the beginning of the semester. Marcela, Yolanda, and Laura gave oral presentations about it. Using a video, Marcela

pointed out in her presentation, 'People from the *Istmo* (Isthmus) lost their houses during the earthquake. We could see in the video that they only have *escombros* (rubble) around them', displaying not only her multilingual repertoire but also using this assessment practice to raise awareness among her classmates about this catastrophe. In her presentation, Laura stated, 'People from other places are *juntando víveres* (collecting groceries) to help them. We should do the same here at the *Facultad* (Faculty).' Julio's classroom assessment made room for students' languages and provided the three female students the space to transgress coloniality and renegotiate their identities as students getting good grades.

In our efforts to work toward social justice goals, assessments in our PAR project were also co-constructed to transgress often unexamined assumptions about rigor and objectivity in assessment and to purposefully upend the long history of assessments as a tool of colonialism (Schissel 2019). Our assessment approach in Marcela, Yolanda, and Laura's class, like all assessment approaches we argue, was not neutral nor objective and operated as ideological mechanisms (Shohamy 2006) co-occurring within macro, meso, and micro worlds of the students and teachers in Oaxaca. In applying a social justice—and for this assessment specifically a trauma-informed (Crosby *et al.* 2018) approach, Julio's classroom served as a space to recognize and validate students' experiences, frustrations, and losses around these events. Current or local events were not commonly included in assessments in English classes at the university. We chose the topic of the earthquakes and issues around aid because, based on our observations, it was infused in daily conversation within the classroom. Our assessment efforts, which switched from a focus on '*asocial* perspectives' (Mirhosseini and De Costa 2020: viii) to social engagement with diverse contextual themes, were also well-received by most students. Not only were students supportive of the topics, but overall, Marcela, Yolanda, Laura, and most student grades were higher on the contextually centered, multilingual assessment than in English-only, grammar-focused tasks (Schissel *et al.* 2018). In such responsive approaches in assessment, we see these changes in assessment approaches as essential shifts to which applied linguistics research projects such as this can contribute.

CONCLUSIONS

Working to co-construct language classroom practices and assessment approaches that recognize, value, and promote the language practices of marginalized groups can promote greater sociocultural equality by moving away from entrenched monolingual/monoglossic views in language education and colonial discourses. Following our stance that research projects with social justice goals should be grounded in day-to-day practices, our PAR project placed Marcela, Yolanda, and Laura and their lives at the center of our research agenda; as researchers, we worked with a flexible, yet socially committed, mindset. Marcela, Yolanda, and Laura were not just informants; rather,

they were part of the driving force behind our PAR project, reminding us that the social realities in their lives should be a higher priority than our research/academic endeavors. Positioning Marcela, Yolanda, and Laura as competent multilingual speakers and believing that their lives and views can *teach us* about the language learning/teaching disrupted the colonial inheritance and brought social justice to the classroom with the incorporation and promotion of multilingual pedagogical and assessment practices with a decolonizing agenda as a matter of social justice. With Julio as a coresearcher, our PAR project reflects a synergy where theory/practice as rooted in daily experiences constantly reshape each other, thereby clearly emphasizing the *applied* aspect of *applied* linguistics.

Conflict of interest statement. None declared.

ENDNOTES

1 In this article, the inclusive plural pronouns 'we' and 'our' are used to refer to the PAR team authors of this article. When referring to one of us in particular, we will be the third person to keep the flow of the argument.

2 Because of space limitations, we provide our English translations of the direct quotes, omitting the original versions in Spanish.

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