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Discourses of White Nationalism and Xenophobia in the United States and Their Effect on TESOL Professionals in Mexico

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White nationalism has emerged in the mainstream of U.S. political discourse, and restricting all forms of immigration has become a central focus of isolationist, "America First" policies. In August 2017, TESOL International released its *Position Statement on Immigration Policy and Reform in the United States*. The authors respond to the position statement and address Mexican English teachers' views towards the immigration debate in the United States, how this debate reflects what Mexicans see as discourses of White nationalism and xenophobia, and the impact they have on the everyday work that teachers do in English classrooms in Mexico. They begin by giving a brief historical background on the closely intertwined relationship between the two countries, and then discuss the effects of the current climate on language educators' work. They explain that manifestations of anti-Mexican xenophobia in the United States increase the difficulty of Mexican English language educators as students of all ages are well aware of the rhetoric coming from the United States, and are increasingly translating these negative words and images into a negative sense of what it means to learn English. Three strategies are described that English teachers in Mexico often

use within their classrooms to engage students in exploring the connection between English and the United States, harnessing the potential of the language classroom as a forum for naming, understanding, and contesting discourses that promote intolerance and racism.

■ In August 2017, TESOL International released its *Position Statement on Immigration Policy and Reform in the United States.* It reaffirmed TESOL's inclusive values, and it was also important in terms of its timing, as it was released some months after the U.S. Executive Order in January 2017 banning refugees and persons from seven Muslim-majority countries. We are therefore pleased to have the opportunity in this forum to contribute to the dialogue within the TESOL community about the current discourses on immigration in the United States from the perspective of English teachers in Mexico. Our response to the position statement will address Mexican English teachers' views towards the immigration debate in the United States, how this debate reflects what Mexicans see as discourses of White nationalism and xenophobia, and the impact they have on the everyday work that teachers do in English classrooms in Mexico. We begin by giving a brief historical background on the closely intertwined relationship between the two countries, and then discuss the effects of the current climate on language educators' work.

DEBATING "THE WALL"

Mexicans tend to be more aware of what is happening in the United States than U.S. citizens are of what is happening to the south. Mexicans have a strong sense of the shared history of the two countries, and the profound social, cultural, and economic ties that we share, as well as the complex problems. Mexican students are very aware that the present-day U.S. Southwest used to be part of Mexico, and that the country lost roughly half its territory through conquest and annexation during the 19th century. During the middle part of the 20th century, about five million Mexicans migrated north during the *bracero* program (1942–1964) to provide manual labor in agriculture. Currently, 36.3 million people living in the United States identify as being of Mexican descent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). These include families who are completely established in the United States and have few direct ties to Mexico, as well as recently arrived and

transnational families. In Mexico, most of the population of 120 million has close family members living in the United States.

Because of these connections, Mexicans in general, and English teachers most especially, are highly aware of the rhetoric circulating in politics in the United States. This was certainly true during the 2016 presidential campaign, when anti-immigrant policies figured prominently. An early key plank of Donald Trump's candidacy during the primaries was the promise to build a "big beautiful wall" along the U.S.-Mexican border. Mexican media outlets showed footage of the campaign rallies with large crowds chanting "Build that wall! Build that wall!" Most infamously, when Trump announced his candidacy in June 2015, he addressed Mexican immigration specifically, asserting: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best … They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists…" (Lee, 2015). Trump's comments on Mexicans that seemed initially as the position of an alt-right fringe candidate speaking to a narrow, xenophobic base of White nationalists soon entered the mainstream of political discourse. *The Wall* has become a central part of the immigration debate, along with the legal status of the young Mexicans brought as children and raised in the United States, known as Dreamers. While the construction of the physical barrier is still being negotiated in Washington, in another very real sense the emergence into the mainstream of the discourse of White nationalist xenophobia has already succeeding in erecting a cultural and psychological wall between the two countries. And for Mexican English teachers, this invisible wall is something that their students know about and that they have to figure out how to engage with in their classrooms.

In preparing this article, we drew on our own experiences and perspectives as ESOL educators, as well as those of our present and former colleagues. We have each taught English in Mexico for many years. We began with several generative dialogues amongst ourselves, and conducted three informal focus group interviews with colleagues who are current English teachers working with young adults in several institutions in south-central Mexico during spring 2018. We exchanged analytic memos on the conversations, and followed Sawyer and Norris's (2015) notions of autoethnography, in which the examination of our dialogues aimed to analyze our teaching journeys in terms of our own attitudes, values, and perspectives. We organized the comments by identifying three different strategies that Mexican teachers have used to try to get students to think about the relationship between studying English and the discourses of xenophobia from the United States. In what follows, direct quotes from our authors' discussions are attributed by name; other excerpts are taken from the focus groups with colleagues.

HOW TEACHERS ENCOUNTER STUDENTS' CHANGING VIEWS OF

English is important in Mexico. Proficiency in English is seen as an important source of linguistic capital (Clemente, 2007). There are approximately half a million English teachers in Mexico. In 2009, the government launched an ambitious new program to introduce English in public primary schools aiming to expand English instruction to more than 14.7 million children in Grades K-6 (Sayer, 2015). Likewise, higher education programs in all areas are requiring English, and higher levels of English. Bilingual programs, English medium-of-instruction schools, and private language schools are proliferating (Sayer & López Gopar, 2015).

At the same time, there are strong *ideologies of language* (Schieffelin, Woolard, & Kroskrity, 1998) in Mexico through which English is closely bound up in the country's popular imagination with the United States and U.S. colonialism. Because of the historical connections explained above, for most Mexicans English strongly indexes the United States and its colonial expansion in the continent (López Gopar, 2016). English teachers in Mexico, as evidenced by their career choice, usually have very positive views of English. These positive linguistic views, however, are not equally held by every teacher, and are certainly not set in stone. For example, we recall that during the build-up to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, many of our colleagues, and particularly our students, disapproved of war; many saw the United States as an imperialist bully. Views toward the United States seemed to have improved since then, but the current anti-immigrant discourse, since it is in large part directed at Mexicans, feels more personal.

As the discourse of xenophobia in the United States became more visible, many EAL (English as an additional language) teachers' perspectives have shifted. One colleague asked: "It's my job to teach about respecting other cultures and languages, but what if they [the United States] don't respect us?" Others all reported similar experiences. The notion of *respeto* is important in Mexico, and another observed that the emergence of openly negative views of Mexicans in the United States constituted a lack of respect that, in turn, makes students less inclined to want to study the language that they associate with the United States. Brenda observed:

> I think that it [students' views of English] would be affected negatively
> by increasing the negative attitude some students have towards learning
> or trying to understand the U.S. language and culture. White

nationalists basically fuel up this attitude. In the U.S. context, I think it affects all English learners, since I've seen videos where students have been asked in class by their teacher to stop speaking "their language" and to "speak American."

A university-level teacher stated that her students' views are influenced markedly by the ways that examples of U.S. xenophobia are over-emphasized in the Mexican media:

> I know that it's not most American [sic] people who think that way [referring to anti-Mexican/immigrant views], but when you see the government people and even the president saying that, it's hard to tell your students "no, most Americans aren't like that, just some," because probably they won't believe you. … What they see on TV and all the social media posts, they see lots of negative behavior towards immigrants.

The role of the media, and social media in particular, is important. Some of the rhetoric coming from the United States became comedic fodder; Mexicans have a wonderful, and often self-deprecating, sense of humor. The words spawned many jokes and memes (*Q: What do Mexicans think about Trump's Wall? A: They'll get over it.)* and Facebook videos of people responding to the June 2016 speech went viral. The prominent role of social media also kept the words and images circulating and recirculating, and then cementing them in the popular consciousness. Brenda related that

> My students share the videos showing people [Mexicans in the United States] getting berated for using Spanish, like in the stores. So that's what sticks with them, that bad treatment. I haven't seen videos of people being nice to migrants. Of course, it [nice treatment] happens too, but they don't see that, because the Mexican media amplifies just the bad things.

In her view, Mexican television coverage focuses only on negative, xenophobic views coming from the United States, and does not present a balanced view which shows the positive aspects of the Mexican immigrant experience. In turn, social media posts reinforce this and create a sort of echo chamber through re-posts of videos showing Mexican immigrants suffering various language- and raced-based acts of discrimination. Brenda opined that, although Mexican immigrants have historically suffered discrimination in the United States, White nationalists are now emboldened: "they feel more comfortable in expressing their ideas openly [online or to someone's face] or acting the way they do."

STRATEGIES THAT ENGLISH TEACHERS IN MEXICO ADOPT

English teachers in Mexico must be cultural mediators. The challenge then is to adopt strategies that will help our students understand the xenophobia coming from the United States. We cannot ignore this as part of our job, because as spelled out above and for better or worse, the social meanings and value of English in Mexico are wrapped up with our idea of the United States. And we cannot ignore it because, at some level, many of our students feel the U.S. xenophobia is directed at them. It affects them personally, because many have *familia* living up north. It affects them personally because studying English for them is strongly associated with an imagined community (Kanno & Norton, 2003) that they want to be able to participate in that includes being able to travel and interact with U.S. Americans. And yet if the general sense they're getting when they turn on the TV, when they check their Facebook and Instagram, is that people from the United States do not like them, then it is our job to try to balance that. Below, we have organized the comments from conversations amongst ourselves and with colleagues into three different strategies that English teachers in Mexico use to try to get students to think about the relationship between studying English and the discourses of xenophobia from the United States. We should note that these do not necessarily represent strategies that all English teachers in Mexico use, and were coming mainly from teachers working with young adult students; however, we do believe that the strategies are representative of the general concern of many teachers in the country to changes in their students' attitudes in response to their awareness of xenophobia and White nationalist discourses in the United States.

The Balancing-the-Accounts Strategy

We emphasized that the representations of the negative experiences of racial and linguistic discrimination that Mexicans in the United States face need to be balanced with positive images. Students need to understand that, while xenophobia in the United States does exist and is a problem that immigrants must deal with, graphic videos of encounters with racists cannot be generalized to all experiences Mexicans in the United States have. We mentioned how Mexican EAL teachers try to balance the accounts by integrating their own positive intercultural experiences (i.e., when traveling to the United States for tourism purposes). David remarked that a possible way to counter

negative generalization about the United States is to include the perspectives of Mexican returnee students into the class:

> They [returnees] lived there [in the United States], so they know the good and bad of both countries. They know there are good people everywhere, and that racism can also occur in Mexico. They most likely understand that Trump's comments are only supported by some, and they do not represent the ideas of the majority. Although some of them [returnees] don't take [English] classes as they are already bilingual, I have invited some of them to my class, and they have shared their experiences with other students who haven't been to the United States.

After the 2008 economic crisis, around 1.5 million Mexican (American) students have returned to Mexico in voluntary or forced conditions (Ramos Martínez et al., 2017). Many of them have experienced the negative side of U.S. policies, as their families were deported and discriminated against. Yet many of them also experienced the positive values that drive U.S. society, especially as returnees have been positively impacted by U.S. individuals and institutions. Returnee students are less vulnerable to unreflectively accept xenophobic ideas or to visualize the United States as a single indivisible racist community. That is, including returnees' perspectives assists in the analysis of the problem of cultural and racial stereotyping, one that should be critically explored in language classrooms (Risager, 2006; Sayer, 2012).

The Make Lemonade Strategy

We have found that using video clips showing racist anti-Mexican encounters with people in the United States, although highly problematic in themselves, can serve a useful purpose as a teachable moment for students, prompting them to think critically about what is happening and why. Essentially, this is a kind of "use their words against them," or making-lemonade-out-of-lemons strategy. We reasoned that since students are posting, watching, sharing, and even making memes of the videos, why not appropriate them? Brenda explained:

> As a teacher, I try to show my students the positive things we can adopt (or at least understand) from their culture, and show them all the possible situations where they might face or experience culture shock (like it has happened to me before) and how to deal with it without being rude or to sound ignorant. So basically, I use footage or examples of Donald Trump's attitudes to show them what not to do when dealing with international situations in the countries they visit.

This strategy echoes the essence of what scholars have referred to as developing *intercultural competence* through second language (L2) education (Byram, 1997), defined as the cultural understanding of the cultural and social characteristics of the context in which L2 occurs (Baker, 2012). Here, Brenda recognizes that an aspect of acquiring intercultural competence is understanding the racial and linguistic dynamics of dealing with people who may not like or respect you.

The Global English Strategy

The global English strategy involves the dis-association of English with the United States, and presents English as international lingua franca (Seidlhofer, 2004). David summed up this view:

> Okay you [the student] might hate the United States but they use English all over the world, so you can use it for anything.

While validating the students' negative feeling toward the United States, he also wants to push to the students to see that the United States does not "own" English, and to connect learning English to participation in wider global imagined communities regardless of the colonial associations of this language[1] (Phillipson, 2016). This also reflects the instrumental view that many EAL teachers in Mexico take, emphasizing the utility of knowing English but trying to divorce it from its cultural and political connections to the United States.

CONCLUSION

White nationalism has emerged in the mainstream of U.S. political discourse, and restricting all forms of immigration has become a central focus of isolationist, "America First" policies. In Mexico, students of all ages are well aware of the rhetoric coming from the United States and are increasingly translating these negative words and images into a negative sense of what it means to learn English. This increases the challenge Mexican EAL educators face to present English in a positive light and motivate students to want to learn the language.

Teachers themselves can feel ambivalent about English, but most English teachers in Mexico have a strong sense that part of their job is as cultural mediators. However, this does not mean sugar-coating or

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[1] However, we also acknowledge, as one reviewer rightly pointed out, the recent rise of nationalism and xenophobia has not been exclusive to the United States; there has been a concomitant increase in Europe and elsewhere.

presenting idealized versions of English. Rather, it entails developing strategies that validate the feelings and concerns that students have, acknowledging the very real problems with xenophobia and systemic discrimination. It entails harnessing the potential of the language classroom as a forum for naming, understanding, and contesting discourses that promote intolerance and racism (Flores, 2018).

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