

RUNNING HEAD: Understanding Literacy: Lessons and Implications

UNDERSTANDING WHAT LITERACY IS AND WHERE IT COMES FROM:
LESSONS AND IMPLICATIONS FROM A STUDY OF TEACHERS AND TEACHER
EDUCATORS

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Abstract

This keynote address will discuss the findings and implications stemming from a study of what literacy means for a group of 12 teachers and teacher educators. It will also discuss the factors that have caused the ongoing evolution of these ideas about literacy. Relying on the idea of a "permeable literacy continuum," which uses five major literacy paradigms as its unit of analysis, this study shows that ideas about literacy have moved toward more inclusive frameworks, where more diversity of readings and writing genres, a more fluid connection between literacy and technology, and a permanent process of reflection about what literacy means are salient issues in today's conversations about literacy. This plenary will also engage the author and the audience on a reflexivity process about what literacy means in an ELT context and the challenges that rethinking literacy in ELT in this new millennium entails.

Literacy is a term that has become an important feature of educational, research, and pedagogical discussions. Historically, it has been linked to the growth and evolution of our societies, but only since the middle of the 20th century have scholars taken a vested interest in reflecting on the meanings of literacy (Kaestle, 1988). In recent times, discussions and scholarship on literacy has become more relevant. In fact, it is not a coincidence that associations like the National Reading Conference, for instance, have changed their name to Literacy Research Association, one conceptual shift that, depending on who talks about it, can range from serious implications to a mere fashion fad (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006).

That said, one thing is to use the word literacy and another to know what we mean by literacy. The question, “what is literacy” is, as one participant in the study that begot this article, “A tough thing to ask, or a tough thing to answer” (Harley, Interview 1). As Kaestle (1988) argued, the discussions about literacy have become more commonplace since the 1960s. One could go as far as argue that there are as many definitions of literacy as there are users. In the educational discourse, ideas such as literacy, literacies, new literacies, multiple literacies, multiliteracies, just to name a few, proliferate in teacher discourse and the literature. As much as one should celebrate the diversity of discussions about literacy, one must also wonder what and how people are defining it, especially to avoid diluting the term and ultimately losing its essence, as has been the case with other terms in education (Dressman, McCarty, & Benson, 1998).

In this evolution in the ideas of literacy, there is one common denominator that scholars have discovered: The transition from traditional and canonical views of reading and writing to one where multiple forms of expression, technology, and alternative and multicultural text have come into play. Many of these recent shifts have drawn inspiration from Paulo Freire’s idea of

“Reading the word and the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987) and continue pushing the boundaries of what kind of word we are reading and the kind of world in which we wish to live.

Another thing that those of us involved in literacy research have learned is that in order to really understand how literacy beliefs and practices continue evolving, it is not enough just to conceptualize it from theory or from pedagogy. We need to listen to the voices of those engaging in different practices and acts of creating and interpreting text. In order to understand the idea of literacy, we need to define it from a myriad of social contexts, school being just one of them.

In the particular context of English education, we define literacy best when we take into account the voices and thoughts of our practicing teachers and those instructors who taught and mentored them in their time as preservice teachers. Without these voices, any reflections and inquiries about what literacy means in the context of first and second languages is incomplete. These voices should become the inspiration of our reflections and reflexivities about what it means to interpret and create text in the societal and school contexts of this new millennium already in progress.

This is the background that frames this article. Using a small data set from a larger study I finished last year (Mora Vélez, 2010), this presentation will first discuss what a group of teachers and teacher educators in the U.S. said in regards to what literacy means to them and what elements of life and education have influenced those definitions. Through the data, I will look at some of the major changes this group of participants experienced in regards to the acts of reading and writing, their ideas about text, and how literacy and technology are inextricably linked today. Finally, through a process of reflexivity (Mora, 2011b; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Schirato & Webb, 2002), I will intertwine these findings with three challenges I believe are important for the current context of ELT in Colombia (and possibly other countries). This last

section has in fact become a focal point of my research for the past year (Mora 2011a, 2011b; Mora Vélez, 2010). Including the reflexivity process to bookend this article is, in my view, relevant to avoid falling prey to the trap of trying to adopt ideas from foreign context instead of revising them and adapting them to our local context. I will use this paper, then, to discuss the following questions,

1. What are the main concepts and influences in the way a group of teachers and teacher educators understand literacy?
2. What are the major changes the participants experienced regarding the connections between literacy, texts, and technology?
3. How are these ideas about literacy applicable and relevant to the current context of ELT in Colombia?

Through the data and the moments of reflexivity that this paper poses, I want to invite the readership to continue thinking and rethinking the fields of ELT and literacy education in Colombia and the world. There is a much larger conversation around what, how, and why we read and write in different languages and different places. This paper is just another starting point for all of us who are researchers, teachers, and teacher educators to initiate those conversations at our workplaces and with our colleagues.

Conceptual Framework: Literacy Paradigms Coexisting, not Antagonizing

Although I argued above that we have to transcend theorization in order to fully understand literacy, ignorance of said theoretical background does not promote a better understanding either. It is necessary to learn what scholars have said and written about how to define literacy as a first step toward transformation. Given the growing interest in literacy that

Kaestle (1988) described, there are multiple positions about literacy in scholarship. Each position focuses on particular understandings of the acts of reading and writing. They also show concern for the kind of person we expect to foster through these acts. In my own research, I have found that there are five major paradigms that still circulate in academic, curricular, and political circles to this date. I will provide a quick summary of these five from a semi-chronological perspective.

One of the first major paradigms about literacy is *Basic Literacy*, proposed by scholars such as Harold Bloom (1994) and E.D. Hirsch (1987, 2006), as well as those in education and policies who call for the “back to basics” (Routman, 1996) in today’s curricula. In this paradigm, as Carsetti (1983) explained, literacy relates to the “skills required to survive in a literate society” (p. 235). In this view, scholars propose that reading and writing are a fundamental component in the school curriculum. In this position, they confine reading to the traditional literary texts that constitute the canon (Bloom, 1994) and instruction emphasizes traditional forms of writing such as the essay and the teaching of explicit grammar and vocabulary (Nunes & Bryant, 2006). In a basic view of literacy, knowledge of certain clusters of knowledge is paramount for someone to be defined as *literate*. In fact, advocates of more extreme forms of basic literacy, such as E.D. Hirsch, advocate for the overt inclusion of these clusters as part of a core curriculum (Hirsch, 1987). All in all, from a basic literacy position, one of the main purposes of literacy is the ability to function as a competent member of a community, with the underlying premise that the community is usually the nation.

The second literacy paradigm I used for this study is *Functional Literacy* (UNESCO, 1970; ICAE, 1979, Papen, 2005; Thomas, 1989; Wragg, Wragg, Haynes, & Chamberlin, 1998), which stemmed from UNESCO in the 1960s that were first implemented in literacy programs in Africa and Central America. In a functional literacy paradigm, the goal is for individuals to

acquire “the essential knowledge and skills which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community” (UNESCO, 1970, in Wragg, et al., 1998, p. 26). In this paradigm, the idea of reading and writing remains rather similar to basic literacy, but with a heavier emphasis on “work-related skills” (Papen 2005, p. 18) and a variation in the kinds of texts and reading comprehension activities teachers are supposed to carry out in class. Ultimately, the idea behind the functional literacy paradigm is to provide individuals with the necessary skills in reading and writing form them to become better members of the workforce, not from a “utilitarian” (Wragg, et al., 1998, p. 26) view point but as an attempt to dignify people’s lifestyles.

Since the 1970s, and largely inspired by Paulo Freire’s pedagogical constructs (Freire, 1970), specifically his idea of “reading the word and the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987), three other literacy paradigms have emerged, usually as a response to the shortcomings in scope and goals that critics of the basic and functional paradigms have discovered. The first of them, *Critical Literacy* (Beck, 2005; Freire, 1970; Freire & Macedo, 1987, Shor, 1999; Morrell, 2008; Willis, et al., 2008) has found inspiration in Freire’s discussions about banking education (Freire, 1970; Macedo, 1994) and the issues of power and inequality that Freire himself denounced in his adult literacy programs in Brazil. As Morgan (1997) explained, “Critical literacy critics and teachers focus on the cultural and ideological assumptions that undermine texts, they investigate the politics of reproduction, and they interrogate the inequitable, cultural positions of speakers and readers within discourses” (pp. 1-2). There is an overarching concern in critical literacy about what we read, how we read it, and most importantly, *why* we read what we read in classrooms (McLaren, 1994; Morrell, 2008). In terms of writing, whatever our students write in

the classroom must provide spaces for interrogation of practice (Shor, 1999) and the validation of their own life and accomplishments (Morrell, 2008).

Looking at the larger picture, advocates of critical literacy are calling for literacy practices that can be liberating and empowering for our students and those around them. A critical literacy paradigm wants to help individuals become advocates against social inequality and injustice (Beck, 2005; McLaren & Lankshear, 1993). As Morrell (2008) posited, critical literacy intends to turn literacy practices in moments of inspiration and show students “that the development of literacies of power can play a role in the transformations of their schools and communities”(p. 190).

The second paradigm inspired by Freire’s work is *New Literacy Studies* (NLS; Gee, 2008; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005, 2006; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Schultz, 2002; Street, 1984, 1994, 1995, 2000, 2005). Inspired initially by Freire’s idea of banking education and Brian Street’s own work in Iran (Street, 1984), NLS advocates question why the only acceptable form of literacy is the one that originates in the classroom. Street (1995) claimed that “Non-school literacies have come to be seen as inferior attempts at the real thing, to be compensated for by enhanced schooling” (p. 106). Out of these reflections and questions, Street constructed what became the backbone of the work from NLS: The idea of *autonomous* versus *ideological* models of literacy. According to Street (1984; 2005), the autonomous model assumes that literacy practices originate in classrooms, isolated (“autonomously”, Street, 2005, p. 417) from the context and the communities. This means that the school practices, and only them, dictate what constitutes the acts of reading and writing (Kaestle, 1985; Kress, 1997; Lankshear and Lawler, 1987). In the ideological model, on the other hand, there is the recognition that “school is one of the many social forces, institutionalized or not, that determine the nature and extent of [...]

literacy. To understand [...] literacy[...] it is essential to examine the nature of literacy practices outside school as well as within” (Resnick, 2000, p.27). The ideological model recognizes that literacy practices are socially situated and other institutions outside of school become instrumental in shaping how individuals read and write. In order to understand what literacy really is, Street (1995) argued, we need to discover those meanings directly from people and not just from theoretical discussions. The goal of literacy and literacy practices within an NLS paradigm is to help individuals gain agency by validating every scenario and moment where the acts of reading and writing take place, as these literacy practices are supposed to be commonplace and take place everywhere.

The final literacy paradigm that draws inspiration from Freire is *the Pedagogy of Multiliteracies* (The New London Group, 1996, 2000; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, 2007, 2009; Kalantzis & Cope, 2008). Inspired by the reflections of a group of literacy scholars from around the world, and initially stated in their 1996 manifesto in *Harvard Educational Review* (The New London Group, 1996), the pedagogy of multiliteracies stems from questions about the role of technology and media in how individuals represent the world in today’s society (The New London Group, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). In this paradigm, there is the lingering question about how print-based literacy practices have neglected the use of multiple forms of meaning to favor the use of the alphabet as the main sign (Kress, 2003). Therefore, the pedagogy of multiliteracies calls for the inclusion of different signs and forms of expression *in addition to* the print text. Part of this new form of expression is the idea of *multimodality* (Kress, 1997, 2000, 2003; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001) as the interaction and integration of different signs and forms of semiotic expression within the alphabet-based texts that individuals create and interpret. The different signs that these new texts include feature linguistic, visual, spatial, and gestural

forms (The New London Group, 2000, pp. 23-30; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, pp. 212-216). Within these practices, there is an overall pedagogical proposal (which is one of those points of contention that separates multiliteracies from NLS), where classroom practices are socially, historically and culturally situated, include supported instruction as part of creating new concepts, and finally want to create a new practice that is deeply rooted in students' values and agendas (New London Group, 2000). The goal of the pedagogy of multiliteracies is to help students become active, reflective members of their communities, with the skills that enable them to navigate technology to eventually be better human beings.

Fighting Against Separations and Binaries: The Idea of a “Permeable Literacy Continuum”

During the process of constructing the conceptual framework for my study, I found a revealing fact: Upon reading about the paradigms, it is very easy to distinguish them at a theoretical level, at the level of scholarship. At this level, it is fairly easy to see the differences between, for example, critical literacy and New Literacy Studies. In practice, those lines are much more nebulous and they become so for practitioners. This is not a critique or an indictment of practitioners by any means. On the contrary, it is the recognition that the five paradigms I mentioned are all present in the field of education simultaneously. While they have strong conceptual differences, they do overlap and have moments of convergence. What I find worrisome is the emphasis on the differences among paradigms and the pressure to frame the discussions about literacy in terms of binary oppositions. The need for binaries is not akin to literacy only. It happens in many other realms of education (Stone, 2003). However, binary oppositions usually place teachers at a crossroad, as they have to be in constant negotiation and compromise of their personal view with those that the curricula endorse or encourage. Binaries

force teachers (and even their students) to pledge allegiance to one particular paradigm over the other. In reality, individuals are hardly ever “black or white”. There are very different colors in the palette, not just shades of grey, for people to be forced just to pick between two colors. This is the assumption under which binaries operate, and one that I openly defy from my research. Binary oppositions have been detrimental to education and literacy (one good example are the infamous “reading wars” from the 1990s and the binary struggle between whole language and phonics) and we, as literacy researchers, scholars and advocates, need to propose new ways to frame existing paradigms.

It is from this recognition that practitioners do not view their practice as either-or and that no one paradigm has disappeared from the educational landscape that I am proposing moving from binaries to a continuum. Although I am not the first to propose this move (Hornberger [2008] has made a case for why we need to look at biliteracy as continua), I am proposing a view of literacy paradigms as part of a continuum. To define my idea of this continuum for literacy, I looked at Dyson’s (1993) idea of a “permeable curriculum”. According to Dyson, the idea of a permeable curriculum

Allows for interplay between teachers’ and children’s language and experiences. Such a shared world is essential for the growth of both oral and written language, and it is essential as well if teachers and children are to feel connected to, not alienated from, each other. (p. 1)

I drew inspiration from the idea of the interplay between language and experiences that Dyson described to propose a “permeable literacy continuum”. In this continuum, I see a space of interplay and exchange of ideas across all five paradigms. A continuum opens spaces to celebrate and recognize the conceptual overlaps all paradigms possess. For instance, despite their

differences about what constitutes literacy, there is the recognition at the core of every paradigm that literacy should be a tool of empowerment. A continuum also recognizes the haziness of using the paradigms in practice, which does not force practitioners to have to choose sides. A view of literacy as a continuum provides teachers with better tools to make curricular decisions as it helps them understand their practice better. I would like to point out that this continuum is neither linear nor chronological. Regardless of when the first ideas about any one paradigm appeared, they are all present and in tension today. This idea of the permeable continuum is aware of those tensions and wants to offer a view where, by recognizing the common goal of human realization, teachers can better reflect about what guides their practice while choosing courses of action from the different conceptual underpinnings at their disposal.

Methodology

The reflections in this study originate from a small data set from a much larger study the author conducted in the United States (Mora Vélez, 2010). I framed the research within the qualitative paradigm (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2003; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Merriam, 1998). A qualitative study, given its emphasis on “understanding human behavior” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p, 43), its reliance on descriptive data, the researcher’s control over the analysis and interpretation (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994), and the levels of sensitivity about the participants’ ideas (Creswell, 2003) provided the best framework to describe ideas about the evolution of literacy beliefs and practices. The goal of the larger study was to learn about the changes in literacy beliefs and practices in a group of teachers and teacher educators and how these changes played out in the curricular decisions within a secondary English teacher education

program. The findings I will present in this article stem from a data set that corresponds to the first research question I posed for the larger study (Mora Vélez, 2010).

There were two main data sources in the larger study. However, for the purpose of this article, I only chose data from three of in-depth interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2008; Johnson, 2002; Kvale, 2007; Mertens, 1992; Reinharz, 1992; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Seidman, 2006) that I conducted with a group of 12 participants. All participants were affiliated with a large U.S. university as either instructors or graduates from a secondary English teacher education program. The 12 participants included four methods course instructors, four English instructors, four teachers who graduated in 2009, and four who graduated in 2003. I conducted and audio-recorded all interviews in different locations at the university campus or at a city within driving distance from this university.

Data analysis. The process of analyzing the data for the larger study was both ongoing and iterative, from the moment I collected the first data sources (Mahiri & Godley, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). To minimize bias (Kvale, 2007) I personally transcribed the interviews using the Express Scribe™ (<http://www.nch.com.au/scribe/>) transcription software. I transcribed the interviews verbatim (Hamel, 2003; Poland, 2002), but did not transcribe pauses or “stalling words” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) because they did not include any real value to the analysis. Part of the analysis included taking different kinds of notes (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) and recording my own ideas about the interviews once I had finished them (Hamel, 2003).

I analyzed the data based on a series of categories related to literacy beliefs and practices. To make better sense of the data, I used a series of charts (Clift, Mora & Brady, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994). I used some charts to map out the data back to the research questions and the categories (Noffke, Personal Communication) and others to separate the participants’ answers by

interview questions. I read the charts with the data by interview questions several times, participant by participant and across participants, to make better sense of what transpired in the interviews. From these charts, I constructed a series of narratives according to the research questions. To ensure accuracy of these narratives, I did member-checks (Merriam, 2008) with all participants. I e-mailed them drafts of these narratives for them to provide feedback about how I was representing them in the narratives.

Understanding Literacy: Participants' Stories

Each of the participant groups presented their own views of literacy. The novice teachers featured the simplest answers in describing how they viewed literacy. The veteran teachers attributed the changes in their views of literacy to teaching experience and other schooling after graduation. The English instructors expressed their positions on literacy ranging from simplistic views to more alternative perspectives, particularly in the act of writing. The methods course instructors' discussions about literacy moved far beyond ideas from basic literacy paradigms.

Definitions about Literacy

When the participants discussed what literacy means and its particular features, they offered four salient ideas, (a) literacy is more than reading or writing; (b) literacy is social; (c) we need to think carefully why we talk about literacy or literacies; and (d) literacy is conducive to critical thinking.

Literacy: it starts with print, but goes beyond reading or writing. All definitions about literacy usually started with references to skills and limits. The novice teachers began their discussions about literacy from reading and writing and then added "being able of using

technologies like the computer, the internet, television, all sorts of things that include technology” (Francis, Interview 1). However, they did not limit their definitions to reading and writing,

Literacy is the ability to read and write, the capacity to express your thoughts into words, the ability to understand the information that comes towards you, to analyze and interpret it and to respond to it in a matter that is according to your own beliefs. (Logan, Interview 1)

For the veteran teachers, literacy meant reading and writing, engaging with text, and using information to connect personal and world issues (Indigo, Interview 1). The English instructors tended to relate literacy to “competence” (Harley, Interview 1), including people’s ability (or inability) to read (Guadalupe, Interview 1; Kennedy, Interview 1). In fact, one instructor brought up the idea of “illiteracy” as an element to consider in text comprehension.

The methods course instructors talked about how “the written word” (Armani, Interview 1) is an important element in any discussions about literacy. Bailey, another instructor, also discussed that literacy “excludes things like photographs, it excludes drawings, it excludes the gestures that I’m making as I’m speaking to you right now” (Interview 1). One of the instructors, as the veteran teachers did, also talked about how education forced individuals to rethink and sometimes complicate their understandings of literacy (Morgan, Interview 1). The instructors, just like some of the teachers, also talked about the range of processes and skills that comprise literacy, such as critiquing or interpreting, which was also linked to the notion of written word, (Armani, Interview 1).

Literacy: social by nature. Most participants agreed that a definition of literacy must encompass the larger social context around their students and themselves. Teachers explained

that, even if one starts at decoding, literacy also “putting [those decoded words] in the context of [a student’s] own life” (Jaden, Interview 1). Logan, a novice teacher, posited that literacy implied “[being] critical of what you’re presented with and [using] that information to either improve yourself or to improve the site around you or just to impact something” (Interview 1).

Although some of the English instructors conceded that discussions of literacy would usually take place in education, not English, classes, they acknowledged the social value of literacy practices. In their view, for instance, college provided a different set of needs and expectations for the acts of reading and writing. The methods course instructors also viewed literacy within this larger social framework. Bailey, for example, described literacy as “being able to encode and decode print text within a broader social and cultural context” (Interview 1, 9/18/09). Morgan added that literacy had to recognize

[T]he impact of socio-economic status and class and race and culture on the capacity of one to express one’s thoughts... so that you’re not simply teaching students to decode and teacher’s expectations are not that students simply be able to cite and recite literature but one is able to become more critical of the world... (Interview 1)

Literacy: One or several; just think carefully why. Three participants questioned whether or not one should talk about multiple forms of literacy. Dylan, one of the veteran teachers, discussed the role of technology and other societal factors in the introduction of literacies,

[Literacy] means once again from the basic phonemic awareness and decoding to kind of critical and analytical literacy. Then we throw things like digital in front of it, critical in front of it, as a way of kind of reading the text, reading the world. (Interview 1)

Guadalupe, one of the English teachers, mentioned that “there’s probably different kinds of social literacies. There’s probably emotional literacy, there’s probably emotional literacy, there’s probably a hundred different kinds of literacies.” Finally, Bailey cautioned that, “people talk about literacies without really thinking about what that means or why there might be such a thing as multiple literacies. I completely disagree with that point of view” (Interview 1).

Literacy: A door to critical thinking. Regarding the connection between literacy and critical thinking, Guadalupe’s retort, “As opposed to what?” (Interview 3) becomes an umbrella statement that summarizes all participants’ opinion. The novice teachers explained their progression from literal comprehension to higher-order thinking activities. The veteran teachers, on the other hand, were more upfront about how ideas about significance and “metacognition” (Dylan, Interview 3) were already a big component of their classroom literacy practices.

The English instructors described how the ultimate goal of all their activities was to be critical, regardless of their emphases. All instructors believed that all activities in their classes led to critical thinking, particularly stressing the inclusion of contrasting voices in their text choices.

Methods course instructors talked questioning authors and discussing larger societal issues as evidence of critical thinking. Bailey explained,

The whole purpose of whatever I have students do in the classroom and whatever I advocate for them to do with their students is about interpreting and making sense of a text within a full context, which would include understanding the political and the social and the cultural significance of whatever it is they’re reading. (Interview 3)

The Act of Writing

Participants shared two main ideas regarding changes in writing: (a) it goes beyond essays; (b) the move from writing to composing is producing a new sense of audience.

The essay is not the only form of expression. Novice teachers are thinking carefully about how to include other ideas about writing, such as “deeper-thinking conversations about a text and what it means and making connections about the book and the real world” (Francis, Interview 3). Logan’s classroom activities included, “a lot of creative writing, like writing their own endings to the stories [...] because I think it interacts with their brain a little bit better, sometimes because they actually enjoy doing those things” (Interview 3, 12/5/09).

The veteran teachers also incorporate multiple genres in their teaching. For Indigo, “probably my main thrust as a writing teacher is not to stick to the traditional essays [...] writing is a note, it’s texting, it’s short stories, fiction, poems, songs, these WordlesTM that we worked on...” (Interview 3). These teachers, however, admit to the struggle of negotiating these ideas and the opposing demands of the school system,

I think that is a real tension in public education because there’s certainly an understanding that kids need to read things that are diverse, but we are so concerned that they’re able to produce a coherent multi-paragraph essay that that always wins. (Dylan, Interview 3)

For the English teachers, “The more [students] write, the better [their writing is] going to get, no matter what they’re writing [...] so I do sometimes use creative writing assignments that are not research-based” (Guadalupe, Interview 3). Harley added, “If you can write well in multiple contexts, in multiple genres, and in multiple situations, you’re in pretty good shape” (Interview 3). For the methods course instructors, “the whole idea of writing in multiple contexts, multimodal writing...” (Bailey, Interview 3) and “experimenting in the usefulness and

¹ WordleTM is an application to create “word clouds” based on any text. Available online at <http://www.wordle.net>.

practicality of getting students comfortable with TwitterTM, texting, and blogging” (Morgan, Interview 3) are important features of their instruction.

Composing for a wider audience. Some participants discussed the idea of “composing” (Harley, Interview 1) as the combination of words, images, and media, usually within web-based environments, as a unified message. All participants discussed their experimentation with websites and other online technologies in this expansive effort to increase writing in their classrooms. This dovetails with the implication that these technologies are increasing the audience for whom one writes. As Dylan explained, “the things that [students are] writing on those blogs are things that are read by real people and are responded to,” which in turn actually “help[s] increase [students’] confidence as writers” (Interview 3). This, according to participants, is a noticeable change about how students and individuals write today.

The Act of Reading.

There were two salient ideas regarding reading, (a) more multicultural works are part of students’ readings; and (b) we have more resources and options for varied audiences.

The infusion of multicultural text. Participants agreed that there is a conceptual shift going on where teachers are exploring options besides “the book and what we can find in the book and the big anthology” (Armani, Interview 1). The inclusion of children’s, youth, and multicultural literature and the questions about including films within literature are ongoing questions in the field. The novice teachers argued that classroom readings should range “from the newspaper or magazines to your novels” (Francis, Interview 1). Logan added, “Literature is words that there are not only well-known in classics but deal with issues that are universal all around the world” (Interview 1). For the veteran teachers, there should be a balance between

canonical and multicultural texts, where “we have a lot of different voices represented” (Dylan, Interview 3). This, as Emery explained, would ultimately help students become “very well-rounded [people]” (Interview 3).

For the English instructors, the discussion is sometimes relative to what they are teaching, “If you’re going to teach a 20th Century class, in either British or American, multicultural issues are going to be more prominent” (Guadalupe, Interview 3). Harley’s discussions also included “standard language ideology, which is all about multiculturalism and the way multiculturalism is a response to ideology in culture” (Interview 3), adding that multiculturalism was “one of the really dynamically interesting things that you can, as a feature of classrooms today” (Interview 3).

New resources, new styles. Participants recognized that the Internet has opened the door for more options and access to readings (Dylan, Interview 1; Guadalupe, Interview 1). However, the participants found little evidence of changes in how people read, as Harley explained, “I haven’t seen any changes. I mean, I see our current reading practices as thousands of years old, fairly stable” (Interview 1).

Influential Factors in the Definitions of Literacy

One of the interests in the larger study was to discover what influences the construction of the idea of literacy. From previous experiences as researcher (Clift, Mora & Brady, 2008), I learned that ethnicity, family, gender, or race are instrumental in one’s definitions of diversity. This section will share what I learned through my interviews.

Race and gender: Not as influential as first thought. Participants did not discuss their race as a big factor in their definitions, with the exception of one participant (Morgan), who

made explicit references about being African-American and its effect on her literacy practices. Specifically, Morgan expected her race to lend a positive effect and trigger certain discussions in class.

If race was negligible in these discussions, gender almost became a non-factor. I first made the deliberate choice to provide all participants with gender-neutral names (Mora Vélez, 2010) to minimize bias. However, the potential of gender bias never surfaced in the conversations. It seemed, then, that there were other factors that made a much larger difference.

Our children were instrumental in definitions of literacy. If gender and race were not influential, the presence of children in our lives was a much bigger factor. In some cases (Kennedy, Interview 3), it was the condition of being a parent which influenced the definitions and questions the participants raised regarding literacy. For other participants, those children were the students with whom either they or their preservice teachers were going to work. Armani, for example, was constantly concerned about preparing her students to work with English Language Learners (Interviews 1 and 3). Part of her teaching included bringing second-language speakers as guests in her class (Interview 2). Bailey made strong statements about who his constituency really was: the students in schools, not the preservice teachers (Interview 3). Morgan also emphasized in her students that they would be facing students who would be different from the kinds of people these preservice teachers interacted on a daily basis (Interviews 2 and 3).

Education was one of the most influential factors. My findings showed that participants' education mattered more than their gender or ethnicity. For instance, Dylan, Emery, and Morgan all argued that their ideas of literacy became more complex upon beginning their graduate studies (Interview 1). Bailey, a literacy specialist by training, linked the evolution of

his literacy beliefs and practices to his doctoral studies (Interview 1). Kennedy gradually included references to being a film studies scholar (Interviews 2 and 3) to her ideas about literacy. Guadalupe attributed her sometimes narrower discussions of literacy to her own work as a British literature scholar (Interview 1). For instance, Guadalupe explained that discussing multiculturalism in Victorian British literature would be retroactive (Interview 1). Harley made references to his writing studies background in his comments about changes in writing and literacy (Interviews 1 and 3).

Life and experiences matter in literacy definitions. The participants' life and teaching experiences made a huge impact in their ideas about literacy. For instance, instructors who had taught abroad (Bailey, Guadalupe, and Kennedy) described the effect of these experiences affected their literacy beliefs (Interviews 1 and 3). Bailey, for example, talked about the influence of his work abroad in his choices of resources, as well as his ongoing reflections about issues of power in the field of English (Interviews 2 and 3). Kennedy also talked about her experiences teaching in Asia and how they affected her views of English (Interview 1). In the case of the novice teachers, one could notice the effect of their growing process in their simpler answers.

Back to the Permeable Literacy Continuum

I would like to finish the discussion of my findings with a tie-in to the ideas about the literacy continuum I described earlier in this article, by sharing five ideas that link the findings to the different elements of this continuum.

The social component of literacy. Despite the inclusion of the social element in their definitions of literacy, these definitions are still far from the discussions that paradigms such as

critical literacy or New Literacy Studies promote. Most descriptions of socially situated are closer to the principles of basic and functional literacy. One good example is the condition of being illiterate that some participants discussed. This runs counter to the calls from New Literacy Studies to stop the “literate/illiterate” dichotomy (Mora, 2009). However, one step forward is the lack of ties between literacy and nation-building that basic literacy promotes.

The plurality of literacies. The low number of participants who questioned whether to talk about literacy or literacies leans closer to traditional discussions of literacy. However, the notion that we need to move past the school as the only site of literacy practices is an important change. This actually aligns with Street’s (1984, 1995) ideas against the “pedagogization” of literacy. So far, the participants are somewhere in the middle between the multiple contexts for literacy and the possibility of a multiplicity of literacies.

Expanded practices. There is a common understanding that multiple forms of expression, the role of technology in expanding audiences (Mora, 2011a) and varieties of genres begins to shift the conversation toward ideas for which New Literacy Studies and the Pedagogy of Multiliteracies have advocated over the years. There is a recognition that, paraphrasing Marshall McLuhan (McLuhan, Fiore, & Agel, 1967), as the media change, so must the messages and the nature of literacy practices.

Rethinking writing. The participants’ answers about the act of writing tend to align with the alternative paradigms. Participants talked about multimodality, composing, and integrating online technologies within writing, topics that New Literacy Studies and Multiliteracies have discussed for a several years already. Particularly, the integration of multimodality (Kress, 1997) to classroom writing is a very relevant issue today. The participants have transcended the

traditional views of the essay as the only genre they should teach. Their views of writing are even defying the calls for traditional writing that standards-based education seems to foster.

Rethinking reading. Looking at the participants' responses, on the one hand, the inclusion of multimodal texts is a sign of progress, according to the critical literacy paradigm. From a social perspective, this also aligns with the alternative paradigms' emphasis on including the students in the process of reading and choosing books. This position about texts in the classroom also challenges the more traditional paradigms and their heavier emphasis on only bringing canonical texts to class.

On the other hand, the view that reading comprehension has remain constant despite new technologies raises a number of questions that we need to address. For instance, scholars in the New Literacy Studies tradition would argue that online technologies and the emergence of digital texts require a fresh take on the act of reading. (Leu, O'Byrne, Zawilinski, McVerry, & Everett-Cocapardo, 2009; Leu, Zawilinski, Castek, Banerjee, Housand, Liu, & O'Neil, 2009)

Reflexivity about the Findings: Three Challenges for ELT

Although the findings I presented from this study come from the context of the U.S., literacy as a field transcends some of those national boundaries. The acts of reading and writing are universal and the need to reflect on how international research can be adapted to local contexts is an ever-pressing need. As a Colombian literacy scholar, it is an imperative for me to reflect on how these findings are applicable in our ELT community. This section will then pose three of challenges as part of a reflexivity (Mora, 2011a; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Schirato & Webb, 2002) process. In his reflections during the seminars at the University of Chicago, Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) defined reflexivity as a social and scientific

reflection that aims to benefit one's community. In this regard, a process of reflexivity transcends a reflection. As I have argued elsewhere,

“A reflection cannot be just an individual act of introspection or a collective exercise within a closed group in which the specific individual or group are the only beneficiaries. On the contrary, the goal of a reflexivity process is to help rethink the practices (Bourdieu, 1990) with solid theoretical and scientific principles. (Mora, 2011b, p. 1, my translation)

In the spirit of this process, I will now pose three challenges that I find relevant to the context of ELT in Colombia and elsewhere.

We Need to Think Critically What Kinds of Literacy Skills we are Promoting in our Classrooms

Through some of my recent work (Mora, 2011a, b), I have discovered that the discussion of literacy in ELT and in Colombia is still emerging. We still need to question what kinds of texts we are reading in our classrooms. We need to ask very critically whether most of the texts in English classes are more canonical than multicultural. In fact, we should interrogate if the resources we use in class and the ideas that teachers are using in their classes include a healthy mixture of texts from second language speakers, traditional British and American literature, and the combination of traditional and alternative genres (Jacobs, 2007).

However, leaving the discussion in *what* we are reading would do disservice to our students. We also need to interrogate *why* we are reading in our classes. Questions about what teachers emphasize in classes are fundamental. Is the emphasis still on decoding text? Are we moving toward the kind of critical thinking that the participants in my study found so important? We also need to wonder if issues of student agency (García & Willis, 2001) and power dynamics

in the acts of reading and writing (A. Luke, 2003; Macedo, 1994) are present in the different reading comprehension activities. We also have to include discussions about our surroundings and our communities (Morrell, 2008) and how through reading we validate them and highlight their features to be shared with people and institutions in other locations.

In terms of writing, we need to think about the balance between working with print text and the addition of digital composing (Damico & Riddle, 2006; Drouin & Davis, 2009). We must interrogate, as the participants hinted, what kind of genres and styles we are favoring in our classrooms. We need to question whether there is a space for multimodal texts in our classrooms. Although there are some emerging examples in the field in Colombia (Mora, et al., 2011; Cárdenas Castro, 2011), we still need more practitioners to attempt to use these frameworks and more technology to increase the level of literacy practices. Along these same lines, we still need to interrogate how we are heightening the sense of audience in our classrooms. Are you students still writing for the teacher alone? Are there spaces for them to share with other audiences through online media (as Dylan suggested)? Are teachers publishing their students work through blogs (Boling, 2008) or other digital media? Those are big questions that must comprise the research agendas of literacy researchers in the immediate future.

Regarding oral expression, we also need to think how orality plays out in the construction of literacy practices. Long considered inferior to literacy, there are questions about the validity of this view (Mora, 2004; Street, 1995). We need to reflect on the kinds of topics we are bringing to class, as well as the value and role of our students' voices and their stories in the literacy development that takes place in our classrooms. In this same vein, we need to think very carefully about what kind of literacy practices we are encouraging in our students. Are we preparing them to be productive workers? Are we preparing them just to be good members of the

nation-state (Hirsch, 1987)? Or, are we creating individuals who can use literacy as a way to advocate for others and themselves before the community and the government (Morrell, 2008)? However we answer will go a long way in deciding the kind of people we are giving to the world and how open or constraining our classroom practices are.

We Need to Think Critically What Literacy Means and Entails for Colombia.

In this regard, we need to question carefully what we mean by “literacy”, both in English and in Spanish. A critical view of literacy must transcend the prevalence of school-sanctioned ideas and bring back the role of our communities. This is even more important if we think about what literacy means for indigenous and minority populations, an issue that still needs further exploration in our country. In terms of Spanish, we still need to question whether we should talk about *alfabetización* or *lecto-escritura* or move on to the, as I and others have argued, more encompassing term *literacidad* (Mora, 2011b; Cassany, 2006).

In this discussion of literacies, we should follow some of the questions that Lankshear and Knobel (2006) have asked about the idea of “new literacies” (p. 24) and what kind of approaches we need to consider as we further the conversations about literacy and literacies in the Colombian and ELT contexts. Questions such as, what an “ideological model” (Street, 1984, 1995) of literacy for Colombia (and by extension, other countries) would entail or how that model would link to ideas about bilingual education in our country are pressing questions that we have to bring to different academic or political forums as we rethink literacy practices in our country.

Along the same lines, we have to critically interrogate the kinds of paradigms that the different policies for first and second languages in Colombia might tend to favor. We need to continue looking at what kind of reading and writing activities and resources are predominant in

the curricula and national standards. We have to question whether these curricula and standards are also promoting out-of-school literacies (Hull & Schultz, 2001) or simply perpetuating an autonomous model of literacy in our schools.

We Need to Look Very Carefully at What Literacy Beliefs, Practices, and Paradigms are Present in our Schools and Teacher Education Programs

As my findings illustrated, one could trace all participants' practices, whether they were fully aware of it or not, to different paradigms. The move toward the literacy continuum responds to this realization that all paradigms are in constant flux and tension at the interior of schools and teacher education programs. Teachers and teacher educators might not make it public, but that does not mean that there are paradigms that are driving their practice. We need to engage in research to learn how these paradigms reflect on their beliefs and practices. We also need to revise what kind of messages teachers educators are sending regarding literacy practices, how students are assimilating them, and how the messages from schools and teacher education programs are overlapping or antagonizing with each other.

There is also a pressing need to find out more about the nature of lessons and conversations taking place in methods courses (Jones & Enriquez, 2009), the kind of practices teacher educators encourage in their students (Kist, 2000, 2007; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003), and how discussions of literacy are making part of teachers' professional development (C. Luke, 2003). Finally, we need to talk to teachers and teacher educators about the evolution of their own literacy beliefs and practices. We have to learn more about what people and events are influencing these beliefs and practices and how instrumental teacher education is in this

evolution process. Once we know this, we can determine better courses of action to improve the literacy practices in first and second language education.

Coda

When I set out on the journey that became the larger research project that also became my doctoral dissertation, I recognized that literacy to me was not a static definition. In fact, as I discovered my participants' changes, I also recognized my own evolution and changes over the past 15 years. I am certain that my literacies are in constant evolution and yet I still have a number of lingering questions and challenges, as a teacher, a teacher educator, and a human being who reads and writes for life and for a living. As I realized when I was planning the larger study, these questions I have are not unique. I still believe that other people have similar or bigger questions and issues about literacy and I know that other literacy researchers and I have to keep unearthing these stories and learning from them as we improve our practice.

The goal of this article was to generate some curiosities from research so that others can embark on this journey. There is still a lot to be said about literacy in the field of ELT and in the Colombian context. We need to be more active in raising these questions and involving others in these conversations. I have the strong belief that literacy has become for many an instrument of liberation and emancipation. However, I am well aware that for many others, literacy is still a tool for oppression and hegemony. The bigger challenge that this research and the acts of reflexivity that stemmed from it is simple: If we really believe in empowerment, in improving education, in educating and raising better human beings and not just workers or citizens, we must take a stand and critically question what we really want "the word and the world" to be like and look like for our children and our communities.

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