

RUNNING HEAD: SECOND LANGUAGE LITERACIES IN THE CITY

Second Language Literacies in the City:
New Practices in Urban Spaces of Medellín, Colombia

Raúl Alberto Mora, Ph.D.
Melissa Castaño
Nathalie Gómez
Natalia Ramírez
María Camila Mejía-Vélez
Carla Pulgarín

Literacies in Second Languages Project (LSLP)
Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, Sede Central Medellín (Colombia)

Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research
Association, Chicago IL

DISCLAIMER

The following paper is part of the research project “English Literacy Practices in the
Urbs of ‘Medellín City’”, funded by the Center for Research, Development and
Innovation (CIDI) at Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, Sede Central Medellín
(Filed under code 047B-02/13-S80). The ideas expressed in this paper are those of
the authors and may not necessarily reflect the views or policies at Universidad
Pontificia Bolivariana.

AUTHORS' NOTE

This paper is an abridged report from book chapter draft under review. While others
are free and welcome to cite this paper, we kindly ask you to report such interest to
the lead author, Dr. Raúl A. Mora, at literaciesinl2project@gmail.com. For more
information about the Literacies in Second Languages Project, visit us at
<http://literaciesinl2project.org>. You may also follow us on Twitter (@lslp_colombia)
and Facebook.

Abstract

This paper shows the results of a study that described how people in Medellín, Colombia are using English as a communicative resource. Relying on an ethnographic approach, the research team discovered that English appears as an element that helps enrich the complexity of the messages that one finds in urban spaces in the city. These findings expand previous research regarding this new complexity of meanings and defy conventional wisdom that portrays the city as “monolingual”. Instead, the data showed more creative uses of English in advertisements, malls, and restaurants, as well as a growing interest in English literature in bookshops and libraries. Implications for research on second language education in Latin America bookend the discussion.

#AERA15 - Literacies in Second Languages Project

Colombia has recently faced a growing interest in English, manifested at an official level in graduation requirements, more language centers, the emergence of bilingual spaces in local media, government-led initiatives at the city level aiming at full command of English by 2019, and more resources (in terms of materials, facilities, and staff) to increase the amount (and quality) of English instruction. All these initiatives wish to help students reach a series of benchmark proficiency levels according to the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2001), such as a B1 level for college graduates and a B2 for students graduating from preservice English teacher education programs.

While the lack of official status of English holds true in Colombia, that does not mean English is only confined to the classroom practices or the official media. For example, walking around Medellín, one would likely find billboards and store ads that use English words, English texts in local bookshops and libraries, and even English words in graffiti. Nevertheless, there is still very little evidence of how people appropriate English language in the city and its urban spaces (Mora, 2012, 2015).

For the last year and a half, our research team explored, based on some realities of literacy practices outside of the school (Knobel, 2001; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Street, 1995; Tannock, 2001), how youth and adults in Medellín are recreating English in the city, adding as part of the local culture. We walked the city to discover how people are appropriating and interacting with the English language in different physical spaces of Medellín, in an attempt to debunk the conventional wisdom that English was the domain of the classroom and that English did not really appear as a

communicative resource in the city. This study discussed the following research questions:

1. What kind of English literacy practices can one find across the different urban spaces in the city of Medellín?
2. What means and modes of expression are people using to reflect these literacy practices?
3. What are the implications for the promotion of second languages in our local context?

Conceptual Framework: The City as Literacy Practice

The notion of “the city as literacy practice”, an attempt to revisit Freire and Macedo’s (1987) idea of “reading the world and the word,” posits that the city itself is literacy (Author, 2012a). We see the city as a place where different texts converge and help generate a world with a certain identity and layers of expression and understanding. The city, then, becomes a space that is not monochromatic; in order to really understand it, one should engage in a deeper analysis of the diverse textual and semiotic interactions stemming from it. This framework (and the study, as a consequence), acknowledges the multilinear and complex nature of the city as a necessary and relevant aspect to describe and analyze the texts that are immersed in and created by the city.

This framework, on the one hand, acknowledges the influential tradition of New Literacy Studies (NLS; Blackburn, 2003; Gregory & Williams, 2000; Hamilton,

2000; Hodge & Jones, 2000; Iddings, McCafferty, & da Silva, 2011; Kell, 2006; Street, 1984, 1995, 2013a, 2013b), which recognizes that literacy is socially situated.

Individuals create, recreate, interpret and reinterpret texts according to the different ends and needs of their particular contexts. Based on a work base that covers almost 30 years since Street's first works (Street, 1984), NLS has studied literacy practices in urban and out-of-school settings (Hull & Schultz, 2001; Pahl & Rowsell, 2006).

Nevertheless, we also recognize that today's complexity of literacy practices in urban spaces requires an extended framework that addresses the evolution of social practices (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). Therefore, we also draw from three recent concepts that help understand and analyze how to rethink text and language today. A reading of all concepts shows the need to, paraphrasing Otsuji and Pennycook (2010), "invent, disinvent, and reconstitute" language in order to understand the new textual manifestations in the city.

The three concepts that will, then, help define this framework are:

- *multimodality* (Albers & Harste, 2007; Kress, 1997, 2003, 2010; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Mejía-Vélez & Salazar Patiño, 2014; Mora, 2014a), or the fluid (Kress, 2010) integration of multiple visual, textual, or iconic resources to create meanings that are more impactful than print-only texts.
- *metrolingualism* (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010), an invitation to revisit what the city means to us as a first step to explore how people use language as a means of social interactions

- *polylinguaging* (Chuquito & Rojas, 2014; Jørgensen, Karrebæk, Madsen & Møller, 2011), or the view of languages as resources that one has at one's disposal to create messages beyond the traditional boundaries of language proficiency.

The dialectical (Dressman, 2007) relationship of this framework helps create a deeper, symbiotic understanding of the city as a literacy practice (as much as it is a site of literacy practices): Languages create new definitions of city and, at the same time, the city creates new and creative uses of said languages.

Methodology

We used an ethnographic approach (Blommaert & Jie, 2010; Heath & Street, 2008; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2008; Ramírez & Mora, 2014) for our fieldwork. On the one hand, from a language practice perspective, ethnographic methods enabled the research team to look at language as nuanced and as a social matter. On the other hand, the ethnographic approach enabled us to assume the research enterprise as “constant learner[s] – ever curious as to what’s happening” (Heath & Street, 2008, p. 30).

Physical Urban Spaces as Routes

We chose the idea of the “route” (inspired by Stuart Hall’s idea of culture [Willis, Hall, Montavon, Hunter, & Herrera, 2008]) as the approach to understand the culture of English literacies that we may find in these urban spaces. For this project, we selected routes that linked English practices to specific physical spaces

(Edwards & Usher, 2008) where one could pinpoint the emergence of said practices. The student researchers focused on three specific spaces, based on their own affinities (Black, 2009) with those spaces and the language practices that may emerge there, as follows: (a) restaurants, (b) advertisements, and (c) malls, bookshops, and libraries.

Data Sources and Fieldwork

We conducted our fieldwork between March, 2013 and June, 2014. In the first stage (March, 2013-January, 2014), our data sources included observations, ethnographic field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995), and photographs (Hodge & Jones, 2000; Marquez-Zenkov & Harmon, 2007). In the second stage (January-June, 2014), the student researchers conducted in-depth interviews (Seidman, 2006; Mora Vélez, 2010) with key informants from each routes.

Data Analysis

We began our analysis from the beginning of fieldwork (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To create the categories, we relied on our conceptual framework and the preliminary data we collected between September and November, 2012. After our discussions of the conceptual framework, vis-à-vis the initial data set, we agreed on the following categories for our analysis:

Multimodal messages. Using the ideas about language use in literacy research and the notion of multimodality, this category analyzed how multiple semiotic resources (Kress, 2010) merged with English texts to convey diverse meanings.

English as a resource. Relying on the idea of polylinguaging (Jørgensen, et al., 2011), this category described how the participants used language resources at their disposal, and what kinds of messages they are producing in English.

Social interactions through English. Based on Otsuji and Pennycook's (2010) understanding of metrolingualism, we analyzed how English enhanced social interactions in these routes.

English in the City: Moments of Interplay and Language Diversity

We will highlight some of the lessons that our team learned during this journey. In this path, which also included a number of previous conference presentations (Mora, N. Gómez, Castaño, Pulgarín, Ramírez, & Mejía-Vélez, 2013; Mora & Ramírez, 2014; Mora, Ramírez, Pulgarín, Mejía-Vélez, Castaño, & N. Gómez, 2014), we have discovered a much broader variety of language use in the city than what other profiles (e.g. Velez-Rendon, 2003; González, 2010) had envisioned.

Language Use in the Advertisement Route.

Our observations indicate that the use of English has begun to transcend the traditional uses of apostrophes (Velez-Rendon, 2003) or isolated words to more complex messages. At first sight, it seemed that the emergence of second languages (Mora, 2013) was mostly a fad or a causality relationship (English seemed to appear where there were more tourists). However, as we moved all over the city and we interviewed our key informants, we learned that mere appearance was not the main factor for choosing names and messages in stores.

Our interviews showed how the owners of these places are interested to show something different (that with time and practice becomes of normal) in their business. They wanted to show something different from the norm to draw the attention of not only citizens, but also of foreigners and tourists. In some of the interviews conducted, shop owners expressed that they knew very well what the names of their establishments meant in the languages they chose (even if they themselves reported a lower proficiency level in English). Shop owners also reported that their choices of English had a great deal to do with the growing presence of English and other languages more in the city, thus providing a way for them to remain current with the trends within the city and as a way to trigger interest in customers or users.

Language Use in the Restaurant Route

Our explorations of restaurants across the city revealed that, as was the case of advertisements, names in English and other languages appear more often and beyond the traditional examples that Velez-Rendon (2003) pointed out in her research. One interesting finding is that, while the appearance of restaurants with names and menus in other languages is a phenomenon across the city, it is not uncommon anymore to find clusters of restaurants where multiple languages appear in the names and menus. Whether this surge may have any relationship with the emerging numbers of immigrants in the city remains a question, one that we might explore at a different time in our research team.

Language Use in the Malls, Bookshops, and Libraries Route

Our findings in this route confirm what the other two are discovering: One can no longer describe Medellín as a “monolingual city”. We must acknowledge the presence of English and different second languages in public places. The emergence of said languages has also triggered new and varied cultural spaces where, for instance, English may no longer be a rarity. Our interviews with store owners have shown personal narratives and experiences with other languages as deciding factors in the selection of names (our interviews in the other two routes confirmed this assertion). In the case of bookshops and libraries, while we are yet to have a critical mass of English literature, there are more patrons asking for books in English. In some libraries and bookshops, the English section now is a more visible portion of the setting. There is a growing concern about librarians about the promotion of English literacy in their spaces, as a response to the growing interest for second languages in the city.

A New Form of Indexicality?

Our findings indicate the emergence of a new form of indexicality (Blommaert, 2015; Collins & Slembrough, 2007). We found this in two specific instances. On the one hand, some of the messages in malls and ads involved references to irony, inspiration and even sexual innuendo as elements to draw attention. On the other, we found examples of foul language immersed in the names of clothing brands and restaurants. While this is an emerging topic in our findings, researchers such as Blommaert (personal communication, 26/08/14) have suggested that this should in fact be a full line of future inquiry in our research.

Implications

Through our analysis, we have learned that English and other languages are now an important element of the new language ecologies (Mora, 2014b) of our city. While far from the full-fledged multilingual cities in Europe or parts of Asia, the assumption that “one might not find any use of English here” is far from the actual truth. Medellín may not be a plurilingual city, but it is very well a “polylinguaged” (Jørgensen, et al., 2011) one. English is a veritable language resource that enriches the complexity of messages that one discovers across the city. These languages provide more complex multimodal messages where it is not enough to factor in modes (Kress, 2010) such as images, colors, or sounds. Now each language, we argue, may very well be a mode in and of itself, making more “kaleidoscopic” (Heath & Street, 2008) messages.

We believe that this study, as well as the ensuing umbrella project that it spawned (which now includes two more projects in progress, several senior and master’s theses, and growing international research partnerships) is a valuable contribution for research in the field of second languages (Mora, 2013b). Our framework, with its complexity, may enable researchers to broaden their scope to describe how languages make part of today’s messages in urban spaces. This study also contributes to the growing research in second languages in what was otherwise called “the forgotten continent” (Friedrich & Berns, 2003). Research on literacies in second languages, at least in Colombia and Latin America, is a very novel field, with very few researchers leading the path.

That makes this study, its ongoing second phase (Mora, Giraldo, Chiquito, Uribe & Ramírez, 2015; Mora, Salazar Patiño, M. Gómez, & Mejía Vélez), and all our work at the Literacies in Second Languages Project (LSLP; Mora, 2015, in press) a growing space for scholarship. We believe that our research will contribute to making this field a relevant option to understand how languages operate in our contemporary language ecologies, especially in a place so diverse and nuanced as Latin America.

References

- Albers, P. & Harste, J. C. (2007). The arts, new literacies, and multimodality. *English Education*, 40(1), 6-20.
- Black, R. W. (2009). English-language learners, fan communities, and 21st-century skills. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52(8), 688-697.
doi:10.1598/JAAL.52.8.4
- Blackburn, M. (2003). Exploring literacy performances and power dynamics at the loft: Queer youth reading the world and the word. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 37 (4), 467-490.
- Blommaert, J. & Dong, J. (2010). *Ethnographic fieldwork: A beginner's guide*. Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Blommaert, J. (2015). Chronotopes, scales and complexity in the study of language in society. *Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies*, 121. Retrieved from

https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/upload/b95222c6-7887-4df9-9c71-0763d66414fc_TPCS_121_Blommaert.pdf

Chiquito, T. & Rojas, B. (2014). Polylinguaging. *LSLP Micro-Papers, 1*. Retrieved from <http://www.literaciesinl2project.org/uploads/3/8/9/7/38976989/lslp-micro-paper-1-polylinguaging.pdf>

Collins, J. & Slembrouck, S. (2007). Reading shop windows in globalized neighborhoods: Multilingual literacy practices and indexicality. *Journal of Literacy Research, 39*(3), 335-356.

Conquergood, D. (2005). Street Literacy. En J. Flood, S. B. Heath & D. Lapp (Eds.), *Research on Teaching Literacy Through the Communicative and Visual Arts* (pp. 354-374). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Cope, B. & Kalantzis, M. (2009). "Multiliteracies": New literacies, new learning. *Pedagogies: An International Journal, 4*(3), 164-195.

Council of Europe (2001). A Common European Framework of Reference for learning, teaching and assessment. Retrieved from http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf

Dressman, M. (2007). Theoretically framed: Argument and desire in the production of general knowledge about literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly, 42*(3), 332-363.

Edwards, R. & Usher, R. (2008). *Globalisation and pedagogy: Space, place and identity* (2nd Ed.). London, UK: Routledge.

- Emerson R. M., Fretz R. I. & Shaw L. L. (1995) *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*.
Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Freire, P. & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. South
Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.
- Friedrich, P. & Berns, M. (2003). Introduction: English in South America, the other
forgotten continent. *World Englishes*, 22(2), 83-90.
- González, A. (2010). English and English teaching in Colombia: Tensions and
possibilities in the expanding circle. In A. Kirkpatrick (Ed.), *The Routledge
Handbook of World Englishes* (pp. 332-351). London, UK: Routledge.
- Gregory, E. & Williams, A. (2000). *City literacies: Learning to read across generations
and cultures*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Hamilton, M. (2000). Expanding the New Literacy Studies: Using photographs to
explore literacy as social practice. In D. Barton, M. Hamilton & R. Ivanič
(Eds.), *Situated Literacies: Reading and Writing in Context* (pp. 15-32).
London, UK: Routledge.
- Heath, S. B. & Street, B. V. (2008). *On Ethnography: Approaches to Language and
Literacy Research*. Language & Literacy (NCRL). New York: Teachers College
Press.
- Hodge, R. & Jones, K. (2000). Photography in collaborative research on multilingual
literacy practices. In M. Martin-Jones & K. Jones (Eds.). *Multilingual
Literacies: Reading and Writing Different Worlds*. Amsterdam: John
Benjamins.

- Hull, G. & Schultz, K. (2001). Literacy and learning out of school: a review of the theory and research. *Review of Educational Research*, 71 (4), 575-611.
- Iddings, A. C. D., McCafferty, S. G., & da Silva, M. L. T. (2011). Conscientização through graffiti literacies in the streets of a São Paulo neighborhood. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 46(1), 5-21. doi:10.1598/RRQ.46.
- Jørgensen, J. N., Karrebæk, M.S., Madsen, L. M. & Møller, J. S. (2011). Polylinguaging in superdiversity. *Diversities*, 13(2), 23-38.
- Kell, C. (2006). Crossing the margins: Literacy, semiotics, and the recontextualisation of margins. In K. Pahl & J. Rowsell (Eds.), *Travel notes from the New Literacy Studies: Instances of practice* (pp. 147-169). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Knobel, M. (2001). "I'm not a pencil man": How one student challenges our notions of literacy "failure" in school. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 44(5), 404-414.
- Kress, G. (1997). *Before writing: rethinking the paths to literacy*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Kress, G. (2003). *Literacy in the new media age*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kress, G. (2010). *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Kress, G. R., & Van Leeuwen, T. (2001). *Multimodal discourse: the modes and media of contemporary communication*. A Hodder Arnold Publication.

- Leeds-Hurwitz, W. (2004). Ethnography. In K. L. Fitch & R. E. Sanders (Eds.), *Handbook of Language and Social Interaction* (pp. 327-353).
- Marquez-Zenkov, K. & Harmon, J. A. (2007). Seeing English in the city: Using photography to understand students' literacy relationships. *The English Journal*, 96(6), 24-30.
- Mejía-Vélez, M. C. & Salazar Patiño, T. (2014). Multimodality. *LSLP Micro-Papers*, 4. Retrieved from <http://www.literaciesinl2project.org/uploads/3/8/9/7/38976989/lslp-micro-paper-4-multimodality.pdf>
- Miles, M. B. & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis (2nd Ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Mora Vélez, R. A. (2010). An analysis of the literacy beliefs and practices of faculty and graduates from a preservice English teacher education program. Disertación de Ph.D., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Disponible en https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/16829/MoraVelez_Raul.pdf?sequence=3
- Mora R. A. (2012, April). *What do you mean by <bilingual>? The multiple dimensions of <bilingualism>*. Presentation at the Bilingualism Integrated Table, Faculty of Education Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, Medellín. Available from <https://vimeo.com/40725314>

- Mora, R. A. (2013). The notion of second languages: Responding to today's linguistic ecologies. *The Journal for ESL Teachers and Learners, Vol. II*, 53-61.
- Mora, R. A. (2014a, August). An introduction to the concept of multimodality. In R. A. Mora (Chair), *Multimodality as reflexivity on literacy and teaching: Examples from undergraduate and graduate teacher education*. Symposium conducted at the 5th International Seminar on the Professional Development of Foreign Language Teachers, Universidad de Antioquia, Medellín, Colombia.
- Mora, R. A. (2014b). Language ecology. *Key Concepts in Intercultural Dialogue*, 13. Available from <http://centerforinterculturaldialogue.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/key-concept-language-ecology.pdf>
- Mora, R. A. (2015, April). Rethinking today's language ecologies: New questions about language use and literacy practices. In *Global Conversations in Literacy Research*. Available from <https://youtu.be/CMLnXwx3lRY>
- Mora, R. A. (in press). City literacies in second languages: New questions for policy and advocacy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*.
- Mora, R. A., Giraldo, M., Chiquito, T., Uribe, S., & Ramírez, N. (2015a, May). A narrative ethnography of tattoos and graffiti as second language literacies. Forthcoming presentation at the Eleventh International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA.
- Mora, R. A., Gómez, N., Castaño, M., Pulgarín, C., Ramírez, N., & Mejía-Velez, M. C. (2013, November). *Urban Englishes in the (still?) Expanding Circle: An analysis*

of English literacy practices in urban spaces in Medellín. Presentation at the 19th Conference of the International Association for World Englishes, Arizona State University, USA.

Mora, R. A. & Ramírez, N. (2014, September). *Rethinking literacy and second languages in the city: a study about urban literacies in Medellín, Colombia*. Presentation at the VI International Colloquium on Foreign Language Research, Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Sede Bogotá.

Mora, R. A., Ramírez, N., Pulgarín, C., Mejía-Velez, M. C., Castaño, M., & Gómez, N. (2014, May). *An ethnography of English literacies in the city: Discoveries and pedagogical implications*. Presentation at the Tenth International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA.

Mora, R. A., Salazar Patiño, T., Gómez, M. A., & Mejía-Vélez, M. C. (2015c, May). Music and fashion as cultural expressions of second language literacies in the city. Forthcoming presentation at the Eleventh International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA.

Otsuji, E. & Pennycook, A. (2010). Metrolingualism: fixity, fluidity and language in flux. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 7(3), 240-254.

doi:10.1080/14790710903414331

Ramírez N. & Mora, R. A. (2014). Ethnography. *LSLP Micro-Papers*, 3. Retrieved from <http://www.literaciesinl2project.org/uploads/3/8/9/7/38976989/lslp-micro-paper-3-ethnography.pdf>

- Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research (3rd Ed.)*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Sharkey, J., & Clavijo-Olarte, A. (2012). Community-based pedagogies: Projects and possibilities in Colombia and the US. In A., Honigsfeld, & A. Cohen (Eds). *Breaking the mold of education for culturally and linguistically diverse students: Innovative and successful practices for 21st century schools*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Soja, E. W. (1989). *Postmodern geographies: The reassertion of space in critical social theory*. London, UK: Verso.
- Street, B. (2013a). Multimodality and New Literacy Studies. What does it mean to talk about 'texts' today. In *ML2 Open Lecture Series*. Retrieved from <http://vimeo.com/88937627>
- Street, B. (2013b). New Literacy Studies. In M. Grenfell, D. Bloome, C. Hardy, K. Pahl, J. Rowsell, & B. Street (Eds.), *Language, Ethnography, and Education: Bridging New Literacy Studies and Bourdieu*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Street, B. V. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice*. London, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Street, B. V. (1995). *Social literacies: Critical approaches to literacy development, ethnography and education*. New York, NY: Longman.
- Tannock, S. (2001). The literacies of youth workers and youth workplaces. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 45(2), 140-143.

Velez-Rendon, G. (2003). English in Colombia: A sociolinguistic profile. *World Englishes*, 22(2), 185-198.

Willis, A. I., Montavon, M., Hall, H.; Hunter, C., Burke, L., & Herrera, A. (2008). *On critically conscious research: Approaches to language and literacy research*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

#AERA15 - Literacies in Second Languages Project