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Language teacher agency for educational justice–oriented work: An ecological model

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Abstract

Recent global social unrest that stems from historical racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic inequality and inequity has elevated the need for language educators to challenge traditional understandings of and practices in the language classroom. Such a development warrants an examination of language teacher agency in contemporary society. To this end and building on recent work on teacher agency in general education and second language teacher education research, we propose an ecological model to investigate teacher agency. Our ecologically oriented model draws specifically on Pantić's (2015) model for social justice and the Douglas Fir Group's (2016) call for an examination of language teaching as impacted by macro-, meso-, and micro-level forces. Through our proposed teacher agency model that represents the multilayered complexity of second language learning and teaching, we seek to advance an educational justice agenda. To illustrate the power and potential of our analytic ecological model to teacher agency for educational justice, we focus on a focal English as a foreign language teacher from Chile, Camila. The article ends with discussion of pedagogical possibilities that can be explored in conjunction with the research model we put forward.

1 | INTRODUCTION

English language learning and teaching and are often oriented to achieving proficiency and pragmatic goals of communication. Frequently absent in classrooms are discussions of the historical, sociopolitical, economic, and cultural backgrounds of target languages and those of the language teachers and

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learners (Block & Gray, 2017). As a consequence, social issues are left unattended (Ensser-Kananen, 2016). In recognizing the educational and transformational potential of language classrooms, critical educational linguists (e.g., Canagarajah, 2012; De Costa, 2018; Kumaravadivelu, 2003) have raised the need for teachers to be made aware of "the social, cultural and economic conditions of those who are frequently marginalized and socially excluded" (Gray & Morton, 2017, p. 103).

In order to incorporate emancipatory and social justice–oriented practices into the classroom (Chubbuck, 2010; Hawkins, 2011), the teacher's role has been redefined in multiple ways: as a public intellectual (Giroux, 2009), as a civic agent and active role model (Mirra & Morrell, 2011), and as a cultural and linguistic agent who is critically aware of power dynamics (Akbari, 2008; Gounari, 2008). Crucially, this shift is consistent with the growing body of research on teacher identity (e.g., Edwards & Burns, 2016; De Costa & Norton, 2017; Ortaçtepe, 2015) and teacher agency (e.g., Leal & Crookes, 2018; Li & De Costa, 2019; Miller & Gkonou, 2018) when it comes to doing this crucial educational justice work. From a global perspective, critical educational linguists have also illuminated the need for developing situated pedagogical practices to resist outsider and dominant perspectives. Canagarajah (2012), for example, argued for the development of strategic professional identities to negotiate practices among different communities and create new local pedagogical practices. This need for language teacher agency is vitally important today in light of growing neoliberal demands placed on teachers in varied educational systems (De Costa, Park, & Wee, 2019). To this end, we propose an ecological model of teacher agency and illustrate how the model can be applied to attain educational justice in a Chilean context by examining the agency of a focal teacher of English as a foreign language (EFL).

2 | TEACHER AGENCY

As noted, the recent interest in language teacher agency as exemplified by an edited volume (Kayi-Aydar, Gao, Miller, Varghese, & Vitanova, 2019), special journal issue (Miller, Kayi-Aydar, Varghese, & Vitanova, 2018), articles (e.g., Leal & Crookes, 2018), and book chapters (e.g., Li & De Costa, 2019) is a poignant reminder that teachers are certainly agentive policy makers (Menken & García, 2010) in their own right. The pressing need to attend to teacher agency is amplified by the fact that teacher professional development is often framed in terms of meeting neoliberal, marketplace utility demands (De Costa et al., 2019). At the same time, though not the focus of this article, this body of work on language teacher agency needs to be seen in conjunction with the vibrant collection of language teacher identity work (e.g., Lindahl & Yazan, 2019) as well as calls for pedagogical innovation (e.g., Martel, 2018).

According to Kayi-Aydar (2019), three lines of inquiry—social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2000), positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990), and an ecological approach to agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998)—have informed language teacher agency research. It is the third approach that we foreground in this article for the reasons we presented earlier—that is, the need to address growing neoliberal demands placed on teachers and in light of the posthumanist turn in applied linguistics (Goulah & Katunich, 2020; Pennycook, 2017). The latter development, in particular, has alerted us to the importance of attending to and harnessing the environmental—physical, embodied, and socio-cultural—conditions in which individuals are embedded. This turn is also consistent with ecological turns in second language acquisition (e.g., van Lier, 2004) and language policy (e.g., Pennycook, 2004) that have called for the need to examine the lived materialities of learners and teachers.

In advancing an ecologically oriented approach to language teacher agency, we draw on the work of sociologists Emirbayer and Mische (1998), who define human agency as the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments, and educational scholars (e.g., Biesta & Tedder,

2007; Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015), who have extended Emirbayer and Mische's understanding of agency by applying it to advance the teacher agency landscape. Priestley et al. (2015), for example, describe teacher agency as a temporally "situated achievement" and historically contingent; such an understanding of agency foregrounds "how humans operate by means of their social and material environments" (p. 20).

One EFL study that adopted Priestley et al.'s (2015) interpretation of teacher agency is Li and De Costa (2019). They paired Priestley et al.'s ecological approach to teacher agency with the Douglas Fir Group's (2016) ecologically oriented call to examine language learning and teaching in relation to micro-level (e.g., classroom), meso-level (e.g., school) and macro-level (e.g., society) factors. The authors examined the teacher agency of an EFL teacher in China whose enactment of teacher agency was a result of negotiation with contextual constraints and resources. This exercise of agency was manifested in two ways. First, the teacher identified himself as a "rule-breaker" who successfully navigated the institutional structure in China by creating his own approach to teaching English. Second, he actively advocated a strong emphasis on English reading skills to develop learner autonomy among his students so that they could become strategic readers in a globalized society. The authors also invoked critical applied linguist Kumaravadivelu's (2012) postmethod pedagogy: a customized pedagogy designed to meet the local needs of students. It is in this spirit of advancing teacher agency that we turn next to Pantić's (2015) model, which exhorts teachers to be agents of change and promote social justice.

Pantić's (2015) model considers interdependent relations of personal and professional beliefs, dispositions, levels of autonomy and power, and interactions in social contexts at the professional level. Pantić refers to four components—purpose, competence, autonomy, and reflexivity—to explain teachers' practices directed at the promotion of social justice, while also considering the role of micro and macro structural and cultural elements in shaping such justice. *Purpose* refers to how teachers conceive themselves as agents of change and engage and initiate such practices following a moral commitment. *Competence* refers to one's knowledge of rules and tactics to transform structures and cultures, as well as micro and macro awareness of how exclusion and disadvantage take place. *Autonomy* is the perceived sense of individual and collective relationship building, efficacy, and the perceived constraints and opportunities afforded by existing structures and cultures. Lastly, *reflexivity* refers to teachers' capacity for self-critical monitoring of their assumptions, actions, and decision making in their respective social contexts.

To date, the only language teacher agency study we are aware of that has applied Pantić's (2015) social justice–oriented model was conducted by Leal and Crookes (2018), who explored how Jackson, an in-service LGBTQ English language teacher in South Korea, negotiated the types of conditions that were supportive of her development as an agent of change and the different ways she exercised her agency in her teaching environment. Specifically, the authors illustrated how Jackson was able to engage in pedagogical flexibility because her curriculum was amenable to LGBTQ perspectives. Crucially, Leal and Crookes report Jackson's attempt to dispel the myth that teachers should be politically and ideologically neutral by engaging her students in critical thinking activities. Building on Pantić's model, the Douglas Fir Group's (2016) model, and those of other ecologically oriented scholars, we put forward our proposed ecological model on teacher agency next as we invite you to consider the institutional and cultural contexts that influence teachers' agency.

3 | TEACHERS AS AGENTS OF EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE: AN ECOLOGICAL PROPOSAL

To attend to contextual restrictions and affordances in a holistic manner, we argue that we need to adopt an ecological approach to teacher agency that attends to complex contextual and time-sensitive

interrelationships at multiple scalar levels and advocates educational justice. Drawing specifically on Pantić's (2015) model and the Douglas Fir Group's (2016) model discussed in the previous section, we propose a teacher agency model that represents the multilayered complexity of second language learning and teaching.

In this model (see Figure 1), the micro level (inner red concentric circle) refers to immediate contexts of social activity (e.g., individuals engaging with others in the classroom). The meso level (middle green concentric circle) comprises sociocultural institutions and communities (e.g., families, schools, places of work). These institutions "are powerfully characterized by pervasive social conditions" (Douglas Fir Group, 2016, p. 24) that influence teacher agency. The macro level (outer yellow concentric circle) represents large-scale ideological structures (e.g., belief systems; political, religious, cultural, and economic values).

Figure 1 shows how components in the Douglas Fir Group's (2016) model on language learning and teaching interact with Pantić's (2015) model for teacher agency for social justice work. Our ecological model of teacher agency takes into account the distributed and relational elements of agency advanced by Priestley et al. (2015), which we argue are mediated by macro, meso, and micro structural factors, as described by the Douglas Fir Group. Collectively, these circles—red (micro), green (meso), and yellow (macro)—constitute the outer spheres of the model. At the center of this model is teacher agency, which itself sits at the intersection of purpose, competence, autonomy, and reflexivity (Pantić, 2015). Put simply, we posit that teacher agency is a complex combination of teacher purpose, competence, autonomy and reflexivity, and is influenced by micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors.
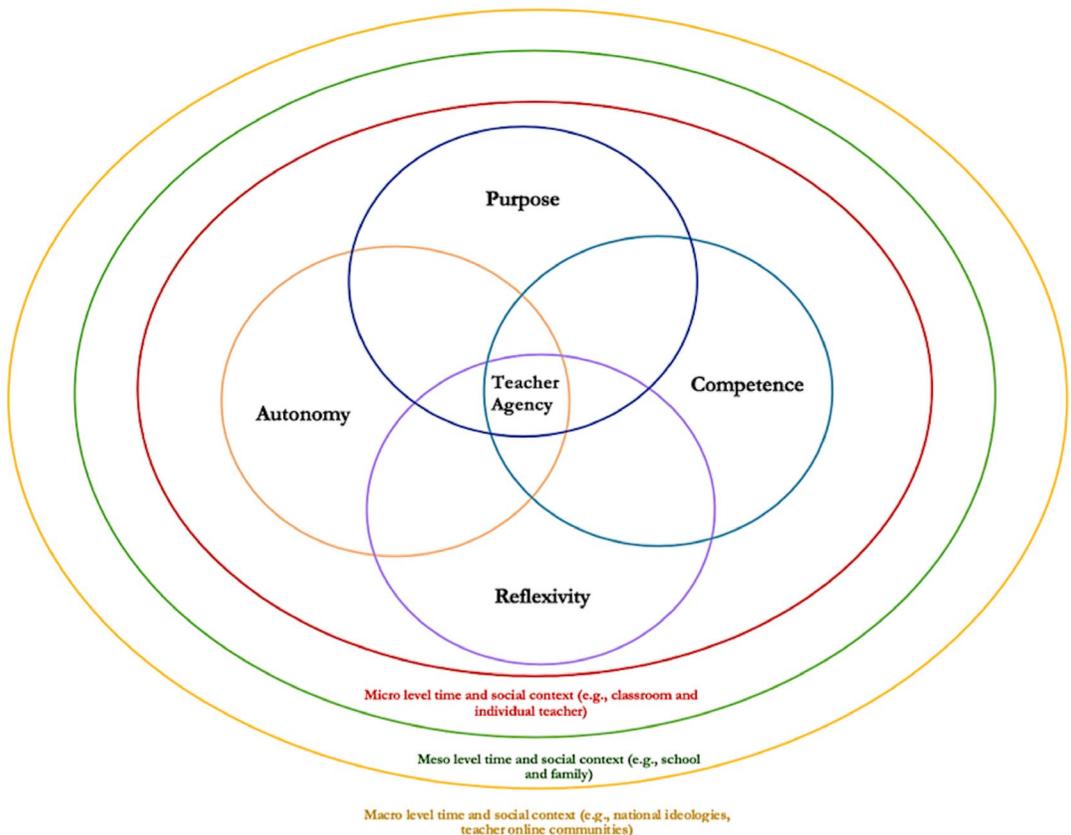
FIGURE 1 Pantić's (2015) revised model of teacher agency for educational justice

To illustrate the power and potential of our analytic ecological model to teacher agency for educational justice, we focus on one EFL teacher in Chile, Camila, whose agency was shaped by macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors. The data we draw on in the examples that follow were collected by the first author, a native of Chile whose first language is Spanish. The data we present were part of an ongoing case study (Duff, 2015) that sought to gain a better understanding of identity development for educational justice–oriented work in second language education. Although school observations were conducted in Chile, the primary sources of our data were interviews, which were carried out in Spanish. As clarification questions arose during the process of transcription and interpretation, the first author remained in constant dialogue with Camila.

4 | CONTEXTUALIZING OUR MODEL

4.1 | Macro-level national context

As noted, Camila worked in Chile, whose education system has increasingly been characterized by neoliberal logics of the knowledge economy (Donoso, 2013). Closely described in future-forward terms (De Costa et al., 2019), English teaching and learning are portrayed as responding to the needs of a globalized world, with English constructed as the language that affords access to enhanced labor and professional opportunities. In the face of neoliberal reforms, growing defunding of health and education, increasing inequality, and social segregation have occurred. In fact, since the 1970s, students and teachers have remained critical about the decreased funding in public services, especially in education. Recently, students led a historical social uprising to protest these long-standing inequalities in Chile (Bartlett, 2019). It is against this evolving backdrop of ideological tensions and an education system that has elected to adopt English as a valuable economic asset that we explore Camila's teacher agency development.

4.2 | Meso-level school context

Interestingly, during various observations at the school level in Chile, English teachers demonstrated strong values of responsibility, accountability, justice, and an enduring commitment to social issues. One of the English teachers served as a guide for students to write documents that placed demands on the school administration. She also supported her students' political and negotiation skills and sociopolitical understanding of what inhabiting different spaces meant. Similarly, during recent protests across in Chile, other English teachers participated in these strikes by designing handmade signs in English that sought to inform an international audience about the Chilean social uprising. Notably, this sign-making made reference to grammar lessons and lesson plan objectives in the EFL class. Here is a case in point:

1. Objective: At the end of the class students will be able to live with dignity. Key vocabulary: solidarity, love, empathy, justice, dream
2. Verb *to be*:
    a. I am tired and angry.
    b. He/She/It is ready to change everything.
    c. We/You/They are ready to stand united. Class dismissed!

4.3 | Micro-level individual context

In the examples that follow, we focus on Camila, who had worked for 5 years at Chiloé High School, situated in Región de Los Lagos. When she first arrived at Chiloé, the school had just started to operate, and this allowed her to participate in the decision-making and design process of the English curriculum. Camila, who grew up and received her formal education in Santiago, voiced a strong commitment to social justice issues and awareness of the issues of segregation, social inequality, and extreme poverty that affected Chile. Her commitments sparked our interest in talking with her and exploring her professional trajectory.

5 | APPLYING OUR MODEL TO A CHILEAN CASE STUDY

In the previous section, we presented the three different ecological levels—meso, macro, and micro—in which Camila was situated. In this section, we illustrate how to apply our proposed ecological model to better understand Camila's professional trajectory. As noted (see Figure 1), teacher agency resides at the intersection of purpose, competence, autonomy, and reflexivity (Pantić, 2015) and (2) is shaped by macro-, meso-, and macro-level factors.

5.1 | Purpose: Education for change

When Camila was asked about her motivations to pursue education, many elements came to the surface regarding her beliefs regarding education as she articulated why she decided to become a teacher.

Excerpt 1
Education as central axis of society and change

> To be honest, at some point I wanted to be a teacher and I didn't care what area, in the humanities of course. … But I wanted to be a teacher. … More than motivating me to be an English teacher, I was motivated to study pedagogy. … In fact, it's complicated, because I don't like being an English teacher. I would rather be a history teacher. It has to do with wanting to change some things, to understand that education is a central axis within society … for change.

Camila located her decision and awareness of education at the core of society and social change, stating, "It has to do with wanting to change some things, to understand that education is a central axis within society." This statement expresses her *purpose* as she conceives of herself as an agent of change and voices her desire for social transformation. Interestingly, Camila also communicated that she would rather have been a history teacher instead of an English teacher, possibly due to the opportunities afforded in the classroom by that subject area.

5.2 | Autonomy: Building relationships and negotiating constraints

Notions of English language ideologies (e.g., De Costa, 2010; De Costa, Green-Eneix, Li, & Rawal, in press; Rosa & Burdick, 2016)—specifically the ideology that English is a vehicle for social mobility—and dominant neoliberal beliefs about education (De Costa et al., 2019) came up as Camila

explained why she became an English teacher. When she told her parents—a meso-level family influencing factor—that she wanted to become a teacher, they seemed hesitant at first. In Excerpt 2, Camila describes a conversation with her parents where she suggested pursuing a career in English language education as an alternate career goal.

Excerpt 2
What if I study English and pedagogy?

> Rather than being motivated to be an English teacher, I was motivated to study pedagogy, and the decision was mostly my parents'. It was a complex situation because they did not want me to be a teacher at all. And when I told them "What if I study English?" it was like, yes! "So that you can stop thinking about being a teacher and start doing research."

Another component of Camila's agency, *autonomy,* was curtailed because her parents influenced her decision to pursue a teacher career. After she suggested becoming a teacher of English, her father changed his opinion of the teaching profession from a negative to one of possibility, and this was communicated by a sense of relief in her voice when quoting her father: *¡ya!* Camila reflected that English was key to knowledge production, and thus her father felt it would enhance her economic worth by learning English. Ironically, it is this neoliberal impulse that helped Camila persuade her initially skeptical parents to allow her to pursue a career as an English teacher. This, however, should not distract us from the fact that with some interpersonal dexterity Camila was able to exercise some degree of agency over her future by persuading her parents to support her.

5.3 | Competence: Knowledge of English as a tool

Camila's responses in Excerpt 3 relate to her *competence*, which according to Pantić (2015) is one's ability to connect knowledge of rules and tactics to transform structures and cultures, as well as micro and macro awareness of how exclusion and disadvantage occur. Such competence invites comparison with Bourdieu's (1986) notion of *sens pratique*, which is a practical mastery of a game that one gains through experience. The game in this case is knowledge of the divisions within Chilean society.

Excerpt 3
English for utilitarian purposes

> Chile's state understands English as a tool that helps you access better jobs, and if you access better jobs, it is understood that you have a better pay, so you have greater purchasing power. That means you're going to have more money. I mean, everything is based on capital.

When asked to expand on the role of English in Chile, Camila referred to macro-level discourses in relation to English that circulated at the national level and within her immediate meso-level family context. Camila exhibited *competence* by demonstrating her recognition of society's spatial distribution as she notes that change would need to originate from the inside first (an educational space) before expanding outward to society. She also acknowledged macro- and micro-level productions and reproductions of discourses about English for individual entrepreneurial purposes (De Costa et al., 2019); that is, she understood that language learning is often viewed in strictly instrumental terms to increase a learner's capital. In short, Camila therefore recognized micro- and macro-economic values and beliefs attached to English that also impacted her own agency as a teacher.

5.4 | Reflexivity: Denaturalizing certain processes and actions

In Excerpt 4, Camila describes her view of English language learning and presents a critical stance regarding the status of English in Chile.

Excerpt 4
English as a tool for reflection

> The learning of a language in general contributes from the development of visions and world perspectives. It helps to understand other societies and other cultural groups, and therefore when I learn about other cultural groups I also begin to pay attention to who I am and my culture … as a unit, and I also begin to see … that there are things that are not right and that have to change. To denaturalize certain processes, certain actions. That for me is the help of the language in general.

In contrast to the macro-level discourse reflected in Excerpt 3, Camila offers a counternarrative to a market-driven construction of English language education in Chile by articulating that languages can open one's mind and thus facilitate learning from and about other cultures. Her purpose as an English teacher is connected with her understanding of society and culture as a whole and her own self-reflexivity through language learning. As she put it, through language learning one can reflect on how to produce social change. Camila's *reflexivity* thus demonstrates her capacity for self-critique about her role, actions, and social responsibility as an educator, all of which also inform her *purpose* (Pantić, 2015) as a language teacher.

6 | ADDRESSING SOCIAL INEQUALITY AND EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE

Thus far, we have presented the four elements of teacher agency—purpose, competence, autonomy, and reflexivity—as observed by Pantić (2015) and shown how they relate to micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors. However, equally important to note is that these elements often work in concert with one another in ways that allowed Camila to develop a more agentic stance to address social inequality. Excerpt 5 illustrates this complex set of interactions at play. Following her response in Excerpt 3, we asked Camila how and why she developed a critical perspective as a teacher. She evoked memories of her childhood, describing how she moved across different social classes herself and through her father, who was a math teacher in a public school. In Excerpt 5, she demonstrates both her development of awareness (*competence*) and socioeconomic *reflexivity* while straddling different contexts ("several cities"), which subsequently shaped her purpose and practice as an English teacher.

Excerpt 5
Between multiple worlds: Unequal realities in Chile

> Every weekend we went to see my aunt in the *población* where my mom was born and grew up. And I saw that it was *so* different from what I had to live that I understood from a very young age (now I can express it) that there were several Chiles. At that time, I saw two: the reality that I experienced and what these children were living. And from then on, I started to understand why I was taught differently.

Camila referred to her mother's place of birth, a *población* (the name given to urban residential areas that host mostly working-class and low-income families in Chile). *Poblaciones* usually contain pre-K to high school institutions, often public or semisubsidized by municipalities. Thus, a very young Camila had already developed the awareness (*competence*) of the existence of two types of Chile. She shuttled between two worlds: a working-class *población* and her neighborhood in an affluent suburban city area.

As noted, Priestley et al. (2015) viewed teacher agency as bearing both a temporal and historically contingent dimension. In this excerpt, Camila refers to two time frames in her response: the past and the present. She points to a "realization" in the *past* ("from a young age") as she witnessed economic disparities as a young girl, while also adding that *now* she has the words to explain what it is. In regard to our ecological model (Figure 1), it is possible to see that learning about social events happens across time and space (Norton, 2013) as individuals interact socially in multiple contexts and acquire new knowledge; in Camila's case, *reflexivity*—as conceived through new understandings and knowledge (*competence*) about society's pains (inequality, marginalization)—helped her better understand her early memories. Such a complex *process* of shuttling between contexts solidified her understanding of the social inequalities within Chilean society.

7 | IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

To understand the interaction between different components of agency (Pantić, 2015) and different structural levels of social interaction (Douglas Fir Group, 2016), we have put forward an educational justice–inflected ecological model for language teacher agency in this article. This model helped us better understand a Chilean English teacher's agency development in an era characterized by neoliberal educational demands. Specifically, we examined Camila's experiences, moments that curtailed her agency, and the interaction of micro-, meso-, and macro-level forces at play during different occasions—all of which contributed in complex ways to her initial development as an agentive teacher.

Critical educational linguists (e.g., Canagarajah, 2012; Leal & Crookes, 2018) describe how the commodification of English language education overlooks the cultural, ideological, and sociopolitical dimensions of language learning and teaching (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). To her credit, Camila seemed to envision more opportunities for teachers in Chile. Mediated by her parents' beliefs about education and English in Chile, she chose English education as her career path (Excerpt 2). We observed how the interaction of macro-level (national) beliefs adopted at the meso (school) and micro (individual) levels impacted her enactment of teacher agency. Nevertheless, Camila persisted in her goal to adopt a critical perspective of English language learning by aiming to *denaturalize* harmful actions (Excerpt 4) and beliefs that required change (Excerpts 1 and 3). Similarly, she expressed her commitment to learn about and understand the wider social context and individuals in order to carry out her social justice work (Excerpt 5).

Camila's agency as an English teacher was inextricably linked to experiences and events that she analyzed critically. In this sense, reflexivity affords teachers like Camila opportunities for analysis across time and contexts (e.g., Burhan-Horasanlı, & Ortaçtepe, 2016; De Costa, 2015). Such teacher reflexivity has important implications for education. As Camila pointed out, teachers should see themselves in constant learning and self-reflection about themselves, their assumptions, and their positionality in society (Excerpt 4). In English language education, an in-motion and iterative practice is in keeping with Priestley et al.'s (2015) observation of teacher agency as an "outcome of the interplay of interactional, practical-evaluative, and projective dimensions" (p. 9). Such a dynamic understanding of teaching and learning thus also challenges broadly accepted lineal language teacher preparation process and sense of progression. Put simply, our model is consistent with the recent body of language

teacher agency research that conceives of teacher agency as being dynamic, in constant motion, and without having a beginning or an end point.

Admittedly, some critics may wonder about the efficacy of our model because the data on Camila we presented in this article do not illustrate how she actually enacted her agency. Said differently, although we provided a glimpse into her purpose, competence, autonomy, and reflexivity—core elements of Pantić's (2015) model—one criticism is that the reader is not presented with evidence of Camila's teacher agency in action. On the one hand, one could argue that this is a limitation of the study, which as we noted earlier is an ongoing investigation. On the other hand, we would like to also underscore the dynamic nature of teacher agency. In other words, like many other English teachers, Camila's teacher agency development is a constant work in progress, a rewarding enterprise that needs to be investigated in an ecological manner by taking into account macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors that might influence its development. After all, we need to remember that teacher agency is not confined to our bodies; instead, it should be examined in relation to the social and materials environments in which teachers are situated.

In closing, and as we invite practitioners and researchers to apply our proposed teacher agency model to their respective educational contexts, we would like to leave you with five pedagogical considerations. These considerations should be explored in conjunction with the research model recommended in this article and the findings discussed earlier.

1. English teachers' disciplinary knowledge and linguistic goals as language teachers should not be disassociated from their commitments to educational justice and social transformation.
2. English teachers need to help their students explore and analyze various topics that connect language content (grammar, vocabulary, etc.) with students' interests and experiences in society. Language and relevant content thus need to be adapted accordingly.
3. English education has a dual role of giving students opportunities to access professional and employment opportunities as well as contributing to their critical reflection of sociocultural and sociopolitical issues to effect social transformation.
4. Relatedly, and consistent with their role as transformative agents, English teachers should develop critical awareness of inequity and social injustice in the multiple scalar (macro, meso, and micro) contexts that their students would need to navigate.
5. Educational justice work is an ongoing process and requires constant examination. This vitally important work requires English teachers to reflexively think about their professional trajectory, their own language learning experiences, their language ideologies, and their social responsibility as educators in teaching a dominant language like English.

Research has shown us that although English can serve as an equalizer, it can also create large fractures in society by dividing the "haves" and the "have nots." That, unfortunately, is the trade-off of embracing neoliberalism in any educational system, not just Chile's. Because of this reality, English teachers need to step up and determine how they can become effective agents of change in school and society.

8 | THE AUTHORS

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