Technology, Digital Literacies, and Language Ecologies Rethinking the Intersection Between Technology, Digital Literacies and Language Ecologies

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Abstract

This reflective paper discusses the author's ongoing reflexivity about the new ways to describe English in today's language ecologies. Specifically, the author questions whether traditional binaries such as second/foreign language or native/non-native speaker remain viable. Thus, the author calls for a revised view of second languages that acknowledges how technology mediation is opening new spaces for creativity and ownership in the use of the language. This paper calls for a vision of English (and second languages) that intersects with technology and digital literacies to become a tool for access and social inclusion. The combination of English and these new technologies, if carefully conceived, can

Resumen

Este artículo discute el proceso continuo de reflexividad del autor sobre las nuevas formas de describir al inglés en las ecologías del lenguaje actuales. Específicamente, el autor cuestiona si los binarios tradicionales como segunda lengua/lengua extranjera o hablantes nativos/no nativos siguen siendo viables. Por lo tanto, el autor propone una visión revisada de segundas lenguas que reconozca cómo la mediación tecnológica abre nuevos espacios para la creatividad y la apropiación en el uso de la lengua. Este artículo también incita una visión del inglés (y las segundas lenguas) que se intersecte con la tecnología y las literacidades digitales como herramienta para el acceso y la inclusión social. La combinación del inglés

provide the first steps toward more equitable societies. The paper also introduces some early implications for pedagogy, literacy practices, and research in the final sections.

Keywords: literacies, digital literacies, technology, second languages

y estas nuevas tecnologías, si se concibe cuidadosamente, puede proveer los primeros pasos hacia sociedades más equitativas. Finalmente, el artículo presenta unas implicaciones iniciales para la pedagogía, las prácticas en literacidad y la investigación en sus apartes finales.

Palabras clave: literacidades, literacidades digitales, technología, segundas lenguas.

Introduction

As the world evolves, so do the different ways in which people interact with and through language. In the case of English (and second languages [Mora, 2013; Uribe & Gómez, 2015]), the demands for its usein today's language ecologies (Mora, 2014b) have become more complex than they used to. This new configurations of second languages and language ecologies, as I have argued elsewhere (Mora, 2011, 2012a, 2013b, 2014b, in press), are particularly crucial in light of the emergence of technology and the internet. Thanks to these two factors, today we find new cadres of language users who do not depend on geographical location to use English in more creative and personal ways. These users are engaging in new forms of participation (Roccanti, 2014) that operate with new forms of social media (Zapata, 2014) and digital literacies (González, 2014). These new forms of mobility (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011) that technology affords provide new opportunitiesfor language educators to rethink their practice and raise questions about how and we learn and teach English (Graddol, 1997; Mora, 2013b). They also provide a moment to reflect upon how language educators need to respond with

meaningful pedagogical proposals to the intersection of technology and classroom instruction (Wilhelm, 2014). Teachers and teacher educators are more aware that the Internet and other forms of technological mediation, which place a premium on participation and design, are now essential factors toreconceptualize and recontextualize language curricula (Mora, 2011; Mora, Martínez, Alzate-Pérez, Zapata-Monsalve, & Gómez-Yepes, 2012).

My recent reflections about language (e.g. Mora, 2014c), which will be the main basis for reflection in this reflective paper, have questioned an apparent gap between how we define technology and how we categorize English. While language users keep exploring and expanding digital spaces in unimaginable ways (Black, 2009; Leander & Lewis, 2008; Mora, 2014f; Mora, Peláez, Jaramillo, Rojas-Echeverri, Castaño, & Zuluaga, 2014), the terms to define English remain anchored in traditional descriptions seemingly linked to geographical features (Mora, 2013b). If it holds true that technology is affording people different ways to participate in culture (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011) and literacy (Labbo & Place, 2010; Rust, 2015), the field of

language teaching at large must respond accordingly. As Thorne and Black (2008) argued,

> [Q]ualitative shifts in communicative contexts, purposes, and genres of language use associated with new media necessitate a responsive and proactive vision of educational practice, particularly in the areas of first and *additional* language instruction (pp. 133-134, emphasis added).

This reflective paperintends to engage the readership in a reflexivity (2014e) process that will focus on the importance of developing agency through technologyas the main factor in our current language learning and teaching processes. I argue that notions such as second/foreign language (Graddol, 2006; Mora, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2015; Nayar, 1997) or native/non-native speaker (Derwing & Munro, 2009; Graddol, 2003; Mora, 2014b; Mora & Muñoz Luna, 2012; Moussu & Llurda, 2008) are not really addressing the new forms of language use and community building that technology fosters. In fact, one could further argue that all these new technologies are demanding that we change the traditional denominations and create new configurations. In this paper, the ultimate call is for a true intersection of English with technology and digital literacies to become a tool for access and social inclusion (Luke, 2004; Mora & Golovátina-Mora, 2011; Pennycook, 2001).

Language Education 1.0: *Second* vs. *Foreign,* Revisited

From a historical vantage point (Pennycook, 2010); society has always sought ways to frame languages, based on a myriad of possible categories. Geography has been one of the most influential. In the field of English Education (Conference on English Education, 2005)[1], for instance, most teachers are aware of the notions of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Conventional wisdom has defined that one learns ESL in those countries where English is the official language (which, traditionally, narrows it down to either the US or the UK) and EFL in any other country where learning usually happens inside school settings alone (Skutnabb-Kangas & McCarty, 2008). In the ESL/EFL dichotomy, the only *bona fide* way to learn to speak "well" is by attending immersion programs in those English-speaking countries, by going to school there, or simply by living there for an extended period. This distinction has helped create categories such as Kachru's (1996) concentric circles (i.e. Inner Circle, Outer Circle, and Expanding Circle), which linked language ownership to geographical areas based on the "official" nature of said languages. The second/foreign language dichotomy has also perpetuated the idea that native-speakerism is the only way to improve the quality of language teaching (Graddol, 2003), especially in the so-called "Expanding Circle" countries (as is the case

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[1] In this essay, I will use English Education as an umbrella term, according to the three parameters from the Conference on English Education position statement in 2005, "(1) the teaching and learning of English, broadly and inclusively defined; (2) the preparation and continuing professional support of teachers of English at all levels of education; and (3) systematic inquiry into the teaching and learning of English". I use this term instead of the traditional "English Language Teaching", as I find it more fitting to my recent discussions of second languages (Mora, 2013b).

of Colombia), where conventional wisdom indicates that English is only restricted to classrooms.

This binary and its derived ideas, albeit popular, have come under scrutiny since the latter part of the 20th Century (Bruthiaux, 2003; Cook, 1999; Graddol, 2003; Hurst, 2010; Kirkpatrick, 2007; Nayar, 1997). While there are multiple reasons to question the binary (Graddol, 2006, Mora, 2011, 2012a, 2013b), in this essay I will only discuss the questions that technology is raising. The distinction between second and foreign, as I explained in the previous paragraph, stems from a geographical distinction, one where borders were clear-cut and communication beyond them was complicated (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011). This meant that access to the cultural nuances of the language was only attainable by the means I mentioned in the previous paragraph. Even in academic terms, the exchange of ideas and arguments required scholars to spend large sums of money to interact with their counterparts. However, technology mediation is offering new ways to reframe mobility, education, and culture (Hawisher, Selfe, Guo, & Liu, 2006). For instance, Blommaert and Rampton (2011) posited that technology is helping immigrants retain their ties with their home culture and language in more convenient ways. Immigrant families otherwise forced to sever all ties for them and their descendants now can communicate often and exchange ideas.

While the case that Blommaert and Rampton (2011) talked about in their discussion mostly referred to immigrants, there are connections to the field of English Education. Communication across speakers is no longer limited to physical spaces. Virtual spaces (Leander & Lewis, 2008) are now the arena for deeper language exchanges, sometimes even deeper than what may happen in physical spaces. Many activities that take place online, such as participation in social media (White & Hungerford-Kresser, 2014; Zapata, 2014), online fan communities (Black, 2005, 2009), or gaming (Apperley & Walsh, 2012; Beavis, 2014; Mora, et al., 2014; Walton & Pallitt, 2012) require participants to use English regardless of their alleged proficiency (Chiquito & Rojas, 2014). Black (2009) explained,

> Such activities also illustrate the ELLs, in spite of language barriers, are fully capable of using technology and multimodal forms of representation to learn and generate knowledge through participation in linguistically sophisticated and cognitively demanding tasks. (p. 695)

If, as Black (2009) claimed, technology may foster language sophistication, then we need to rethink how we are linking English and technology. One of the problems that sometimes take place in English classes is that actual lack of sophistication that Black brought to mind. In their analysis of the typical technology classroom activities, Mora and colleagues (Mora, Martínez, Alzate-Pérez, Gómez-Yepes, & Zapata-Monsalve, 2012; Mora, Martínez, Zapata-Monsalve, Alzate-Pérez, & Gómez-Yepes, 2012), posited,

> Without clear and engaging tasks, most Internet-based activities just combine Google™, Wikipedia™, or YouTube™

with grammar or pronunciation websites. The usual outcomes of these activities seldom foster critical thinking skills, strong criteria to select content online (Segers & Verhoeven, 2009), or the necessary communicative competencies in a second language. In addition, in the case of copy -and-paste written reports, there is the constant risk of plagiarism (Badke, 2010; Callison, 2005; Dames, 2007). (p.292)

As Mora and colleagues contended, in this particular scenario, critical thinking takes a backseat to the use of the browser and language use becomes yet again something devoid of meaning for the students, lacking true spaces for their participation through language. An in-depth analysis of all these elements requires, then, a new framework to think about how language, literacy, and technology must intersect for a revised view of language.

Language Education 2.0: The interplay between *Second languages* and technology

Looking at some of the debates about the division between second and foreign language (Graddol, 2006; Mora, 2011, 2013b; Nayar, 1997), one common question appears: Is the idea of *foreign* language still valid today? If one started from the idea of "foreign" as "not one's own" or "strange to us" (Mora, 2012a), then the idea of a *foreign language* becomes problematic. There is no sense of ownership, there is no sense of real use, and language is meaningless. People would only use language to go somewhere else, to talk to someone else (i.e. native speakers). Language use would

always be defined as "artificial" and would set it as unnecessary or nonexistent in our local contexts, an idea that some of our recent research (Mora, 2014d, Mora, Gómez, Castaño, Pulgarín, Ramírez, & Mejía-Vélez, 2013; Mora & Ramírez, 2014; Mora, Ramírez, Pulgarín, Mejía-Vélez, Castaño, & Gómez, 2014; Mora, Castaño, Gómez, Ramírez, Mejía-Vélez, & Pulgarín, 2015) has begun to debunk.

Setting these goals for language will always make learners feel that their investment in the learning process is moot. It may also set unequal structures where language becomes a luxury for some and a source of marginalization for others (Luke, 2004; Mora, 2014c; Mora & Golovátina-Mora, 2011; Pennycook, 2001). This explains why scholars such as Graddol (2006) or Mora (2011b, 2013b) have made strong calls to claim that "foreign language has officially run its course" (Mora, 2012b). We need, then, a revised view of what it means to talk about *second languages* (Mora, 2013b; Uribe & Gómez, 2015)*.*

If we start from Mora's (2013b) understanding of second languages as those learned in addition (whether concurrently or after) to one's mother tongue (Skutnabb-Kangas & McCarty, 2008), the notion of additional (Thorne & Black, 2008) makes us revisit all the spaces where language exchange takes place and, as a consequence, how these new places beget new form1s of participation. The online realm of the Internet, with social media (Zapata, 2014) and gaming (Jaramillo Villegas, 2014) spaces is the first place that would most likely come to mind. As a place that transcends the physical spaces and a

place where most language interactions take place in English, the Internet becomes then a space where language users exchange ideas in multiple ways, some beyond the canonical expressions of language. Social networks, online gaming (Labbo & Place, 2010; Mora, et al., 2014), the constant creation of memes (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011), the transmission of news and stories through applications such as Twitter™ or Pinterest™ (Rybakova & Kollar, 2014), and even the use of technologies such as Livescribe™ (Piotrowski, 2014) provide a new myriad of spaces where English use takes a life of its own as the source for increased forms of participation, especially for second language users.

Technology offers us, in this case, a place where one could even argue that while English would be the second language of the majority of speakers, it is a space where English is, in fact, the *first language* (Skutnabb-Kangas & McCarty,2008), as that language that is most often used. Whether English is one's mother tongue or second language, technology mediation congregates us, through different communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), to find creative ways to use the language. This a stark contrast to the idea of foreign language: Our students in Colombia, Vietnam, Russia, France, Kenya, or Samoa, just to name places far from each other, may find themselves using English in more authentic scenarios, for richer cultural exchanges, and in a more meaningful language immersion than what language courses may offer them.

The idea of second language as a language without any boundaries other than what the language users themselves wish to set for themselves is one of the operating principles of notions such as World Englishes (Bhatt, 2010; Bruthiaux, 2010; Rajagopalan, 2004; Smith, 2014) or English as a Lingua Franca (Björkman, 2014; Seidlhofer, 2005). Language, in this sense, is as real or authentic as the uses and purposes that one sets for it. If one belongs to an online community where people around the world share interests and knowledge (I can still recall how many strong friendships I developed with people at one IRC chat room I used to visit back in 1997), or what Black (2009) calls "communities of affinity", language becomes realistic and authentic.

Language Education 3.0: Pedagogical and Research Implications for Technology as catalyst of challenges and opportunities

The intersections between technology and second language learning have opened very interesting options for teachers and students alike. Today's language education communities need to find ways to actively participate in the different conversations and debates about language learning and teaching worldwide. The first reality that language teachers and teacher educators must face is that, in order to access the myriad of language networks already available, we must be ready to offer sound pedagogical proposals. In the view of second languages we are proposing here, this realization is the starting point. As Black (2009) posited, Web 2.0 (Benson & Graham, 2013; Fahser-Herro & Steinkuehler, 2011; Wang & Vásquez, 2008) is about active participation. The traditional view of foreign language tends to be more passive. The only

"authentic" texts to which students are exposed are those made for and (most importantly) *by native speakers.* This over-validation of the native speaker creates social imaginaries that non-native speaker teachers might be unable to use English in real contexts (Mora & Muñoz Luna, 2012). In that sense, Web 2.0 offers a very different scenario for teachers and students. In this context, authenticity has less to do with nationality or native-speaker status and everything to do with affinity.

The emergence of digital literacies (González, 2014; Smythe & Neufeld, 2010) also opens new spaces for what it means to be an author (Mora, 2011) and how language users can participate in these new media environments. Ideas such as blogging (Deng & Yuen, 2011) and the use of multimodal (Mejía-Vélez & Salazar Patiño, 2014; Mora, 2014c) tools for communication and text creation, for instance, provide new outlets to compose in more imaginative ways (Angay-Crowder, Choi, & Yli, 2013) while sharing one's ideas with a much broader audience.

With a broader audience and appealing topics, a new sense of *ownership* and *empowerment* (Dockter, Haug, & Lewis, 2010; O'Byrne, 2014) may emerge. This ownership of the language and the content that language learners find is an important consideration for the classrooms. We must interrogate what kind of activities we are promoting when it comes to English and technology. The use of blogging (Arena, 2008; Lee, 2011; Mynard, 2007), micro-blogging (Borau, Ullrich, Feng, & Shen, 2009; Stevens, 2008), Wikis (Craig, 2013; Kessler, 2009; Lund, 2008), mobile

technologies (Godwin-Jones, 2005; Kukulsa-Hulme, 2009), oror WebQuests (Mora, 2014f; Mora, et al., 2012), when applied to English language learning and teaching, provide plenty of spaces for language users to expand their language limits. These forms, with their participatory (Roccanti, 2014) nature, engage students and invite them to produce texts that matter. This engagement, as my colleagues and I have argued elsewhere (Mora, Martínez, Zapata-Monsalve, Alzate-Pérez, & Gómez-Yepes, 2012), also invites teachers and students alike to see immersion as a learner-toward-language relationship, but as more complex relationship where the language is a means to link our worlds with those of others all over the world (p. 2097).

This idea of second language as one beyond boundaries poses a challenge to ELT researchers and teacher educators: We need to understand all the spaces where language participation may take place. If languages have no true boundaries (Jørgensen, Karrebæk, Madsen, & Møller, 2011), then we need to inquire about all those places where languages may come into play (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010). This means that we need to expand our frameworks to understand language to include ideas such as multimodality (Kress, 1997, 2000, 2010; Mejía-Vélez & Salazar Patiño, 2014) or multiliteracies (Cañas & Ocampo, 2014; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009; Kalantzis & Cope, 2008) as concepts that bring together language, literacy, and technology while stressing the need for participation and agency. Along those lines, there is also call for caution about the use of languages as tools for inequality (Caney, 2001; Mora, 2013a; Mora & Golovátina-

Mora, 2011). We must advocate for a social justice component (Conference on English Education, 2009) for the use of online and internet-based technologies in English Education.

Coda

The use of online, digital, and internet technology has the potential to expand the boundaries of our imagination. But, as language educators and researchers with a strong sense of social justice, we cannot forget the dangers that technology could provide as a way to separate and dehumanize people. Ultimately, the intersections among language education, digital literacies, and online technology must provide spaces, whether physical, blended, or virtual, where all language users can find ways to engage in common interests, in meaningful interactions, and in active participation. We can never forget these new ways to see second language through technology must help us break all those other barriers that did not allow us to see each other as peers, as Others (Mora & Golovátina-Mora, 2011) who have more in common than what our physical borders may ever allow us to realize.

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