

Catherine M. Mazak

**Literacy, Technology, and Community: A study of practices and English language
development in rural Puerto Rico**

Introduction

Every Puerto Rican public school student studies English as a subject from kindergarten through ninth grade. However, this does not mean that all graduates of Puerto Rican schools have the English abilities that might be required of them to study in higher education, pursue careers on the island and off, or even manage everyday texts in English. The troubled history of English in the educational system has led to controversies in educational and island-wide language policy (Barreto, 2001; de Gutierrez, 1987; Duany, 2002; Pousada, 1999; Torres-Gonzalez, 2002). If all Puerto Rican students are really to be served by the system of English education, new approaches to English language teaching based on empirical research need to be developed. This study seeks to inform those approaches by studying English language use in a particular community in Puerto Rico. By looking up close at real, everyday English literacy practices of regular Puerto Ricans, we can understand more clearly the kinds of community literacy practices in English that good language curriculum could be based on.

A growing area of research within literacy studies looks at the intersections of literacy and technology (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 2000; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). As more and more people gain access to the world of computers, different literacy practices are emerging, including the reading and writing of online texts such as web pages, emails, and blogs, and the navigation of interfaces that require an understanding of both text and image. In addition, through the internet, students in Puerto Rico and all over the world have access to a myriad of texts in English. Though English language learning may be controversial in Puerto Rico, the fact that English is the language of computers and technology is not questioned. This study seeks to

understand the relationship between the use of text in English and computers as it was observed within the context of a larger study of English literacy practices in a rural Puerto Rican school-turned-community center. In this way, the work will inform a cutting-edge line of research by expanding current work on literacy and technology into the Puerto Rican context of English as a colonial language.

Beyond technology and other physical resources that may facilitate English language learning, good language teaching should utilize all available resources, particularly those that come from the community (Dyson, 2003; Street, 2001). Studies of community and family literacy classes have mostly focused on adult literacy in English in the context of the United States (Lytle, 2001; Rockhill, 1993). This study, however, includes data collected in the process of teaching a unique community English course at the same data collection site as mentioned above. In this course, junior high and high school students, young professionals, retired teachers, and even whole families studied conversational English together. In the process, they shared resources in a way that is not possible inside the traditional English classroom. Study of the participants' English language development and how the unique classroom setting fostered it could will not only potentially inform English language educational policy in Puerto Rico, but also will present a new addition to the current research on family and community literacy.

Objectives

This course release would support the development of these two threads in the collected data that have arisen but gone unanalyzed: the relationship of technology and literacy and the practice of resource sharing inside the community English class. These two themes emerged from the data during previous analysis but were beyond the scope of analysis at the time. In addition, the course release would support the writing of a book proposal and manuscript reporting the results of the study. This would involve revision of existing work developed from

the same study (including two projects supported by *descargas* in previous semesters: “Negotiating English literacy practices in a rural Puerto Rican community,” First Semester 2005-2006 and “Language brokering as border crossing,” Second semester 2005-2006) into book form.

An interesting finding of the study so far has been the relationship between English literacy practices and technology. In my observations of English literacy practices in the school library-turned-community center, I found that participants of differing ages and levels of English proficiency used English text on computers. This included navigating computer interfaces in English, filling out web-based forms, and reading web pages. Young people also used the English on the computer to write messages to each other in English, where they rarely did so using pen and paper. Delving back into the data to explore this theme means asking the questions: How do participants see computers as “safe” places to use English text? How do computers contribute to the motivation, especially of young people, to learn to read and write in English? How do interactions around computers develop English proficiency? How might these informal uses of English at the computer inform our classroom pedagogy?

The second theme that will be developed in this project is that of language brokering inside the community English class. Quite unexpectedly, I had the opportunity during the course of the study to teach a community English class where students young and old—from 8th graders to retired teachers—came on Saturdays to study conversational English. In some cases, whole families and parent-child pairs came and studied side-by-side. During the last few weeks of the study, I began taping these classes in order to analyze them later. This data will be transcribed and analyzed as part of the study. I will look particularly to address the following questions: What borders are being crossed in the process of studying in the community English class (i.e., traditional borders between parent/child, school/community, teacher/student)? How does this

border crossing facilitate English language learning? How do participants share resources in the process of developing their English language abilities?

Thus, this work has implications for educational language policy. From a sociocultural perspective on language learning, language is a social phenomenon, a form of communication between people and groups (Hymes, 1994). Its use is always situated within a context and has a specific purpose (Miller & Goodnow, 1995; Street, 1993). Any new communicative practice—whether it is learning a language, learning to read, communicating in academic contexts, or learning a new genre of writing—builds on existing practices. This project rests on the assertion that until we know the communicative practices of a given community, teachers, curriculum developers, and policy makers cannot effectively utilize those practices for what they are: a person’s admission ticket from one discourse community into another. Understanding these communicative practices is key to developing good language curricula and effective teacher education, as teachers could build on these practices to enhance student language learning.

Setting and Participants

Data was collected in Comerío, a rural, mountainous farming community in the central area of Puerto Rico. Data collection took place over a four-month period in a school library which, with the help of a Title V grant, became a community center where students, parents, teachers, and other community members studied, surfed the internet, held meetings, and relaxed in their free time. Focal participants included junior high students, teachers, lunch ladies, parents, professionals, and retirees. The community language was Spanish, though people encountered and managed English text regularly as part of their everyday lives, including reading product labels and instructions (which are often printed in English only), navigating the computer interface, and corresponding with federal agencies such as with the federal student loan program.

Though few community members claimed to speak English, almost all of the participants read and used English text.

Work Plan

This course release would support the preparation of: (1) a book proposal to be submitted to Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers or Teacher's College Press (or other publishers if rejected by both), (2) revision of dissertation (currently six chapters) into a book manuscript, and (3) data analysis and writing of two additional book chapters to add to the converted dissertation manuscript. Work would begin with the preparation and submission of the book proposal. After submission of the proposal, data analysis for the two additional chapters would begin. This would involve returning to the collected dissertation data, listening to 30+ hours of audiotape, identifying sections to transcribe, transcribing those, and analyzing the transcribed data. I anticipate two chapters to be written from this data: "Technology and English literacy" and "Language brokering inside the classroom." (If the book proposal is not accepted by a publisher, I will rewrite these two chapters into journal articles.) Finally, the dissertation would be revised into a book, incorporating the two new chapters. The final book would include:

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Language and identity

Chapter 3: Community literacy practices

Chapter 4: Technology and literacy

Chapter 5: Language brokering outside of class

Chapter 6: Language brokering in the community English class

Chapter 7: Conclusion & implications for English education

Work plan itinerary first semester 2006-2007 (15 weeks):

Weeks 1-5: Preparation of book proposal. Revision of two sample chapters for submission with the proposal.

Weeks 5-9: Analysis of recorded materials. Identification of key parts to be transcribed.

Transcription of those parts.

Weeks 9-12: Data analysis; Analysis of transcribed materials; re-analysis of data for the two new themes.

Weeks 13-15: Outline and begin to draft chapter on language brokering in the community English class.

Work plan second semester 2005-2007 (15 weeks):

Weeks 1-3: Finish draft of chapter on language brokering in the community English class.

Weeks 4-9: Outline and draft chapter on literacy and technology.

Weeks 9-14: Revision of existing text into book format, incorporating the two new chapters.

Specifically, revise chapter one to combine literature review and methodology sections into an introduction. Expansion of implications and conclusions of the work into a final chapter. Work to link chapters so that an argument builds throughout the book.

Weeks 15: Submission of book manuscript to publisher (if proposal has been accepted).

Justification

A six-credit course release for an entire academic year is required to undertake a project of this magnitude because it involves not only revision of an existing (dissertation) manuscript, but also new analysis of data. This will include going back to existing data with a slightly new theoretical lens, one that includes a framework for understanding the interaction of literacy and technology, a newly developing field of study. Also, the addition of a chapter about classroom language brokering practices widens the scope from the dissertation, which focused solely on outside-of-class uses of English text. This will involve serious re-working of the original text,

particularly the first and last chapter. In addition, the inclusion of this chapter involves the transcription of many hours of audiotape, an extremely time-consuming activity. Preparation of the book proposal itself will also contribute to the work load.

The possibility of contributing to a cutting-edge area of research, one that works in the intersections of the fields of language, literacy, and education, makes this a timely project. Researchers are just starting to complicate understandings of bilingualism, for example, with research such as this that takes place in a unique cultural context. In addition, this course release would support the development of an interesting thread that has emerged from this on-going project, that of the relationship between English literacy practices and technology. This has the potential to inform current thought on language teaching with technology.

Bibliography

- Barreto, A. A. (2001). *The politics of language in Puerto Rico*. Gainesville: University of Florida.
- Barton, D., Hamilton, M., & Ivanic, R. (Eds.). (2000). *Situated literacies: Reading and writing in context*. London: Routledge.
- Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (2000). *Multiliteracies: literacy learning and the design of social futures*. New York: Routledge.
- de Gutierrez, E. A. (1987). *The movement against teaching English in the schools of Puerto Rico*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Duany, J. (2002). *The Puerto Rican nation on the move : identities on the island & in the United States*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Dyson, A. H. (2003). *The brothers and sisters learn to write: Popular literacies in childhood and school cultures*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Hymes, D. (1994). Toward ethnographies of communication. In J. Maybin (Ed.), *Language and literacy in social practice: A reader*. Clevedon, Avon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Lytle, S. L. (2001). Living literacy: Rethinking development in adulthood. In E. Cushman, E. R. Kintgen, B. M. Kroll & M. Rose (Eds.), *Literacy: A critical sourcebook* (pp. 376-401). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- Miller, P. J., & Goodnow, J. J. (1995). Cultural practices: toward an integration of culture and development. In J. J. Goodnow, P. J. Miller & F. Kessel (Eds.), *Cultural practices as contexts for development*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Pousada, A. (1999). The singularly strange story in English in Puerto Rico. *Milenio*, 3, 33-60.
- Rockhill, K. (1993). Gender, language and the politics of literacy. In B. Street (Ed.), *Cross-cultural approaches to literacy* (pp. 156-175). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Street, B. (1993). The new literacy studies. In B. Street (Ed.), *Cross-cultural approaches to literacy* (pp. 1-21). London: Cambridge University Press.
- Street, B. (2001). *Literacy and development: Ethnographic perspectives*. London: Routledge.
- Torres-Gonzalez, R. (2002). *Idioma, bilingüismo y nacionalidad : la presencia del inglés en Puerto Rico*. San Juan: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico.