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# "Most of my students kept saying, 'I never met a gay person'": A queer English language teacher's agency for social justice

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an interview-based case study of a language teacher agency from social justice, queer, and ecological perspectives. We use Pantić's (2015) model of teacher agency for social justice to investigate four aspects (i.e., "sense of purpose," "competence," "autonomy," "reflexivity") of Jackson's agency, a queer language teacher. A central driving force of Jackson's agency was her identification of contradictions between her sense of purpose and the educational structure in which her work was located, and thus her sense of purpose changed based on her context—from tending to her students' pastoral needs and to educating students about homophobia and Queer culture. Favorable conditions at the institutional and classroom levels enabled Jackson to exercise agency. They were a supportive department, an institution located in a liberal region, a conducive curriculum, student-teacher rapport, and timing of an instructional module (on LGBTQIA Rights). Jackson exercised agency particularly through the means of identity as pedagogy and also by changing the program's materials, by decentering herself as the sole holder of knowledge, and by coming out in the classroom.



## 1. Introduction

> *On one hand, I was sick and tired—as a queer person standing right in front of them—of hearing students say, 'I've never met an LGBT person.' On the other hand, what a teachable moment, despite my personal frustration. (Jackson)*

The present study investigates the agency for social justice of Jackson, a queer language teacher. Our aim is to contribute to the growing body of literature on the nature of language teacher agency (i.e., why, how, and what we are trying to accomplish) from queer, social justice, and ecological perspectives.

In a 2006 special issue of the *Journal of Language, Identity & Education* titled *Queer Inquiry in Language Education*, Nelson argued for queer perspectives to be included in language education:

On a broader, ethical level, excluding queer perspectives and knowledges from our classrooms and our literature is, in effect, a way of enforcing compulsory heterosexuality, which hardly seems an appropriate role for language educators and researchers. (p. 7).

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The teacher who follows the conventional practices of their local educational contexts will find their agency more likely to be supported by the system than opposed by it. On the other hand, a teacher who manifests a social justice pedagogy faces obstacles. Even more than this, a teacher who manifests in their very identity a challenge to hegemonic culture faces internal and external obstacles the moment they step through the school entrance (as did Jackson, our focal teacher). For those teachers who are doing (or being) something (e.g., queer, or radical) in their classroom that is different from the conventional practices or identities of their local educational contexts, questions of agency—of what can be done, of how far to go and how fast, or of to what extent one should compromise or dissimulate, are crucial. Publishing cases of teachers striving to carry out such alternative pedagogies enables teachers to imagine possibilities and to see others taking and defending marginalized[1] identities in the school and in the classroom.

Our study draws on data from an interview-based case study, described below. The first author (Leal) conducted this research; the second author (Crookes) acted as a sounding board and co-writer. We will use the first-person singular throughout most of the article as reflecting the actions and views of the senior author, shifting to "we" when stating jointly arrived at findings and positions.

We first review matters of agency both broadly and in the context of education followed by a discussion on the use of identity as pedagogy in language education and its use from a queer perspective. Then, using the model for study of teacher agency for social justice as theorized by Pantić (2015) further discussed in section 2.3, data analysis and findings are reported.

## 2. Aspects of agency and language teacher identity as pedagogy

### 2.1. Agency and teacher agency in language education

Agency has been extensively theorized and discussions of it have often focused on what is commonly known as the structure—agency debate. The influential social theorist Giddens (1977; 1984) brought back a concern for agency in the mid-1970s in an attempt to balance it against the structures—of the late Marx, or of structural theorists like Levi-Strauss—which left little to the active human being (Best, 2012; cf.; Callinicos, 2004). His concept of *structuration* allows us to understand agency in context. First, structures are specific sets of rules and resources which are created by the human being. Second, those same sets of rules and resources at times constrain the human being and at times aid agency (Hewson, 2010). From Gidden's point of view, structure and agency are two inseparable and complementary concepts.

Unlike agency, the concept of teacher agency, that is, "agency that is theorised specifically in respect of the activities of teachers in schools" (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015, p. 625), has received less attention with little theory development (Toom, Pyhältö, & O'Connell Rust, 2015; but see; Feryok, 2012; Priestley, Biesta, Phillippou, & Robinson, 2016).

In the field of applied linguistics, studies of agency focus less on language teacher agency and more on the agency of the language learner. Language teacher agency has been investigated most notably through the lens of language policy and planning (e.g., Menken & García, 2010; Priestley et al., 2016), TESOL pedagogy (e.g., Canagarajah, 1999), and teacher education (e.g., Feryok, 2012; Kayi-Aydar, 2015). What these studies have in common is that they conceptualize agency from a sociological perspective (drawing on e.g., Giddens, 1984) in which agency is not something one possesses but something that is achieved in particular social interactions (Priestley, Edwards, Priestley, & Miller, 2012). In this paper, we further conceptualize language teacher agency from an ecological perspective. An ecological perspective of agency views it as "a contextually enacted way of being in the world" (van Lier, 2002; 2008, p. 163). Van Lier's focus on agency disputed the view of the learner and learning in early Second Language Acquisition theory. Van Lier (2008) emphasized agency as achieved and practiced in and through engagement with contexts; hence the importance of the term 'ecological' in his work.

### 2.2. Teacher agency and identity as pedagogy in language education from a Queer perspective

A teacher's "contextually enacted way of being" (van Lier, 2008, p. 163) in the school refers not only to teacher agency but to teacher identity as well for, "our work as teachers shapes and is shaped by the very mode of our being" (Clarke, 2009, p. 186; cf.; Barcelos, 2015). The identity of a language teacher shapes their pedagogical choices but also can be used as a form of agency. The power of using one's identity as a pedagogical resource to confront dominant discourses has been acknowledged by feminist educators, particularly by those identifying as LGBTQIA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersexual, Asexual), for example, Wright (1993).[2] Drawing from the late 1960s feminist slogan "the personal is political" (Hanisch, 1969/2000), Wright (1993) discussed her coming out as a lesbian to university students and its effects. Wright weaved together the personal, the political, and the pedagogical with the goal of "normalizing" those who do not adhere to a heteronormative lifestyle.

Accounts like Wright's (1993) of teachers coming out in the classroom have continued to appear in general education literature, but rarely in applied linguistics (Nedela, Murray, & Steelman, 2018). On the one hand, the field has increasingly

[1] We acknowledge that many of us occupy both positions of privilege and marginalization (i.e., intersectional identities). In this article, we will sometimes emphasize our focal teacher's marginalization and at other times her position of privilege while striving to preserve recognition of intersectionality.

[2] See broader discussion in Schippert (2006); Talburt (2000).

considered language teacher identity as pedagogy, following Morgan (2004). Drawing from Simon's (1995) notion of 'image-text', Morgan demonstrated how his identity as a "white, male and 'accentless', in the eyes and ears of many [students]" (p. 179) became a pedagogical resource in challenging his Chinese senior students' assumptions around gender roles in a community, adult English as Second Language (ESL) program in Canada. And at the same time, in applied linguistics, issues of how sexual diversity interface with cultural and linguistic diversity have begun to be brought to light in language education in the last decade (e.g., Merse, 2013; Nelson, 2002; 2006).[3] Nelson's work has been pathbreaking in presenting models for critical second language teaching that show language teachers how to work in a dialogical and participatory manner when engaging with LGBTQIA content. On the other hand, however, the teacher's identity as a resource has not been central to this literature. Our study addresses this gap in the literature in that it examines the agency of a queer language teacher, working for social justice, who used her identity as pedagogy.

### 2.3. Pantić's (2015) Model of teacher agency for social justice

It is not easy to study social justice-oriented perspectives on teaching since, as they represent a perspective that opposes dominant discourses in education, they are not well established in concrete or broad and visible forms. Similarly, despite its importance, substantial empirically-grounded theoretical work on teacher agency for social justice is rare. One exception is the recent work of Nataša Pantić (2015; 2017), contextualized in a primary school of a small town near Edinburgh, Scotland, in which she used a theoretical model of teacher agency for social justice (Pantić, 2015). Pantić's understanding of social justice is consistent with classical Freirean critical pedagogy, though it is stated in prosaic terms, as "addressing exclusion and underachievement by extending what is ordinarily available to create learning opportunities for all children" (2015, p. 760). To this end, and for teachers with such aims, "agency for social justice might involve efforts to transform" and act within "school cultures and broader education system set-up" (Pantić, 2015, p. 767). Jackson's contexts and social justice purposes were very different from those of Pantić's. However, as it will become clear, Jackson's social justice purposes were directed in particular to classroom culture and broader education system. Pantić's model of teacher agency for social justice explicitly claims the same socio-cultural inheritances we have alluded to earlier, it "adopts a socio-cultural perspective of agency in which agents are embedded in their contextual conditions, yet capable of transforming these conditions" (Pantić, 2017, p. 220).

Pantić's model of teacher agency theorized teacher agency for social justice in terms of four aspects. (1) Teachers' "sense of purpose," or how teachers see themselves and how they perceive and understand "their professional and moral roles" (2015, p. 766). (2) Teachers' "competence"—initially theorized by Pantić as the "understanding of broader social forces" (2015, p. 767). (In a later work Pantić (2017, p. 220) theorized "competence" as the practice or "the enactment of [teachers'] beliefs in context-embedded practice." However, we maintain its earlier notion not to confuse it with the third aspect of the model, "autonomy.") (3) "Autonomy" for Pantić relates to "how teachers practice their agency" (2015, p. 768). (4) Teachers' "reflexivity" which in Pantić's terms is the practice of "identify[ing] ways of transforming the conditions that obstruct their purposes" (2015, p. 765).

Having arrived (with Pantić) at a substantial and plausible mid-range theory of teacher agency for social justice, of course based on a particular set of circumstances, it is important for researchers to seek comparable studies across different contexts to see if this analytical model can be extended, and thus support its potential transferability and overall utility (in guiding, say, teacher development). Or, for that matter, if it does not apply, we should extend it, develop it, or otherwise point out its limitations (We address this in section 5.).

In the study to be reported here, the central research questions were based on three aspects from Pantić's (2015) theory, "sense of purpose," "competence," and "autonomy." Extending this work to an additional case and context, we asked the following research questions: (1) What is Jackson's "sense of purpose" (as defined by Pantić) when exercising agency for social justice in the classroom? (2) What are the conditions, as understood by Jackson (Pantić's "competence"), supportive of her exercising agency for social justice in the classroom? (3) How does Jackson exercise agency (Pantić's "autonomy") for social change in the classroom? As already suggested, these are particularly important questions regarding the exercise of agency by teachers with marginalized identities and social justice-oriented approaches to teaching.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Context

This data is part of a larger study (still ongoing) about the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 1959) among English language teachers. A series of interviews and informal conversations with 28 English language teachers followed, one of whom was Jackson. At the time of the interviews, Jackson taught at a community college in a predominantly liberal region in the Western United States. Its English for Academic Purpose (EAP) curriculum for international students was based on Civil Rights.

[3] For earlier writings, see Harris (1990), Hirst (1981), Kasten (1992), Nelson (1993) Shore (1992), Snelbecker (1994).

### 3.2. Focal participant

Jackson (pseudonym) was born in the United States and, in her words, is "a relatively privileged white cis middle-class queer woman." Jackson grew up and went to college in the Midwest where she graduated with a Bachelor's degree in literature. As she reflected on what led her to choose the language teaching profession, she shared that teaching had not been in her original plans when she started college. However, as she got more experience tutoring writing in college, she was surprised by how much she liked it. As Jackson recognized she liked helping people learn to write, she decided to try teaching, even though she did not like the public speaking aspect of it. After graduating from college, and motivated by the aftermath of the U.S. 2008 financial crisis, Jackson moved to South Korea where she taught English as a Foreign Language (EFL). After a few years, she returned to the US, worked as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher for a period, and then enrolled in a Master's program in Applied Linguistics. Specific dates that might compromise Jackson's anonymity have been omitted or altered.

### 3.3. Data collection

Jackson was intentionally selected to be part of the larger study because I was familiar with her social justice-oriented pedagogy and because of our rapport. Our frequent dinners were a space for sharing our personal and professional desires, frustrations, concerns, and attempts at being agents of change for social transformation (Fullan, 1993). Our meetings were occasions that provided Jackson (and me) with opportunities to engage in a sustained process of reflection and reflexivity. In technical terms, Jackson was selected as part of a purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). We met regularly and I used open, active interviews (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004). I asked questions that would encourage Jackson to reflect on her teaching experiences in different contexts and to describe her agentive practices to transform them (Pantić, 2015). For example, I asked questions about how she became an English language teacher, about her decision and experience in coming out in the classroom, and about sharing her moral, political opinions in the classroom.

I audio-recorded four of those interviews[4] which took place during one academic year. This period encompassed from a few months after Jackson had graduated from a Master's program and had begun working as an ESL teacher in a community college to just before she left this position.

### 3.4. Data analysis

I broadly transcribed the interviews for content. As laid out in section 2.3., Pantić's (2015) model of teacher agency for social justice was used as an analytical framework. First, I coded the data inductively; I annotated the data by highlighting phrases and sentences that struck me as salient while simultaneously reading the transcribed interviews and listening to their audio recordings. Second, I used a deductive approach to identify and organize the data into Pantić's (2015) four aspects of agency: "sense of purpose," "competence," "autonomy," and "reflexivity." Several excerpts were classified within multiple aspects of agency.

## 4. Findings

The findings are presented by research question, under which we briefly allude to the pertinent aspects of teacher agency for social justice as conceptualized by Pantić. In most cases, all four aspects of Pantić's model (i.e., "sense of purpose," "competence," "autonomy," and "reflexivity") appear in each section as part of the answers to the research questions, and are mutually interacting. We first investigate Jackson's "sense of purpose" (as defined by Pantić) when exercising agency for social justice in the classroom; second, the conditions, as understood by Jackson (Pantić's "competence"), supportive of her exercising agency for social justice in the classroom; and, third, how Jackson exercises agency (Pantić's "autonomy") for social change in the classroom.

### 4.1. What is Jackson's "sense of purpose" (as defined by Pantić) when exercising agency for social justice in the classroom?

Consistent with the literature (e.g., Borg, 2003; Johnson, 1990; Pajares, 1992), interview data suggest that Jackson's "sense of purpose" in her professional role shifted during her career. As Jackson examined her professional and personal values (manifesting Pantić's "competence" or the understanding of broader social forces) at different times during her teaching career, she expressed becoming more aware of contradictions (i.e., Pantić's "competence") between her "sense of purpose" and the purpose of the institutions where she taught. This noticing and understanding of broader social forces (i.e., Pantić's "competence") seemingly transformed and guided her agency in teaching for social justice. There are numerous examples of this throughout the data but, for reasons of space, we refer to two examples: one from her early teaching career in South Korea and another from teaching at a community college.

[4] We met more often than that. In the occasions, I did not audio record the interview, I audio recorded my impressions immediately after.

*4.1.1. Tending to students' pastoral needs*

Jackson recounted that her growing development as a social justice-oriented teacher started with the recognition of the contradiction between what the South Korean government wanted her purpose to be and what she felt her students needed. This recognition, or increasing awareness can be seen as an aspect of Pantić's "competence." It seems to have arisen from her understanding of broader social forces as she reflected on her circumstances as well as she considered what she was doing as a language teacher in South Korea (Pantić's "sense of purpose"). In South Korea, English proficiency is perceived to lead to better job prospects and class mobility and it often serves as gatekeeper to higher education and job promotion. As a result, many South Korean families spend a significant amount of money on after-school English education and the educational achievement gap between the children who can afford private lessons and those who cannot continues to increase (Jang, 2018).

***Excerpt 1: "I started to question really early"***

*In [South] Korea, my students were so low level and unmotivated to learn English so I started to question really early, 'why am I here? What am I teaching these kids? Does this class that I'm doing have a real purpose in their lives? Do they have any reason to want be here and learn this?' And sometimes the answer was no, there were students who weren't getting enough sleep, who weren't eating—it was a very poor school, so I would bring in food to my after-school class. Students who needed to sleep during my class, I'd honestly let them stay in the back. I'd rub their (back) and go, 'do you wanna stay up for class? Oh, no? Okay, you do your thing, I get it.' Because I was like, 'they're 16 to 18, what do these kids actually need?' Because sometimes learning silly English vocabulary isn't it, it's not it, it's not what they need.*

Jackson's self-questioning is a manifestation of Pantić's theoretical term "reflexivity" or the practice of "identify[ing] ways of transforming the conditions that obstruct their purposes" (2015, p. 765). This led Jackson to exercising agency in teaching practices that diverged from the impetus provided by English textbooks and curricula. She was no longer prioritizing the government's educational directives (thus manifesting Pantić's "autonomy"); instead, her purpose shifted to tend to her students' immediate, humanistic, pastoral and, in her opinion (an assessment arrived at through "reflexivity"), more important needs (i.e., food and sleep). Her enactment of Pantić's "competence" and "reflexivity" is consistent with a long-standing position in social justice theory, in that "individuals analyzing their own reality become aware of their prior, distorted perceptions and thereby come to have a new perception of that reality" (Freire, 2000, p. 115).

Jackson's new perception of reality was also affected by the homophobia and sexism that she experienced inside and outside the classroom. Having reached a point where she felt she could no longer take the sexism and homophobia, and even though she liked teaching and wanted to continue teaching, she manifested agency in choosing not to renew her contract and return to the U.S. According to Jackson, the U.S. was a place where she felt more comfortable critiquing sexism and homophobia. It was also a place where she felt she could pursue a Master's degree in a critical program and "know more about teaching theory" (Jackson's words) before returning to South Korea to teach again. Here, agency may be seen in terms of Pantić's aspect of agency, "sense of purpose", having been enhanced through having reflected on her conditions and ways to transform them (manifesting Pantić's "reflexivity") and having had some success exploring her capacity to be agentive though exercising "autonomy."

*4.1.2. Helping students understand discrimination*

Jackson's "sense of purpose" shifted after she left South Korea, graduated from the Master's program, and began teaching in the U.S. In this next chapter of Jackson's professional trajectory, contradictions also emerged as important. While in South Korea, Jackson grappled with government expectations and the reality of her students' lives; in the U.S., she struggled with contradictions between the program's selected materials and contemporary discrimination (Pantić's "competence"). As previously mentioned, Jackson taught EAP at a community college whose curriculum encompassed the Civil Rights. Although the institution was in a predominantly liberal region in the Western U.S., most international students came from East Asian countries, in particular South Korea and Japan, where cultural values have been traditionally heterosexist and patriarchal (Lim, 2008).

While the curriculum was about Civil Rights, the program's selected textbook explored these movements from a historical perspective as if those social movements had happened and had stayed in the past. Not only did the textbook advance this perspective, but the students also came into the classroom with the preconceived idea that issues of discrimination had ended in the U.S.

Because of her experiences as a queer teacher and active participation in LBGTQIA movements, Jackson was acutely aware of this contradiction (Pantić's "competence") in that discrimination continues to exist and social movements continue to occur in the U.S. to promote equal rights (e.g., same-sex marriage); it was important to her (Pantić's "sense of purpose") to exercise agency in helping students become aware too.

*4.2. What are the conditions, as understood by Jackson (Pantić's "competence"), supportive of her exercising agency for social justice in the classroom?*

In general, teachers' working conditions are often poor and restrict their sense of agency; those who manifest a critical pedagogy face even more challenges. However, Jackson's case is significantly interestingly different. She reported finding

favorable conditions (Pantić's "competence") for exercising agency (Pantić's "autonomy") and developing as agent of change for social transformation (Pantić's "reflexivity") both at the institutional as well as at the classroom levels.

*4.2.1. Institutional level*

At the institutional level, favorable conditions included a supportive department, an institution located in a predominantly liberal region, and a conducive curriculum.

***Excerpt 2: "I couldn't imagine teaching in an environment that was more conducive"***

*Especially as a teacher with a supportive department behind me, I was in a position of power to influence my students' ways of thinking about LGBTQ people, so I felt some social responsibility to do so. I couldn't imagine teaching in an environment that was more conducive to my coming out. By that I mean, I was teaching LGBTQ rights as the official curriculum, supported by both of my bosses … I knew that there was no chance of negative backlash; at least as far as my job security was concerned.*

The rapport between Jackson and her supervisors and the certainty that her job security was not under threat were some of the favorable conditions that enabled Jackson to exercise agency (Pantić's "autonomy") and use her identity as pedagogy (Pantić's "reflexivity"). These elements are consistent with the ecological conceptualizations of agency by van Lier (2008) and Priestley et al. (2016) which consider the social relations within one's contextual circumstances. In Jackson's case, the cultural (i.e., ideas, beliefs, values, and discourses), social (i.e., relationships, roles, power, and trust), and material (i.e., resources, textbooks, and curriculum) aspects were supportive of her disposition (Pantić's "sense of purpose") to influence her students' ways of thinking about LGBTQIA people.

These conditions were not the result of chance; rather, they were the result of successive and cumulative generations of organizing. The conception of a community college itself (as favoring less privileged students), previous curriculum specialists with an emancipatory view, previous teachers with a critical orientation, a protective union, and supportive administrators, all in direct and indirect ways had been involved. (This suggests the importance of educators with critical viewpoints taking up the responsibility of becoming administrators, another place to exercise agency, rarely discussed in our literature, but see Crookes, 2013.)

*4.2.2. Classroom level*

At the classroom level, Jackson exercised agency (Pantić's "autonomy") to build potentially supportive, favorable conditions which culminated in her coming out. Jackson was aware that how she handled difference in the course would greatly affect the conditions (Pantić's "reflexivity") that afforded her students to deepen critical thinking.

From the first module to the very last one, difference was an ever-present topic as students learned about discrimination that led to different social movements in the history of the U.S. Some of the ways Jackson exercised agency to build favorable conditions (Pantić's "autonomy") were encouraging students to question preconceived ideas about social constructs (e.g., race, gender), to voice their opinions even when different from hers, and to develop their critical thinking. For example, in the African American Civil Rights module, students learned how to discuss controversial topics such as discrimination and to question taken-for-granted ideologies about race; in the Women Rights module, students researched (and shared their findings with each other) gender discrimination not only in the U.S. but in their home countries as well.

Jackson learned from experience that to build favorable conditions in the classroom, student-teacher rapport was essential and she built a good relationship with her students throughout the semester.

***Excerpt 4: "From experience"***

*From experience as both a student and a teacher, I know that the classes where the teacher opens up often have better rapport and thus better attendance, class atmosphere, and overall learning conditions. I enjoy class more when I share a bit of my personal life with my students, even though that's hard for me as an introvert … I didn't have many students come out to me, but even if I made one student feel more welcome or comfortable in the classroom by coming out, then it's well worth it.*

Like the participants in Snelbecker's (1994) study, Jackson understood the broader social forces present in her classroom (Pantić's "competence") and saw her coming out (Pantić's "autonomy") as an opportunity to transform (Pantić's "reflexivity") and strengthen the relationship with students and to provide support, validation, and affirmation to potential closeted queer students. Unlike Snelbecker's participants, Jackson expressed a "sense of purpose" for self-disclosure of personal benefit. Being able to share her personal life with the students allowed her to enjoy class more. In other words, being able to be one's authentic self in the classroom and to integrate one's professional life with their personal life may lead to greater feelings of satisfaction and fulfillment.

### 4.3. How does Jackson exercise agency (Pantić's "autonomy") for social change in the classroom?

We now turn our discussion to three specific examples of how and in which ways Jackson exercised agency[5] (Pantić's "autonomy"). They include adapting the course and material selection, encouraging epistemological shifts and decentering the teacher, and using her identity as pedagogy.

#### 4.3.1. "Tweaking the course"

Jackson's program had established the Civil Rights curriculum almost 20 years earlier as a base for the EAP program. Throughout these years, modules had been revised and new ones had been added. With new modules came the need for new materials as well as the freedom for faculty to select and develop their own for their courses. One of the new modules was on Disability Rights and Jackson, with only a couple of months on the job, was excited with the challenge of teaching a topic she had not taught before and with the perspective of adapting the course content to support students' critical thinking (or of identifying ways to transform her classroom conditions; i.e., Pantić's "reflexivity"). Jackson reported exercising agency by adapting the content cyclically (Pantić's "autonomy") as she became more familiar with the content and more experienced with the curriculum throughout her years teaching in this program.

Jackson shared one example of this cyclical process; it had happened just before the start of her second teaching semester. As she and I talked about the program's movie selection for the module on African American Civil Rights, *Something the Lord Made* (2004), Jackson remarked,

> ***Excerpt 3: "My main complaint is …"***
>
> *My main complaint is that Alan Rickman, the white doctor, gets way more lines, screen time than Mos Def, his black lab assistant. My argument is that a movie for the African American Civil Rights Movement should place African American people front and center. I'm going to develop materials for Selma [the 2014 movie] instead! Really excited for this!*

Once again, her awareness of contradictions based on her understanding of broader social forces (Pantić's "competence")—in this case between the curriculum goal to educate international students about discrimination and the program's material selection—led her to agentive practices. Jackson changed the program's original movie choice to another (Pantić's "autonomy") which she believed to provide a fairer representativeness of African Americans (Pantić's "sense of purpose").

#### 4.3.2. Decentering the teacher as the sole owner of knowledge and ultimate authority

Another example comes from Jackson's efforts to implement teaching practices (Pantić's "autonomy") that decentered the teacher as the sole owner of knowledge and ultimate authority and instead allowed students to think critically about the content and material (Pantić's "sense of purpose"). Jackson was aware of (Pantić's "competence") teachers within her program who thought that their way of teaching was the only way and she expressed being uncomfortable with such teaching approach. Jackson discouraged the notion (Pantić's "reflexivity") of there being only one right way of teaching and only one right answer by encouraging her students to voice their opinions even when different from hers (Pantić's "autonomy").

After watching the movie *Selma* (2014), students were assigned to write a character analysis; one of the students had the character of Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ), U.S. President from 1963 to 1969. While this student identified LBJ as a conscientious and open-minded person, Jackson disagreed with his assessment.

> ***Excerpt 4: "You have my attention"***
>
> *That student probably has obviously learned I disagree with him … we have a different opinion. And he was writing his hook today and he wrote an excellent hook! … He wrote something like, 'although many people who watched the movie Selma think that LBJ is not conscientious or open, I disagree' … I looked at him and I was like, 'you have my attention and that is the goal of the hook' and we kind of laughed together.*

Jackson understood that the goal of this task was to teach the student how to write an academic essay, specifically the thesis statement, or "hook," and she praised him for his work. In addition, Jackson understood that part of her role as a teacher for social justice (Pantić's "sense of purposed") went beyond teaching the structures of an academic essay. Her role as a teacher for social justice was also to identify ways of transforming her classroom conditions (Pantić's "reflexivity") into favorable conditions for her exercising of agency. Jackson did that by encouraging and supporting her student's development of critical thinking—even if it meant accepting his differing opinion. Being a teacher for social justice did not mean that she should impose her values and beliefs on her student (Pantić's "autonomy"). On the contrary, being a teacher for social justice meant (Pantić's "sense of purpose") engaging the student (Pantić's "autonomy") in thinking for himself.

Also in contrast to the "banking" teacher, Jackson trusted her students as capable of making their own decisions regarding their language learning and language use. Jackson recognized the power of language and the language of power (Pantić's "competence") and exercised agency by exposing her students (Pantić's "autonomy") to different ways of using and

[5] We recognize that these practices are not unique to those teaching for social justice, but how they materialize is; they are a manifestation of Jackson's agency.

perceiving language. She was aware (Pantić's "competence") that, as English language learners in the U.S., international students might miss subtle, but different, meanings and intentions while using the language in particular when using expressions related to discrimination. She argued that when individuals use the expression "receive discrimination" rather than "experience discrimination" or "suffer discrimination," the ideology that one can ignore or refuse being discriminated against was perpetuated. She explained that, while one could "receive a gift basket" or "a call from your friend" and such gift could be refused and such call ignored, one cannot decline or refuse discrimination itself. Jackson's focus on identifying ways to transform her students' discourse (Pantić's "reflexivity") by explicitly addressing the effects of language choices and of the embedded ideologies within such choices encouraged her students to be aware of how word-choice can reproduce, reinforce, or challenge certain ideologies.

*4.3.3. Choosing to come out*

The module on LGBTQIA was the last module in the curriculum. Coming out at the end of the semester had the advantage that if there were any students who did not accept it, it was already the end of the semester and unlikely that Jackson would teach them again. Yet, facing the risk of negative reactions, Jackson exercised agency in choosing to come out (Pantić's "autonomy") while teaching this module. Like some of the participants in Snelbecker's (1994) study, she planned the process of her coming out to her students very carefully and integrated it into the curriculum (i.e., pedagogy as identity; we see this as a manifestation of Pantić's "reflexivity"). Snelbecker (1994) argued that it can be beneficial to plan how one is going to come out, even though it is not possible to predict all opportunities. Having a short script in mind can help one to be prepared (as much as one can prepare) for spontaneous situations and avoid regretting saying (or not saying) something. In Jackson's case, she planned a presentation (Pantić's "reflexivity") which allowed her to have a sense of being in control of her experience and of coming out in her own terms (Pantić's "autonomy"). It also allowed her to be emotionally prepared to answer students' ensuing questions.

***Excerpt 5: "I never met a gay person"***

*Jackson: The first time I decided to come out to my students, it was hard for me …*

*Priscila: Did you plan on it?*

*Jackson: oh yeah, I made a PowerPoint [presentation] ((laughs)) [It was in my] first semester because I thought, 'I'm teaching LBGT Rights and it's never been more relevant.'*

*Priscila: But why did you decide to [come out to your students]?*

*Jackson: Because most of my students kept saying, 'I never met a gay person.' And I was like, 'bullshit'. Every time they said it, it would piss me off. I'm like, 'you're talking to a gay person right now'.*

For Jackson, the decision to come out in the classroom was closely tied to her situation as "a relatively privileged white cis middle-class queer woman," in a context that was supportive of many, if not all aspects of this identity. Several times during our conversations, Jackson expressed being aware of her intersectionality and how, in different contexts, she occupied both positions of privilege and of marginalization. Such awareness and understanding (reflecting Pantić's "competence") appeared to inform Jackson's thinking (Pantić's "reflexivity") and pedagogy (Pantić's "autonomy"). Like Morgan (2004), Jackson used her identity to educate students.

Coming out was a significant exercise of agency. Although it reflected her favorable circumstances, the heteronormative, homophobic, and gendered discourses present even in liberal parts of the U.S. and academia strongly inhibit the assertion of agency of a teacher identifying as LGBTQIA (see Bettinger, Timmins, & Tisdell, 2006; Branfman, 2017; Khayatt, 1992). In most schools, there is nothing in the institution that is not visibly heteronormative. As a physical space, Jackson's community college was not LGBTQIA friendly. It was an implicitly heteronormative institution because it did not, on its face, challenge the conventional norms of society or heterosexual privilege (Allen, 1995). (At the time of this writing the institution had one gender-neutral restroom and had no LGBTQIA student club, let alone LGBTQIA teacher caucus.)

While it might be true that Jackson's colleagues in this program would not change their behavior towards her if she were out to them, most of the time LGBTQIA teachers still, to some extent, walk on eggshells because the people with whom they spend most of the time in the day are the students whose opinions about LGBTQIA issues are often unknown *a priori* to teachers. In Jackson's case, even if the institution under its "neutral" surface might have seemed to be liberal, her classroom unfortunately was not with most students being from East Asian countries, in particular South Korea and Japan, where cultural values have been traditionally heterosexist and patriarchal (Lim, 2008). This was another example of contradictions in the educational structure in which her work was located. Jackson shared with me her concerns about receiving negative end-of-semester student evaluations and about whether the students would change their opinions of her as a teacher. (Student evaluation is one of the most common tools in the assessment of instructor teaching quality and often of promotion and tenure as well.) Fortunately, she reported not having received negative student evaluations yet. In a sense, a LGBTQIA teacher is not sure what they are facing. Jackson could have been facing people who could very well have quite homophobic attitudes and these were the people with whom she was supposed to maintain a good rapport. The extent of this challenge is not to be underestimated.

## 5. Discussion

Pantić's theory could indeed be used effectively to structure findings and the answers to the research questions. (1) Jackson's "sense of purpose" (as defined by Pantić) when exercising agency for social justice in the classroom changed based on her context. Initially, it was tending to students' pastoral needs and later educating students about discrimination. (2) Jackson's understanding of her supportive conditions (Pantić's "competence") for exercising agency for social justice in the classroom were central to her acting and development as agent of change for social transformation. They were a supportive department, the institution located in a liberal region, a conducive curriculum, student rapport, and timing of the LGBTQIA module. (3) Jackson exercised agency (Pantić's "autonomy") for social change in the classroom by changing the materials, decentering her as the sole holder of knowledge, and coming out. Jackson exercised agency (Pantić's "autonomy") particularly through the means of identity as pedagogy, a form of "autonomy" supported by "competence."

Notwithstanding, we point out two minor limitations with regards to Pantić's (2015) model of teacher agency for social justice. First, Pantić did not explain clearly how the four aspects ("sense of purpose," "competence," "autonomy," and "reflexivity") are related. In the case of Jackson, these four aspects are highly interrelated. It was because of Jackson's awareness of contradictions (Pantić's "competence") between her "sense of purpose" and certain educational structures that she contemplated opportunities to change these contradictions (Pantić's "reflexivity") which led her to make decisions and take actions (Pantić's "autonomy") to change materials and teaching practices. In other words, these contradictions between her "sense of purpose" and certain educational structures depended upon "reflexivity" and they would not have been noticed if there had not been "competence," and these contradictions could not have had the effect that they needed to if there had not been "autonomy." This suggests a degree of bidirectional causality (see Fig. 1).

Second, the clarity of the model is not aided by the fact that *teacher beliefs for social justice* was combined in with Pantić's "sense of purpose" given that there is a wealth of literature distinguishing among teacher beliefs and other comparable constructs (Pajares, 1992; e.g.,; Biesta et al., 2015; Borg, 2003; Farrell & Ives, 2015). "Sense of purpose," while important, would be misdirected if there were no appropriate, social justice-oriented teacher beliefs. We argue that Pantić's (2015) model is not exclusive to teacher agency *for* social justice; "sense of purpose," "competence," "autonomy," and "reflexivity" are aspects present in teacher agency in general. What makes the model specific to agency for social justice is the teacher's *belief* in teaching for social justice which in turn guides her agency—from her "sense of purpose" and understanding of broader social forces (Pantić's "competence"), to her teaching practices (Pantić's "autonomy") and recognition of opportunities to affect change (Pantić's "reflexivity") (see Fig. 1). It is worth noting that Jackson exercised agency (Pantić's "autonomy") by making seemingly simple, yet potentially significant, changes when allowing her identity to emerge as pedagogy. Although many of the practices Jackson implemented are not unique to language teachers for social justice, their purpose is.

Next, at a more detailed level, we observe that a central driving force of Jackson's agency was her identification of contradictions (Pantić's "competence") during periods of "reflexivity" (i.e., when identifying ways of transforming these contradictions). We note that the contexts in which Jackson was situated were also important—that is, her agency and its development were at least partly emergent from ecological context. Early in her teaching career in South Korea, she observed a contradiction (Pantić's "competence") between, on the one hand, the South Korean government directive and the ideology of social and economic advancement through English language learning that she was confronted with and pastoral caring, on the other. Later, when teaching in the EAP program, Jackson recognized a mismatch (Pantić's "competence") between various aspects of the program's goals and its choice of materials. First, from Jackson's perspective, the program's original choice of film was not sufficiently representative; second, the textbook misrepresented discrimination as being over. In addition, she

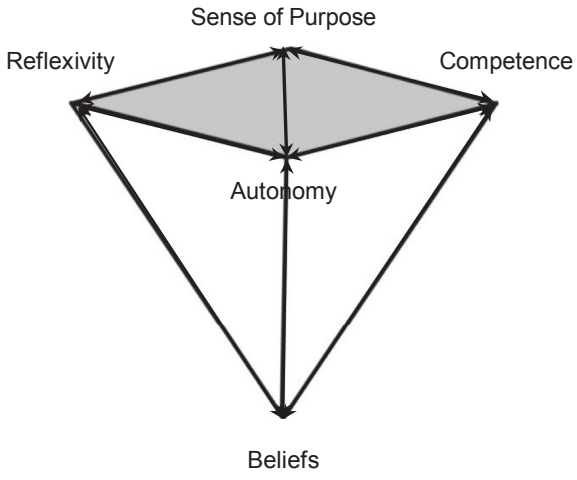


**Fig. 1.** Interaction among Pantić's four aspects of teacher agency for social justice and beliefs.

was aware that her students might have had homophobic views regardless of the liberal curriculum. A perhaps decisive final contradiction was her students' lack of familiarity with "gay people" and her own lack of self-disclosure. While we did not predict it, nor were we initially in search of it in the data, the concept of contradictions driving (historical) trajectory is central both to classical critical theory and Freirean ideas in social justice pedagogy. At a personal level, that is what appears to be in action here.

Being exposed to contradicting realities may not be enough for an individual to perceive them (Pantić's "competence"). Having the time, space, and motivation (Pantić's "sense of purpose") to reflect on these realities, and on how social structures benefit some and hinder others, was a fundamental component in Jackson's becoming an agent of change for social transformation. It was by reflecting on the social structures around her (Pantić's "competence") that Jackson could envision actions (Pantić's "reflexivity") to transform her pedagogy. It was also through "reflexivity" that Jackson could understand her "sense of purpose" (and how it contradicted with certain realities), "competence," and "autonomy." In other words, "reflexivity" informed her agency. Perhaps, the possibility to become agents of change in classrooms and communities starts when teachers develop an awareness of the contradictions between their "sense of purpose" and the educational and social structures in which their work is located.

The importance of an ecological viewpoint returns in the following point. It would be banal to say that teachers always need good working conditions and rarely get them well-administered. But what we hope to have shown here is support for a careful yet simple analysis of what good working conditions really means in terms of the four aspects. That is, in this case, we believe that Pantić's analysis stands up and can be usefully focused on, both by teachers in search of opportunities of agency for social justice and administrators needing to support it. In addition, perhaps elementary, we believe important points are the following. Without good working conditions—the groundwork that had been done over many years in the environment we have reported on—little could have been achieved, even by a teacher as thoughtful and personally-invested as Jackson. And then, without Jackson's awareness of good working conditions (Pantić's "competence"), her own personal groundwork in identifying opportunities to affect change (Pantić's "reflexivity") and in enacting these changes (Pantić's "autonomy"), and her exceptional degree of commitment (Pantić's "sense of purpose"), perhaps there would not have been the positive actions that we have sketched here (mostly through her words).

## 6. Conclusion

Teacher agency for social justice, in its various aspects, is complex and we will benefit from carefully-grounded theoretical understandings of it, which should be developed contextually and extended (or refuted) as necessary, so that teachers who have a sense of purpose in this area and have the conditions in which to access theoretical discussions can turn them to purpose. That has been the intention of this study. From an intersectional viewpoint, we can note that many teachers, even while working for social justice, are themselves marginalized. Jackson's favorable circumstances, her ecological location, may give some hope, though we have emphasized that agency needs context, which needs a willingness to continually do the groundwork over years and decades so that others (teachers and students) can benefit.

We agree with Crookes (2013) in that small steps are needed when exercising agency and beginning to implement social justice-oriented teaching practices. It is better to embrace one aspect (i.e., materials or strategies) at a time, attempt to implement it, reflect on its challenges, modify it, and try it again that one may achieve (perhaps slow but sustained) positive change. "Making a difference takes time" (Shin & Crookes, 2005, p. 133) and those of us teaching languages for social justice have to be in it for the long run. A sense of sometimes being unable to enact agency has to be viewed, or indeed countered, with a longer perspective. We may think we are not doing a lot of forward movement but we are probably making more than we think. If we engage in what may seem to be only a little action now, we have no idea how it may pay off later.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2018.06.005.

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