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Situated, Relational, and Critical: A Participatory Action Research Study of English Language Educators' Homegrown Professional Learning in Oaxaca, Mexico

Professional learning can promote equity in English language teaching, yet conventional approaches to professional development are technical, acontextual, and position educators as passive recipients of knowledge. Informed by the scholarship on resisting linguistic imperialism, this participatory action research study advances a situated, relational, and critical approach to professional learning and documents how a collective of language educators in Oaxaca, Mexico engaged in ongoing professional learning rooted in critical reflections on situated practice. Data were collected from transcripts of group discussions and teachers' written reflections. Participants engaged in a process of collective data analysis. Findings suggest participation resulted in increased critical consciousness, an increased confidence in developing localized curricula, and deepened professional commitments including an increased commitment to advocate for more equitable policies in the field. Finally, this paper offers guiding questions for educators to consider when designing their own situated, relational, and critical professional learning experiences.

Keywords: professional learning, English language teaching, participatory action research

Language teacher education should prepare English language educators to resist and transform problematic ideologies and practices such as language hierarchies, discriminatory hiring practices, and the misuse of standardized assessments (Dikilitaş & Çomoğlu, 2024; Jenks, 2017; Selvi, 2024). In order to do so, teacher education—including coursework for pre-service teachers as well other professional learning experiences educators engage in throughout their career—should foster critical consciousness, increase agency, and be responsive to particular contexts (De Costa & Uştuk, 2024; Dikilitaş & Çomoğlu, 2024). Teacher education has the potential to foster the moral agency necessary to catalyze more inclusive, equitable practices in the field of English language teaching (De Costa & Uştuk, 2024; Peercy et al., 2024), yet, too often, professional development agendas for English language educators emphasize techniques presumed to be applicable in any context and position educators as passive recipients of information poised to maintain the status quo (Dikilitaş & Çomoğlu, 2024).

Inspired by Canagarajah's (1999b) work on resisting linguistic imperialism, we advance a situated, relational, and critical approach to teacher professional learning that is responsive to the local context, rooted in interpersonal relationships, and fosters agency. This study examines how a small collective of language educators in Oaxaca, Mexico, adopted a situated, relational, and critical approach to professional learning in order to support a situated, relational, and critical approach to language teaching.

Political and economic interests often influence educational policies concerning English language instruction in Mexico (Perales Escudero et al., 2012; Ramírez-Romero & Sayer, 2016). The *native speaker fallacy*, or the belief that the ideal teacher of English is a "native speaker," is one of the core tenets of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992). Despite decades of scholarship documenting and condemning discriminatory practices that privilege so-called "native speakers" (Canagarajah, 1999a; Holliday, 2006; Motha, 2014; Phillipson, 1992; Selvi, 2024), these practices persist in many parts of the world, including in some educational settings in Oaxaca. Although distinctions between "native speaker" and "non-native speaker" are not valid linguistic categories (Amin, 2001),

the native speaker fallacy creates a perceived shortage of “qualified” teachers by deeming local teachers ineligible to teach English in their own communities (Phillipson, 1992).

In the fall of 2021, Anna began teaching at a public university in Oaxaca that exclusively hired “native speakers” to teach in their language center. She was unsettled by the discriminatory hiring practices and the indiscriminate use of commercial curricula and standardized testing. Anna was interested in collaborating with local language educators to develop more culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogies. Given the exclusionary hiring practices at that institution, she had to look elsewhere to find educators who were familiar with the particular social, political, and historical contexts of Oaxaca, one of the most linguistically and culturally diverse regions of Mexico (López-Gopar et al., 2021). That desire to collaborate gave rise to the collective of language educators which is the focus of this study.

This participatory action research study examines how a small collective of language educators in Oaxaca, Mexico, created our own professional learning experience that helped us deepen our pedagogical and professional commitments. This paper addresses the following questions: (1) What does a situated, relational, and critical approach to professional learning for English language educators in Oaxaca look like? (2) What are the benefits and challenges of participating in a situated, relational, and critical professional learning experience for English language educators in Oaxaca?

As the U.S. government divests in programming that promote equity, diversity, and inclusion, resources for multilingual communities including English language learners and migrant youth are being withheld. These cuts will be felt especially hard in states with the largest immigrant populations, including California. A situated, relational, and critical approach to professional learning could be valuable for California educators as they navigate the changes affecting their schools and communities and determine how to respond.

Literature

The imperial and colonial legacies of English can still be seen in education policies, teacher certification programs, recruitment and hiring practices, curriculum and instruction (Phillipson, 1992). We need interventions in every arena to create more liberatory alternatives (Hsu, 2017), and educators are uniquely situated to influence multiple facets of the field. Collective approaches to professional learning, initiated by teachers, and rooted in inquiry that arise from situated practice can help. Just as critical language pedagogies problematize inequities affecting our communities, critical approaches to teacher professional learning do too. Our professional learning experiences should prepare us to act in solidarity with marginalized communities and foster agency—ours and that of our students (López-Gopar, 2019).

To support pedagogies that are responsive to the local context, rooted in relationships, and critical of inequities in our field, we need a different model of professional learning. Influenced by Motha’s (2014) critical feminist ethnography of in-service educators Teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in the United States and Canagarajah’s (1999b) work on resisting linguistic imperialism, our collective of language educators envisioned a situated, relational, and critical approach to professional learning to support a situated, relational, and critical approach to language teaching.

In a pluralistic society, education should be in service of cultural and linguistic pluralism (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014). Situated approaches to language teaching center local knowledges and recognize learners’ home languages and cultures as assets (López-Gopar, 2019). Our curricula and instructional practices should make space for, connect with, and expand upon the knowledges and experiences our students gain from their families and communities (Jiménez, 2019; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014). This requires familiarity with, interest in, and respect for our students’ linguistic and cultural identities.

Interventions in teacher education and teacher professional learning are needed to support English language educators in resisting hegemonic practices in the field (Estacio & Camargo Cely, 2018). Educators’ capacity to theorize about our own situated practice is central to a critical approach to teacher professional learning (Estacio & Camargo Cely, 2018), and collaborative action research can be instrumental in the co-construction of localized knowledge and interventions that are responsive to the local context (Banegas, 2013).

In addition to taking a situated approach to professional learning, cultivating relationships among educators is also vital. Freire (1970) argued that humanizing education centers the realities and needs of the learners. Furthermore, attentive listening is a key pedagogical practice for getting to know and connecting with learners (León Jiménez et al., 2019; Norton & Toohey, 2004). Respect is also essential for a relational approach to teaching.

As Lawrence-Lightfoot explains, respect involves attention, curiosity, and mutual empowerment (UW Video, 2013). This is as true in our relationships with colleagues as it is in our relationships with students.

Kumaravadivelu (2016) advocates “concerted, coordinated, collective action” (p. 81) to disrupt discriminatory practices in our field. Such actions, he argues, should be “formulated and implemented by local players who are knowledgeable about, and sensitive to, local conditions” (p. 81). Jaramillo and Carreon (2014) advocate pedagogies of resistance and solidarity characterized by “reciprocity, solidarity, and *horizontalidad*” (p. 393).

Pedagogies of resistance can help disrupt and transform linguistic imperialism (Canagarajah, 1999b). As Motha (2014) explains, “...teaching without consciousness of the interrelationships among race, place, and language will, given the racialized and colonial nature of the terrain in which they practice, lead individual teachers to simply reproduce existing power arrangements” (p. 111). Thus, critical self-reflection and intentional efforts to deepen critical consciousness have an important place in professional learning for educators.

Critical language pedagogies address issues affecting our students’ communities, problematize social injustices, and foster civic engagement while also advancing students’ proficiency in the target language (Morales et al., 2020). Critical language educators nurture students’ sense of agency, champion the liberatory potential of languages, and recognize the importance of resistance (López-Gopar, 2019).

Methodology

This Participatory Action Research (PAR) study documents how a small collective of language educators with diverse experiences teaching English in Oaxaca came together to raise questions and reflect upon our teaching as situated practice. PAR is a participatory process of collective knowledge construction (Koirala-Azad & Fuentes, 2009–2010) that brings people together to deepen their understanding of shared concerns and to determine how to respond collectively (Kemmis, 2001). PAR is characterized by a recursive process of dialogue, reflection, and action. It centers local knowledge production and equitable power relations (Lake & Wendland, 2018). It is rooted in reciprocal relationships and is committed to the social and political consequences of the process (Koirala-Azad & Fuentes, 2009–2010; Lake & Wendland, 2018). PAR is based on the conviction that those impacted by injustices are well situated to research and respond to those injustices (Fals Borda, 2001; Koirala-Azad & Fuentes, 2009–2010).

The research team included four language educators teaching in different educational settings in Oaxaca, Mexico. Angelica, Claudia, and Nora are from different regions of the state of Oaxaca, and Anna is from the United States. The participant-researchers’ professional experience at the time of the study is summarized in Table 1. The diversity of our professional and personal experiences enriched our collaboration and the insights we gained from it.

Table 1
Description of Participants

Name	Language(s) taught	Teaching context	Years of teaching experience
Anna	English	higher education, community-based organizations	10
Angelica	English, Spanish, <i>Tu'un Savi</i>	higher education, community-based organizations	18
Claudia	English, Spanish	elementary schools, private lessons	13
Nora	English, French, German, Spanish	private lessons	17

The university where Anna taught when this project began exclusively hired so-called “native speakers” to work in their Language Center. Anna knew that the segregation of local and foreign educators that resulted from these discriminatory hiring practices was detrimental to the teaching and learning of languages, and she wanted to work alongside local language teachers to challenge discriminatory practices in the field.

Anna met Angelica and Nora through a professional organization for English language educators in Oaxaca. Angelica and Nora later introduced her to Claudia who had been a classmate of theirs in their undergraduate program for language teachers. The four of us began meeting at a café in Oaxaca City in February 2023 to informally reflect on our teaching practice. Our gatherings were generally 2–3 hours per month and continued through the end of the year.

Rather than establishing a set agenda for our meetings, our monthly discussions centered reflections on our teaching experience. Our guiding questions included: (1) How is your teaching going? (2) What challenges have you faced recently? (3) What questions have emerged? These questions deliberately elicited a range of reflections on pedagogical practices, interactions with students, and critique of institutional policies and practices. They invited us to address a wide variety of issues as they arose in our respective professional contexts.

In order to understand how our gatherings functioned as a form of situated, relational, and critical TESOL teacher professional learning, we collected data throughout the fall semester (August 2023 through November 2023) and engaged in several collective data analysis sessions in December 2023 and January 2024. Data sources included journal entries reflecting on our participation in the collective, audio recordings and transcripts of our monthly discussions, and artifacts created by the collective. The analysis of multiple data sources and the collective process of data analysis supported the reliability and validity of our findings.

Throughout our collaboration, we practiced translanguaging, drawing from our entire linguistic repertoire to enhance our learning and interpersonal connection (Vogel & García, 2017). In multilingual spaces, translanguaging promotes equity, affirms participants’ identities, and empowers people with different levels of language proficiency to engage more fully in the exchange of ideas (Ortega, 2019; Vogel & García, 2017). Participants were encouraged to express themselves in the language they felt most comfortable with to promote equitable participation in the language teacher collective.

With the aim of co-constructing knowledge, we engaged in collective data analysis. It was an inductive process with several stages. First, we each read and annotated the transcripts of our discussions and one another’s journal entries. Then, we met to identify and categorize themes that emerged from the data. The themes identified

included “institutional problems,” “teachers as agents of change,” “teaching philosophies,” and “the collective.” Finally, we discussed each research question with the data in mind. That discussion was audio recorded and transcribed for further reference. Our findings were derived from that document and several conversations followed as we further reflected on the data.

Findings

To better align our professional learning experiences with our values as educators, we need a collaborative space independent of formal evaluations that affect our job security and opportunities for professional advancement to raise questions and concerns about our teaching. Whereas conventional professional development activities situate educators as the recipients of information, we believe in educators’ potential as the producers of situated knowledge, so we centered our reflection on our own teaching experiences. We helped one another navigate the challenges we face in our teaching, gained confidence as educators, and felt an increased responsibility to promote equity in our classrooms and in the institutions in which we work. Our findings are organized by the key elements of our situated, relational, and critical approach to teacher professional learning and are briefly outlined in Table 2.

Table 2
Summary of Findings

Key elements	Description	Outcomes
Situated	responsive to the local context	supported the development of localized curricula; facilitated dialogic reflection on our teaching context, students’ backgrounds and learning experiences
Relational	rooted in interpersonal relationships	relationships with collaborators supported our relationships with students; participation in the collective helped us feel connected and supported
Critical	centers the concerns of educators; empowers them to challenge inequities	increased critical consciousness; heightened sense of agency; broadened professional commitments; helped us recognize advocacy as a natural extension of teaching

Situated

We wanted our collaboration to resemble the types of learning experiences we aim to facilitate with our students. With respect to a situated practice, we focused on developing localized pedagogies and curriculum and reflecting on the realities of our immediate teaching contexts and the broader social milieu.

Localized Pedagogies and Curriculum

Promoting cultural exchange is one aspect of our work as language teachers, and we can do so in a way that represents and values our students’ cultures. As Claudia advocates, we can “*enseñar inglés a través de nuestra cultura, nuestros saberes, costumbres, ideas, [y las] identidad[es] de los alumnos*” [teach English through our culture, our knowledges, customs, ideas, and the students’ identities]. We should be critical of imported curricula with little regard for local contexts and cultures. Claudia suggests that making our curricula more relevant to the local context sends a message that students can learn English without compromising their identities. We can spark their curiosity and motivate them to learn more about other cultures while also valuing their own identities and those of their peers.

Doing so requires familiarity with, sensitivity toward, and respect for our students, their communities, and their cultures. It requires us to adapt or develop our own teaching materials which can be a tremendous amount of work for teachers working in isolation. The collective provided us with the space to raise questions about what we teach, why we teach it, and how we teach it. Working collectively helped us generate ideas, share resources, and address questions that arose along the way. Sharing the work reduced the burden for individual educators and

helped us make progress toward developing a situated language curriculum that is relevant to our students' lives and affirms their identities.

Considering the Realities of Our Immediate Teaching Contexts

In our language educator collective, we shared ideas about how to navigate the challenges we face in our respective professional contexts. During the data collection phase of this project, Anna was teaching in an area with frequent power outages, unreliable internet connection, and extreme weather that affected students' personal and academic experiences and her approach to teaching. When we weren't able to find colleagues working at the same institution to collaborate with, having the space to reflect with trusted peers from different educational settings helped us adapt to the circumstances in a way that was thoughtful, supportive of our students, and aligned with our values.

The collective was a space where we could reflect on our students' realities—their socioeconomic circumstances, educational backgrounds, home languages and cultures, and the degree to which they felt a sense of belonging at school and in our classrooms. We shared different perspectives and embraced our capacity to theorize about our teaching practice and support one another in our professional growth without relying on outside experts to guide us. We shared instructional resources, strategies, and practical recommendations.

Angelica shared her experience as an elementary school student in the Mixteca region of Oaxaca where the teachers spoke her home language, *Tu'un Savi*. She recalled collecting sticks and stones to use as manipulatives in her math classes. She contrasted that with her experience as a middle school student in a nearby city where all instruction was in Spanish, and teachers expected students to purchase synthetic materials to create models for science class. While her elementary school experience felt inclusive, the middle school experience caused dissonance. Her teachers' expectations were out of touch with some students' socioeconomic realities and drew attention to economic disparities among them. It was alienating for students who didn't have the resources to buy the materials, and her teachers seemed unaware or unconcerned about it. Hearing about her experience helped us consider the material demands of schooling from our students' perspective.

Our collective also helped us think about the broader social context in which we teach. Our dialogues addressed the many factors that affect our students' learning and affective experiences in school including their prior educational experiences, distance traveled to attend, and so on. We also interrogated the underlying assumptions and beliefs of a system that invests heavily in the teaching of English while marginalizing local Indigenous languages in educational spaces.

Relational

A relational approach to teacher professional learning and to teaching and learning more broadly centers interpersonal relationships. Supporting one another as educators ultimately enriches our relationships with students. A relational approach to teaching is rooted in respect, listening, and connection. It provides us with the space to reflect, learn from one another, and offer moral support that helps us build confidence and take risks in our teaching.

Respect, Listening, and Connection

The relationships we built with one another supported us in strengthening our relationships with our students. At each of our gatherings, we reflected on interactions with students and strategies for supporting their language learning process. Given that most of our students are required to study English whether they want to or not, increasing their motivation to learn was a concern for all of us.¹ After discussing students we were concerned about in the collective, we gained new insights into how to build trust and better engage them in class.

Several times, Angelica told us about a student who was extremely quiet at school. He continued to wear a face mask even when it was no longer a required public health protocol, and he rarely said a word. When she first told us about him, his reluctance to speak was impacting his grades, and he was at risk of having to repeat a class.

¹ In some cases, reluctance to learn English may be a form of resistance to educational requirements learners deem unfair or incongruent with their cultural or linguistic identities (Solorzano & Yosso, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999). While it's beyond the scope of this project, advocating for more inclusive language policies that ensure students have the opportunity to further develop proficiency in their heritage language(s) in addition to studying other languages could be a critical response to this situation.

Angelica made an effort to build a trusting relationship with him. After a few days, he started responding to her in a whisper, and eventually the length and volume of their conversations increased. At times, he would remove his mask when he spoke with her even though he wore it the rest of the school day. Angelica suspected that his refusal to speak at school was indicative of some social or emotional discomfort, and she encouraged his other teachers to provide alternative opportunities for him to demonstrate his learning. As a result, he was able to pass his classes. Discussing her concerns about the student with the collective helped Angelica gain confidence in her ability to connect with and advocate for him.

Angelica wasn't the only one who felt that participation in the collective improved her relationship with students. Claudia and Nora also shared stories about students they were concerned about, and we all benefitted from our reflections on how to support them. Our conversations led Nora to new insights about what motivates her students and how to engage them in class. Claudia also said that our collaboration had a positive impact on her relationship with a student she was concerned about. Our conversations *"impactó positivamente en las clases y la relación con mi estudiante"* [had a positive impact on the classes and the relationship with my student] leading to improved communication. She continued, *"Escuchar al estudiante y conocer sus intereses permitió que el alumno se involucrara en la clase y se le facilitara aprender, así como que se sintiera en confianza para pedir ayuda"* [listening to the student and understanding their interests allowed him to become more involved in the class, making it easier for him to learn and to feel confident asking for help].

Getting to know our students helps us curate meaningful content that sparks their curiosity and affirms their identities. Similarly, being in community with other educators allows us to learn from one another's experiences and support each other in our shared vocation of language teaching. When done with intention and care, teacher collaboration can provide a supportive environment to explore our ideas, refine our thinking, and encourage our continuous growth as educators.

This collaboration created time and space for us to reflect individually and collectively. All of us were open to new ideas and willing to share differing perspectives. We helped one another think through the challenges we faced in our classrooms and offered moral support to take the necessary pedagogical risks to teach in ways that are more aligned with our intentions. Nora said that her participation in the teacher collective helped her *"...cambiar ciertos aspectos de la enseñanza. Me ayudó a estar abierta a cambios, críticas constructivas, a mejorar mi enseñanza..."* [...to change certain aspects of teaching. It helped me be open to changes, constructive criticism, to improve my teaching...].

In reflecting on our experience as a language educator collective, Angelica said, *"Hubo algo interesante—convivencia armoniosa, intelectual, académica, libre pensamiento. Hubo mucha tolerancia... experiencias que nos une..."* [There was something interesting—harmonious, intellectual, academic coexistence, free thinking. There was a lot of tolerance... experiences that unite us...]. Teaching can be challenging, so a supportive relationship with other educators is valuable. In Claudia's words, *"La enseñanza no es fácil. Siempre hay nuevas situaciones que implican un reto, pero el saber que cuentas con un colectivo que te apoya hace que sea un proceso más sencillo de lograr"* [Teaching is not easy. There are always new situations that involve a challenge, but knowing that you have a group that supports you makes the process easier].

A relational approach to teacher professional learning helped us feel connected and provided us with a supportive space to reflect upon our teaching practice. When our care for one another and our students extends beyond interpersonal relationships, it heightens our collective attention to the social and environmental issues affecting our collective well-being.

Critical

A critical approach to professional learning centers the questions and concerns of educators and empowers us to address the challenges we face in our workplace and our communities. It is based on the conviction that educators are well equipped to navigate the problems that arise in our teaching practice. Through a recursive process of dialogue, reflection, and action, we questioned commonly held assumptions and pushed back against inequitable practices in our professional sphere. The data suggest that participation in the collective increased our critical consciousness, enhanced our sense of agency, and broadened our professional commitments.

Increased Critical Consciousness

In order to develop new ways of teaching, we need a different model of professional learning. Our *colectivo* was a supportive space for us to reflect, grow, and explore different possibilities. As Claudia explains:

Como maestro te das cuenta a veces que ni uno es crítico. ¿Cómo enseñas a ser a alguien si tú no lo eres? Y dices bueno, el cambio está en mí, ¿no? Pero si sabes que ser crítico es mayor compromiso, mayor responsabilidad... ["As a teacher, you realize that sometimes even you aren't critical. How do you teach someone to be critical if you aren't critical? And you say, well, the change is in me, right? But if you know that being critical is a greater commitment, greater responsibility..."]

Educators need to continuously develop our own critical consciousness in order to support students in the process of developing theirs (Reyes, 2019).

Through our discussions, we began to understand that our work as language educators expands beyond the classrooms and the institutions where we teach. We began to think of ourselves as members of a profession, and with that came questions about our professional responsibilities and opportunities to influence aspects of our discipline we find problematic.

After our reflection and critique of the issue, Claudia and Angelica noticed ways in which the native speaker fallacy influences language teachers' thoughts and actions. Claudia said, "*...si te dicen recomiéndame un maestro, a veces recomiendas al nativo y no a tu compañero que no es nativo, ¿no? ... si queremos cambiar eso, ...vamos a empezar desde nosotras* [...if someone asks you to recommend a teacher, sometimes you recommend the "native [speaker]" and not your colleague who is a "non-native [speaker]," right? ...if we want to change that, ...we are going to start with ourselves]. Through our discussions, Claudia became increasingly aware of some commonly held biases among local English language teachers, a necessary step toward personal and collective transformation.

Occasionally, Angelica is asked to evaluate other professors at the university where she teaches. She used to feel uncomfortable evaluating so-called "native speaker" English professors given the prevalent assumptions about their inherent competence teaching the language. However, after our reflections on what it means to be a qualified language educator, she noticed an increased sense of confidence in her interactions with foreign teachers. After all, she realized, she isn't evaluating their English language proficiency; she is evaluating how they teach the language, and she is very well qualified to do that.

In short, participation in the language educator collective helped us expand our professional commitments, and recognize, question, and mitigate uncritical ideologies. Our dialogues helped us widen our focus from the micro- context of classroom interactions to the meso- and macro- contexts of the institutions we are affiliated with and our profession more broadly. It helped us to feel more aligned with our values and recognize our potential as agents of change in our field.

Increased Commitment and Agency

As Anna came to know Angelica, Claudia, and Nora, she developed an increased sense of responsibility to advocate for more equitable practices in our field. In February 2023, in the early stages of our *colectivo*, Anna and a colleague of hers drafted a letter to the administration of the public university system they worked for advocating for more equitable hiring practices for language teachers, and the members of the collective helped revise it. Several months later, the administration announced a decision affecting more than 10 universities in the state of Oaxaca. After more than thirty years of exclusively hiring so-called "native speakers" to teach in their language programs, they decided that any qualified language teacher should be eligible, regardless of their nationality. Our letter may have been one of the factors that influenced the subsequent policy change.

Critical reflections helped hone our arguments, ensured they adequately represented the interests of the collective, and emboldened us to send the letter. As Claudia explained, "*primero hicimos conciencia sobre nuestra realidad laboral, definimos qué conlleva ser un maestro eficaz, y cuales son sus derechos como maestro. Es lo que nos llevó a querer hacer un cambio, a querer movernos*" [First we raised awareness about our work reality, we defined what being an effective teacher entails, and what their labor rights are. That's what led us to want to make a change, to take action].

Although Anna was concerned that the discriminatory hiring practices at the university where she was teaching were detrimental to language teaching and learning prior to meeting the local teachers, getting to know them deepened her awareness about how these inequities affect them personally and professionally. As a result, she felt an increased sense of responsibility to advocate for change and to do so in such a way that advanced the interests of the local teachers.

Deepening Our Professional Commitments

Through this collaboration, we began to understand advocacy as a natural extension of our teaching. We came to see how we can help create better conditions for teaching and learning by working to change policies at the institutional level. A number of circumstances influenced our engagement with advocacy including a change of administration at the university system where Anna taught. The collective worked together to revise a letter advocating for more inclusive hiring practices for language professors, and that fall the policy changed.

In sum, coming together as a collective of educators created the space for us to reflect. A change of leadership seemed an opportune time for action, and the *colectivo* provided feedback and moral support to take action. Our situated, relational, and critical approach to teacher professional learning led to an increased sense of commitment and an increased sense of agency to advocate for change. It helped us see engagement with institutional policies as a natural extension of our teaching practice, and it influenced our response to unforeseen developments in our professional context.

Discussion

We took a situated, relational, and critical approach to our professional learning as a means of supporting our development of a situated, relational, and critical approach to language teaching. This approach led us to consider our responsibilities as members of a professional community with the agency to influence the future of our profession (Motha, 2014; Pantić & Florian, 2015). This differs from other professional development activities we've participated in that emphasized generalized teaching methods and assessment practices and often felt detached from the realities of our classrooms, the institutions in which we work, the communities in which we live, and our priorities as educators. Our *colectivo* provided ongoing support throughout the semester, was responsive to our shifting concerns as educators, and led us to deepen our professional commitments and advocate for more equitable policies. We determined when to meet and what to focus on, and as a result, we created an ongoing professional learning experience that was responsive to our needs.

This study was designed to explore what a situated, relational, and critical approach to professional development looks like in Oaxaca, Mexico. To begin with, we looked beyond our immediate workplaces and across educational settings to find like-minded collaborators. In contrast to traditional professional development that has a set agenda, we took an emergent approach (Goodnough, 2010), focusing on our students, our particular contexts, and the profession of English language teaching more broadly. We met in comfortable spaces—first in a café and later in one another's homes. Our dialogues centered the questions and tensions that emerged from our respective professional experiences. Normalizing and encouraging translanguaging led to fuller engagement and new insights within our plurilingual collective (Vogel & Garcia, 2017).

The study also looked at the benefits and challenges of participating in a language educator collective. With respect to a situated approach to professional development, the benefits included dedicating time to reflect on the realities of the contexts in which we work and how to adapt our teaching to these particular circumstances. We supported one another in the development of localized pedagogies and curricula. In contrast to conventional professional development, our learning was rooted in ongoing reflection on our teaching (Goodnough, 2010; Motha, 2014). We did not rely on outside experts or professional development initiatives organized by the institutions we work for; we created our own.

With respect to a relational approach to professional learning, we felt heard and supported as we navigated challenges that arose in our teaching practice. We also noticed an increased sense of confidence as we made pedagogical and curricular changes and in our interactions with colleagues. Participants demonstrated increased critical consciousness, and we began to recognize ourselves as agents of change (Goodnough, 2010; Priestly et al., 2013). Finally, we developed an increased sense of responsibility to advocate for more equitable policies and practices in our field.

Limitations of the study include the small number of participants and the imbalance of local and foreign language educators in the collective. Another potential challenge with this model of professional learning has to do with the willingness of educators to engage. This experience was only possible because we all dedicated several hours each month to connecting, reflecting, and supporting one another in inquiry and exploration. Each iteration would have a different feel to it depending on the participants, their interpersonal dynamics, the circumstances in which they work, and their degree of engagement with the process.

We all felt that our participation in the language educator collective was valuable, yet we each benefited in different ways depending on our positionality. As a foreigner in Mexico, Anna felt an increased confidence in her

ability to develop a situated curriculum with the feedback and encouragement of the local teachers. On the other hand, Angelica and Claudia both gained increased awareness of the ways in which some language teachers have internalized aspects of the native speaker fallacy. After critical reflection, they experienced an increased sense of confidence in their identities as local language teachers and in their professional interactions with foreign teachers.

Nora, who is self-employed, noted shifts in her pedagogical practices after discussions about adapting our teaching methods to learners of different ages and sharing our reflections and critiques of different approaches to language teaching. Because Nora primarily teaches private lessons, she receives less feedback on her teaching than those of us who work in schools and universities. The collective was a generative space for her to reflect on her teaching methods in dialogue with other educators.

We all benefited from the time and space to reflect on our teaching, articulate challenges we were facing, hear different perspectives, and support one another in navigating difficult situations (Priestley et al., 2013). While all of us appreciated the sense of camaraderie and connection that we generated through this collaborative endeavor, the benefits we gleaned from the experience varied from teacher to teacher according to our circumstances.

Critical pedagogies in language learning focus on local situations, problems, and issues (López-Gopar, 2019). Shouldn't professional learning for language educators do the same? We need professional learning initiatives that resemble the ways in which we aspire to engage with our students, address our concerns as educators, and encourage us to question and ultimately challenge policies we find problematic (Goodnough, 2010; Priestley et al., 2013). Such professional learning should be characterized by "collectiveness, plurality and locality" (Borelli et al., 2020, p. 319).

As Claudia pointed out, teaching is challenging. To navigate these challenges in a conscientious and sustainable manner, it's helpful to have a support system. Hantzopoulos advocates seeking out trusted colleagues to process and collaborate with, even if you have to look beyond your school or institution to find them (Fernekas, 2024). We looked beyond our immediate teaching contexts for support in adopting a situated, relational, and critical approach to language teaching and to our own professional learning.

Implications of the Study

This study supports a paradigm shift about professional learning and provides a model that could be adapted to other contexts. Our experience demonstrates that there is value in plurality—bringing educators with different backgrounds and experiences together enriched our reflections and led to new insights. This may be particularly true in contexts where discriminatory hiring policies result in limited contact between local and foreign educators and limited opportunities for teacher interaction across nationalities.

A situated, relational, and critical approach to teacher professional learning may be particularly valuable in places like California where the majority of educators serve multilingual students from a wide range of linguistic, cultural, and ethnic identities. California educators serving student populations that are underrepresented in their schools or districts may benefit from seeking out teachers in other educational settings who support students with similar backgrounds to support and learn from one another. Such an approach to professional learning can help teachers reflect upon their students' experiences and how best to support them socially and academically.

As an alternative to the focus on "best practices" in conventional professional development initiatives, we offer some guiding questions for English language educators to consider as they seek out or design their own professional learning experiences:

- What would a professional learning initiative that centers the experiences, expertise, and concerns of educators look like in your particular context?
- How could educators sustain ongoing support for one another throughout the school year (not just on designated professional development days)?
- If you don't find the support you need in your immediate teaching context, where could you look for collaborators?
- If the professional development opportunities provided by your institution do not address your concerns as an educator, how could you grow your own professional learning community?
- How might you collaborate with teachers beyond your own school site and across grade levels?

Conclusion

In this participatory action research study of collaboration among four language educators working in different educational settings in Oaxaca, Mexico, we adopted a situated, relational, and critical approach to professional learning to support our development of a situated, relational, and critical approach to language teaching. We each came to this project with a variety of concerns such as not finding peers to collaborate with in our immediate workplaces, wanting to disrupt the segregation of local and foreign language educators that result from discriminatory hiring practices in our field, a desire to continue our development and growth as educators, and an interest in more responsive professional learning experiences.

Regarding the first research question about what a situated, relational, and critical approach to professional learning for English language educators in Oaxaca looks like, our meetings took place in comfortable environments at mutually agreed upon times. We discussed an array of questions and concerns that arose in our professional lives, and our focus was responsive to developments in our local context and our shifting concerns. Over time, we came to consider how broader policies and practices influence what is possible within our classrooms as well as our potential to influence institutional policies and practices in our field more broadly. This educator-initiated professional learning experience was a departure from traditional professional development experiences that often feel disconnected from our immediate concerns or overly technical focusing on acontextual teaching methods, classroom management techniques, or how to leverage the latest educational technology in a language class.

The second research question focused on the benefits and challenges of participating in a situated, relational, and critical professional learning experience for English language educators in Oaxaca. Participation in this collective of language educators heightened our critical consciousness, increased our confidence, and enhanced our sense of agency and willingness to advocate for more equitable practices in our field. Our collective could serve as a model for professional learning in different contexts. Educators can seek out collaborative communities, embrace their potential to generate situated knowledge about their own teaching practice, support one another, and continue their professional growth independent of formal evaluations. Kumaravadivelu (2016) argues, “If the professional community is serious about disrupting, if not dismantling, the hegemonic power structure, it must resolve not only to think *otherwise* but also to act *otherwise*” (p. 80). This was our attempt to approach teacher professional learning otherwise.

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