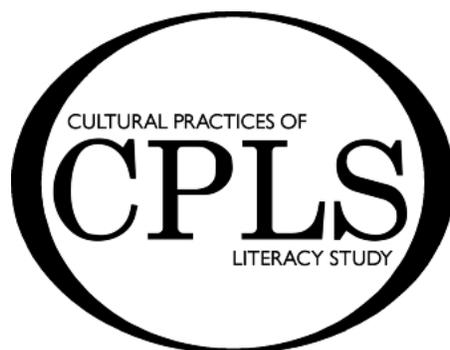


**Appropriation and Resistance in the (English) Literacy Practices of
Puerto Rican Farmers**

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Working Paper #3

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The road from San Juan to Ramona is crowded and winding. As you climb up hillsides covered in green palms and plantain trees, the crazy traffic of the city falls away. It is replaced with small *tiendas*, selling fresh roasted pork, hanging close to the roadside, and views down the valley to the Rio La Plata. Though only 3,000 feet above sea level, the small town of Ramona seems on top of the world. From the schoolyard you can see the Atlantic, but the tourist beaches and high-rise hotels that Puerto Rico is known for are a world away.

The cruise ship crowd never makes it this far into the island, though many other signs of an economy driven by the U.S. do. There are a local Sears™ and a McDonalds™ in a neighboring town. Many local businesses have signs in English: *Palomas Mini-Market* and *Zayas Cash and Carry*. The center of the *pueblo* of Ramona sits on the banks of the Rio La Plata, deep in a valley surrounded by the green mountains. A sign for *Julio's Parking-50c* means that while you conduct your business, Julio will watch your car, which you can park on the river bank, for a very reasonable rate. The streets of the town square, which has the Catholic Church at its center, are narrow and better suited for horses than cars. But if you want to get your mail in Ramona, you have to find a way to navigate them, because that is where you will find a U.S. Post Office, zip code 00892.

But don't be confused by all the signs in English. If you are planning a visit to Ramona, it's a good idea to speak Spanish. Though you will find the occasional bilingual in Ramona (usually a military veteran, or those who have participated in the reverse migration from the mainland U.S.), English will not get you very far. Inside of all of those buildings with the English signs, business is conducted in Spanish.

Puerto Rican Language History

The colonial relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico accounts for the signs in English and the predominance of American chain businesses even in the most rural parts of the island. Language policy has been at the center of the power struggle between Puerto Ricans and the U.S. government since the U.S. invaded the island in 1898. Education was the battle ground where the war over language was fought. In 1899, Victor S. Clark, appointed president of the Puerto Rican Board of Education, made this strategy very clear in a report to his superior:

If the schools are made American, and teachers and pupils are inspired with the American spirit, and people of both races can be made to cooperate harmoniously in building up the schools, the island will become in its sympathies, views, and attitude toward life and toward government essentially American. The great mass of Puerto Ricans are as yet passive and plastic . . . Their ideals are in our hands to create and mold (Davis, 1899, p. 646, as cited in Morris, 1995, p. 26).

It was clear to this military government that “the easiest path to the eventual Americanization and anglification of the population was thought to lie through the children of Puerto Rico” (Scheweers & Hudders, 2000, p. 64).

Not surprisingly, one of the first acts of the U.S. military government to these ends was to declare English the official language of education in Puerto Rico. This started a long struggle for Puerto Ricans to keep Spanish as the language of education. This struggle happened both at grass roots levels and through legislation, and a Puerto Rican’s opinion on this issue defined his or her politics (Morris, 1995). This very imposition of English, designed explicitly to Americanize, actually succeeded in strengthening Puerto Rican identity and rallying Puerto Ricans behind

Spanish as an act of defiance against the colonizer (Morris, 1995; Scheweers & Hudders, 2000; Zentella, 1999).

The policies surrounding the language of instruction in the schools changed as Puerto Rican government and status changed. In the elementary schools from 1915 until 1934 a mixed policy existed: Spanish was the language of instruction until fourth grade; in fifth grade, students spent half a day being instructed in Spanish and half in English; from sixth grade on, English was the language of instruction (Ramirez-Gonzalez & Torres-Gonzalez, 1996).

It is important to note here that what actually happened in these classrooms was likely very different from what this policy mandated. Many teachers only taught in English when they were being supervised (Scheweers & Hudders, 2000). High schools were taught in English from 1898 to the late 1940s, mainly because those students who went to high school were from upper class families who wanted English as the language of instruction.

In 1946 a bill went through the Puerto Rican legislature that would make Spanish the language of instruction in both elementary and high schools. The bill was vetoed by the U.S.-appointed governor, and the veto was over-ridden by the necessary two-thirds vote in the legislature. Any bill that had been vetoed and overridden was then sent to the president of the U.S. for the final say, according to the laws of the time. President Truman vetoed the bill. But as soon as Puerto Ricans had negotiated their commonwealth status in 1952, a law was passed that made Spanish the language of instruction in the schools (Morris, 1995). This law remains in effect today, and Puerto Ricans study English as a subject in school from first grade through college.

On April 5, 1991 Spanish was declared the official language by the new pro-commonwealth government, overriding the 1902 law declaring both languages official. In

January of 1993 the newly-elected pro-statehood government passed a law reverting to both Spanish and English as co-official languages of the island. This is still the case today, though a pro-commonwealth government has been in power since 2000.

Knowing the language policy history, though, is not knowing the whole story. The real story of language in Puerto Rico must be seen from the ground up. The actual language of education and business, and of the citizens and students who must negotiate those institutions, is very different from what the policies imply. It is fairly well accepted in Puerto Rico that English is necessary for economic success. In this way, it has the kind of mythological quality that surrounds English as a world language in other countries (including in immigrant and other language minority populations in the U.S.). English is seen as the key to financial success, to scientific and technological advancement. For this reason it is taught in the schools, and the aspirations of even the pro-commonwealth government who declared Spanish the sole official language were to promote bilingualism with English, not because it was an official language but because it was necessary for participation in the global economy.

Thus, the language policy in Puerto Rico is bilingualism, and it is fairly accepted among U.S. institutions that Puerto Ricans are bilingual. As an example, though the large Midwestern university where I taught tested all international students for placement in English, they did not test Puerto Ricans. The assumption was made that they were all bilingual, and thus could handle academic classes in English just as any native-English-speaking student could. (Below I will complicate the notion of what it means to “speak English” or be “bilingual.”)

A close look at the island soon reveals a more complex picture. The ability to speak English is very much determined by social class and by location on the island. The higher your social class, the more likely you are to speak English. Those from the urban, densely populated

coast are more likely to speak it than those in the rural, mountainous interior. Some key exceptions to this rule are veterans of the U.S. armed forces, into which Puerto Ricans were heavily drafted after U.S. citizenship was imposed in 1917 and for which they are still heavily recruited. Those who have participated in the steady flow of Puerto Ricans migrating to and returning from the mainland U.S. as they seek economic opportunities are also likely to speak English.

To begin to understand the real story of language, literacy, and power in Puerto Rico, we need to look closely at the assumptions about the role of English on the island. What does being bilingual in Puerto Rico really mean? What are the uses of English outside of the populated coasts? How important is English, really? This case study explores the ways that reading and writing in both Spanish and English are used by two farmers in the interior of the island. It is a study of language appropriation and resistance, where English is taken up by the participants to meet their own needs on their own terms.

Chucho and Jacinto's Family

Ramona is a rural community in the fertile mountains of Puerto Rico. It has a long agricultural tradition, and was once well known for growing tobacco. The participants in this study are Chucho and Jacinto¹, brothers who live on their family's farm with their mother and sisters in the house in which they grew up. The farm is on a hilly, red-earth spot of about 80 acres, a large farm by Puerto Rican standards. The farm was owned by Chucho and Jacinto's grandfather, Don Luis, who gave out parcels of the land around the boundaries of the farm for his twelve children to build houses. Chucho and Jacinto's house is one of those. With the death of Don Luis, the farm was split into pieces and distributed among Chucho and Jacinto's aunts and uncles. The brothers are trying desperately to make the farm turn a profit so that the *tíos*

won't sell off their pieces to developers. Chucho and Jacinto work the farm, doing the picking and planting themselves, with an occasional hired worker. They manage the business end of the farm as well, selling their products to local buyers, applying for loans, and doing everything that running a small business might entail.

They are also community organizers. Jacinto works with the local farmers as president of the "nucleus of production," a group of farmers who grow the same crops and manage a small store. The brothers won the "Conservationist Farmer of the Year" award for Puerto Rico, given by the USDA national resources conservation service.

Chucho and Jacinto come from an educated family. Their father holds a bachelor's degree and worked in banking. Now he is a real estate appraiser. Their mother was an elementary- school Spanish teacher and, in her spare time, a writer. She has published several stories and poems in local magazines. Both brothers have bachelor's degrees in Agricultural Science from the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez. Jacinto, the older of the two, also began to work towards a Master's, but never finished. Chucho and Jacinto are good informants because they provide a perspective from rural Puerto Rico. Though they have much English education, they do not consider themselves English speakers. In this way, Chucho and Jacinto are typical of many educated Puerto Ricans from the interior of the island.

Researcher Location

I have come to know this family well. There are five brothers and sisters, Elías, Ana, Jacinto, Chucho and Alma, spanning in age across ten years. Through my work as an ESL teacher at a large Midwestern university, I met Ana, the oldest sister of Chucho and Jacinto, when she was my student for an intensive summer English course. During that summer she introduced me to her brother Elías, the oldest in the family, who was a full-time graduate student.

We started dating soon after the summer session. In the course of my relationship with Elías, I have traveled many times to Ramona, always staying in the house on the farm.

I have come to know Chucho and Jacinto, as well, over the years, despite my initially low level of Spanish. When I approached them about this project, I was very aware of my identity as an American, a member of the colonial power that occupies their country. More significantly, I am an English teacher, one of the very people who reify the role of power in the teaching of English, a language that is presented to Puerto Ricans as essential to economic and academic success.

Despite these factors, the brothers were happy to talk to me. After the first interview, however, Elías took it upon himself to reassure Jacinto by explaining something about me as a researcher. Elías felt it was important that Chucho and Jacinto know that I do not think everyone needs to learn English, and that I understand the historical role of English in Puerto Rico as a tool of imperialism. He told them how I feel about globalization and the hegemonic role of English in that process. In other words, he represented me as “on their side” and “safe to talk to.” For this reason, Jacinto seemed more eager to talk to me, perhaps because he might have seen me as able to make some positive changes for farmers in the community. Though it certainly does not eliminate my positionality in this study, this endorsement does give me confidence that Chucho and Jacinto understand better where I am coming from.

“Everything that Falls into My Hands in Spanish, I Read”

Chucho and Jacinto are in their mid-twenties, just one year apart in age. Because they are always together, they seem more like twins, and are treated by the family as one unit: *los nenes* (the kids). On a typical day they can be seen working on the farm in mud-stained brown pants and long-sleeved shirts, even under the scorching Puerto Rican sun. They are quite a sight from a

distance. An old T-shirt serves as a lightweight head covering for protection from both sun and dust. They put the shirt over their heads, with just their eyes showing through the neck of the shirt, and tie the sleeves around the back of their heads. Despite these measures, the brothers are very brown. The hard work keeps them thin and strong, even though they seem to eat at least a mountain of rice each day!

Chucho and Jacinto's literacy practices in Spanish are what one might expect from the educated children of highly educated parents. They use reading and writing in Spanish regularly in their personal and professional lives. When asked what literacy meant to them, they answered very similarly. Chucho said that reading was, "The way we communicate . . . how we know everything that we know. And writing? Writing is how we interpret the things we read. It's a way to deal with experiences." Jacinto's answer was very similar, "For me it's a sort of knowledge. And writing is a way to transmit what I think, to communicate myself." Reading very much means "knowledge" (*conocimientos*) to both brothers, and they referred to "knowledge" as a driving purpose behind their reading of texts.

Chucho reported reading many things, saying, "Everything that falls into my hands in Spanish, I read." This is perhaps because he comes from a family of readers. When asked about what his family read, the list was long:

In Spanish, that I remember, my dad and mom had many novels--novels in Spanish--Garcia Marquez and those of other Puerto Rican writers, and always I remember that I have seen *Selectiones*, *Reader's Digest*, always it was around here in Spanish; and other things are newspapers and magazines and yes, many novels and books of stories and things like that.

He describes a world full of text in Spanish, an immersion in books and print.

Chucho and Jacinto's mother was a Spanish teacher and a writer of poems and stories. The family reveals their pride in the pieces that she has published in a local magazine about life in their town, pulling it out to show me and encouraging me to read them. Even Chucho and Jacinto's grandfather, who lived next door to them, would recite poetry in Spanish, though he was formally schooled through only the fourth grade. Their brother Elías wrote poetry and songs in Spanish as part of a punk band that the brothers formed during college.

Reading and writing seems to provide real pleasure for this family. For the brothers, in the case of the songs written for the band, reading and writing brought them together and gave them an activity to share. The family routinely passes different types of reading material around. Texts, including newspaper clippings and books, regularly get mailed back and forth from the island to Elías in the U.S. Books in Spanish are frequently given as gifts, perpetuating the family's culture of literacy, and strengthening the bonds between them, even across long distances.

Literacy and Work

Literacy in Spanish is also a key part of the work life of the family. The work of all the family members requires reading and writing in Spanish. To manage the farm, the brothers must conduct financial activities that are mediated by reading and writing in Spanish, including managing finances (writing checks, depositing money into accounts) and applying for loans. They used the Internet to compare tractor models before purchasing one, and to purchase seeds from a company in Hawaii.

They also get information about farming through reading and writing. The island agronomist publishes a newsletter with information about agriculture, and the brothers also attend information sessions given by agronomists where they take notes. When they have a

question or a problem about the farm, the bookshelf seems to be the first place that they would go to answer it, including questions about how to treat sick animals (more on this in the English section below). The continued use of textbooks from their college studies in agricultural science shows one way in which school literacy transacts with home literacy.

Literacy and Politics

To understand how literacy mediates the political lives of Chucho and Jacinto, one needs to understand the role of politics in Puerto Rico. Politics is infused into the everyday life of Puerto Ricans. There are three major political parties on the island, and all of them position their platforms around the key issue of Puerto Rico's relationship to the United States: pro-statehood, pro-commonwealth, and pro-independence. Party affiliation is a large part of social life, and political discussions are frequent and heated among family and community members. Politics also has a great deal to do with economic life, often playing a role in who gets hired across many sectors of the economy, including education, agriculture, and banking.

The salience of political party in everyday life can be seen in many ways. Each party has a symbol and a color, and everyone is aware of them. As an example, every time I wore a red shirt in Puerto Rico I would hear some comment that I was a *Populare*, a member of the pro-commonwealth party. In addition, each newspaper is controlled by a particular political party, so to some extent you can detect the political leanings of someone by their newspaper subscription.

The choice of which newspaper to read is one way that literacy and politics interact in Puerto Rico. For the family, though, their relationship with politics is also mediated through many other kinds of texts. Speeches of political leaders, such as those of Luis Muñoz Marín, the founder of the pro-commonwealth party, were available in text format and were often read by Don Luis, Chucho and Jacinto's grandfather, who was an ardent party member.

Within this political context, Chucho and Jacinto, though very political, claim no party affiliation, rejecting the three main parties that dominate Puerto Rico. This is reflected in their reading about politics. Chucho reads books by political activists like Eduardo Galiano and also uses the Internet to read information about alternative political philosophy.

For Jacinto, reading in Spanish is a place where his work and political life connect. “Almost everything I read is about agriculture and politics, international politics and relation with agriculture.” Jacinto’s uses for literacy in Spanish cross into his political activities as a community organizer. Jacinto is the president of a “nucleus of production” which is a group of local farmers who meet to discuss production as well as the fair pricing of their goods on the market. The purpose of the group is to market their products together in order to eliminate the middle man. For these purposes, Jacinto needs to read information about economics and about agriculture, much of which is provided through the agricultural extension service.

Chucho uses writing in Spanish for political ends as well. When developers were proposing to put a *McDonald’s*TM in Ramona, Chucho wrote to the mayor and explained how this would hurt the local economy.

“In School You Did It Because You Had To”

As mentioned above, both Chucho and Jacinto hold bachelor’s degrees from the University of Puerto Rico. Though they went to different high schools (Chucho opting to go to the local public school rather than the private Catholic School), they were taught Spanish literacy in very much the same way. They report reading stories, novels, poems, and textbooks throughout their years of schooling. They also wrote stories, poems and academic essays of different types. Always the rebellious one in the family, Jacinto struggled a bit in school. “At the

beginning, I didn't care for Spanish [class], but once I got into middle school I started working harder on it and started appreciating it more."

For both, reading and writing in school gave them the tools they needed for reading and writing in Spanish in their adult lives, but now both feel the freedom to use literacy however they want. When asked about how their current literacy practices are different from the literacy they learned in school, Jacinto replied, "In school, you did it because you had to. Now you do it because you need to or to communicate, to do the projects that you have to do."

Similarly, Chucho said,

Well, in school there was a project you had to read. Now you choose whatever theme interests you. But, in which way did those texts influence me? Well, I think substantially because with them I developed my taste, what I like and dislike. During that time and now I imagine that, yes, for example, there's novels like *Lautaro* that I like a lot, *La Lllamarada*, *Relato de un Náufrago*, this is the type of writing that now I enjoy. However, there's a lot of other things that I really dislike, and now I don't read that kind of stuff.

This adult control over the texts they read and their uses of literacy in school is important to the brothers, and this theme reoccurs as they discuss their literacy practices in English.

"I Read Only What I Truly Need to Read in English"

The role of literacy in English in the lives of Chucho and Jacinto is very different from that of Spanish. Though they both studied English in school from elementary through college, neither would claim to be an English speaker. (Even in the days when I spoke very little Spanish, they would not try to communicate with me in English, unlike their younger sister Alma.) When speaking of doing a presentation in English class, Chucho said that he imagined the goal of the teacher was to get the students to think in English. "But I don't think in English!" he said with a

laugh. Jacinto reports, “I believe that after all these English classes that I took [before college], none of them helped me to understand it, really.”

Despite this, both brothers do read in English. When asked about what reading in English means to him, Chucho responded,

In English, well, there, it’s more specific [than reading in Spanish]. In English I read what really interests me and what I have to read. What I don’t find in Spanish, and, well, in English I can find it, then I make the decision to read it.

Similarly, Chucho writes in English only when absolutely necessary, when he has to communicate with someone who doesn’t speak Spanish, as when he bought seeds over the Internet from a Hawaiian company. During the first interaction with the seed company he wrote in English, but when he found that someone there could write in Spanish, he switched. Jacinto asserts that he doesn’t write anything in English.

Chucho and Jacinto use English in very specific domains. Jacinto explains, “In English, I mostly use reading to acquire knowledge. That’s because most of the information is in English. But I never write in English. I almost never use it.” Chucho reports similar purposes for English literacy.

Reading? Well, to get knowledge of, of other cultures that communicate in the English language. And, well, to incorporate it in my work and in my knowledge. Writing? Well, I have a little bit more of a problem with it, but, really, generally I don’t write in English. Here, the ability to read in English is specifically characterized as a way to get something—knowledge or information—that they need. Jacinto goes so far to say that “most of *the* information is in English” (emphasis mine), implying most of the important information, most of the information worth knowing is in English.

This emphasis on English, especially as a source for science and technical information, is consistent with the image of English presented in the schools. Chucho and Jacinto studied English as a subject in school throughout their academic careers. During English classes in school they read newspapers articles, poems, stories, essays and an occasional short novel, but Chucho reports it was “very little.” As for writing, the brothers reported writing and publishing a newspaper and a magazine in English as a school project. Jacinto expressed uncertainty about why they did this, saying that he guesses they did it to “promote the language.” They also wrote out reports that they would then deliver orally as a presentation in front of the class. In the university, reading and writing in English was key to their degree programs in agricultural science. In English classes they wrote essays, poems and stories in English and read textbooks, essays, articles, and stories. Chucho remembers “writing essays about many things. The purpose was for you to develop fluidity in English.” Almost all of their content-area classes required reading textbooks in English, but their writing in English took place primarily in the context of English language classes.

This emphasis on English in the sciences perhaps adds to the perceived difficulty of English and becomes a real obstacle for some students, like Jacinto. When I asked him how his knowledge of English affected his student life, he replied, “It affected me because it limited me from obtaining a lot of information . . . because much of the information in the textbooks is in English, so it limited me in what I could read. . . . It limited me so much.”

For Jacinto, who struggled learning to read in his first language, reading in English seemed especially difficult. Speaking of learning English in school, he reports:

I always didn't care much for English. At the time I thought it was that I didn't have good teachers, they weren't good communicators, but now I think it was that I was learning

two languages at the same time, one first language and one second. I was having problems learning [to read and write] Spanish so unconsciously I decided on one of the two. I learned one by my own effort and the other one I left behind. That's the attitude that I had in my early life and then I just kept with it. That's the analysis that I make now that I'm older.

The university changed things somewhat because it allowed him to read things in English that truly interested him. "Because English was difficult for me, I was just interested in things related to agriculture." Still, learning English was difficult:

I believe that after all these English classes that I took, none of them helped me to understand it, really. The university was different. I think that what I had at the university was worth it more than the nine years that I had before that.

Despite this, reading in English continues to be a source of frustration for Jacinto. In a recent phone conversation, Jacinto told Elías that he needed to find a good book about economics in order to deal more successfully with recent debates over the price the farmers in the nucleus were getting for their plantains. Elías asked him, "Don't you have an agricultural economics textbook from the university?" Jacinto replied, yes, but that it is in English and he needed to get the information fast, so he wanted one in Spanish.

Here the relationship between in-school and out-of-school literacy is clear. For Chucho and Jacinto, school and work literacy practices in English reflect the same purposes or functions as well as the same challenges. The fact that textbooks are in English means that in school students must read English to gain information/knowledge. When these textbooks then become the reference library of the students in their professional lives, they face the same problems of access to information that they struggled through in school.

Both brothers report that their use of English is limited to two domains: work and politics. Jacinto says he reads to “incorporate” knowledge into his work, and Chucho says, “I read [in English] really for my work.” In addition to reading reference material in English, the brothers also have to read pesticide labels and other instructions in English which are vital to their health and work. They also use English to read about politics. Both said that reading in English was important in order to have access to political information. Jacinto reports, “Most of the information about politics is in English. Especially about world politics. Information is in other languages, but the one that I can most easily use is English.” Because both brothers feel that their political perspectives are important in their lives, reading political information, and thus reading in English, is a crucial part of their lives.

The importance of English literacy in the domains of work and politics is clear in the home environment as well. In the family, Spanish is the preferred language, but texts in English will be read in the domains of work and politics. Chucho reports that he remembers seeing his father read university textbooks in English for work. Occasionally their father brings home the Puerto Rican business newspaper in English, but this is not a regular practice. When asked about his father’s writing practices in English at work, Chucho reported:

I imagine that almost everything that they do, all of this that they write for work would have to be in English, because it’s an agency that works in English, really. Yes, I imagine that all the work in the office is in English.

As for other family members writing in English, Chucho could only remember “two or three songs that my brother Elías wrote. Writing in English . . . I don’t know, is for work or school or something.” Elías’ use of English literacy for pleasure (reading sports books, writing

songs and poems) is the exception in the family rather than the rule. For the rest of the family, literacy in English appeared in only the domains of work and politics.

Appropriation and Resistance

When charting the domains in which Chucho and Jacinto use literacy in Spanish and English, two things are striking: the central role of reading in English (rather than writing, speaking, or listening), and how that reading is relegated to very specific domains. One interpretation of this finding is that Chucho and Jacinto are simply enacting the types of English literacy they learned in school. This would make sense from the perspective of learning English as a foreign language, where often reading and writing are emphasized over listening and speaking because of the lack of opportunities outside of the classroom for using the spoken language. This does not explain, though, the fact that the brothers do not write in English, since clearly they learned how to do so. From their reports this was a focus of their language learning, especially during university study. We might look to the context, then, to explain the centrality of reading, given that students are unlikely to use any of the language they learn in the classroom if there are not sufficient opportunities for its use outside the classroom.

Though signs label businesses in English, Ramona is not a place where reading in English is necessary to function in daily life. (In fact, Elías confirms that these names of businesses are treated as any other name, without real awareness of their meaning in English.) Given that the two brothers never traveled outside of the Spanish-speaking world, why would reading in English be so central to their literacy practices?

Jacinto answers this question himself when he says, “All of the information is in English.” He and Chucho both go on to talk about English reading in terms of appropriating knowledge or information. In their own words, they use reading to “acquire” and “incorporate”

information into their own repertoire of knowledge in order to use it in their lives for their own purposes.

Not only do they have few opportunities to use writing in English, writing will not get them access to knowledge in the same way that reading will. Similarly, the ability to understand and use spoken English gets them little. “The information” is not encoded in spoken English, at least, not in Ramona; it is encoded in written text. Further, the use of productive skills in English—speaking and writing—would mean sharing some of their own knowledge with the very audience who seems to withhold information from them, encoded in a foreign language. As Chucho himself says of writing in English, “They wanted you to think in English--but I didn’t think in English!” This appears to be a clear rejection of English, with all that it represents, and perhaps a defense against its control of his thoughts.

Similarly, Jacinto’s suspicions about writing a newspaper in English “to promote the language” is an indication of how he sees writing in English as an act of Americanization, of language “promoting” rather than language learning. Thus, Chucho and Jacinto’s proficiency in reading English and their rejection of other English skills can be interpreted as an act of resistance (Canagarajah, 1999; Pennycook, 1994, 2001). They resist English as part of their productive repertoire, rejecting the identity of “English speaker.” Instead, they appropriate the literacy practices in English that support their farming and give them access to information about their political interests.

Literacy and Activism

In the spirit of community organization and activism, Chucho and Jacinto’s reading in English becomes a resource for other farmers in the community. When farmers have questions about how to use pesticides, which are generally labeled exclusively in English, they go to

Jacinto who not only can read the instructions but also is an agronomist. They trust him as an expert on farming, which he is in part because of his access to information--in the form of texts--about farming. As president of the nucleus of production, he must access economic information through texts in order to be able to negotiate a better price--and thus a better standard of living--for the farmers whom he represents.

Complicating Notions About the “Need” to “Speak English”

The argument above calls for a complication of two commonly held ideas: The “need” to speak English, and what it means to “speak English.” As English has become a global(izing) language, some have called for the recognition of global English(es) as legitimate varieties in their own right. Chucho and Jacinto’s use of reading in English takes this notion even further, problematizing what it means to “speak English” at all. Though I would not say that the brothers speak English, it would be hard to deny the fact that they certainly “know” or have proficiency in English (Pennycook, 2001). So, has the language policy of the educational system succeeded in making them bilingual? At one level the answer is yes, but that should be qualified by saying that they have become bilingual on their own terms, for their own clearly defined purposes.

Statements about the “need” to learn English because of its status as a global language are also called into question here. At the very least we must say that this need is dependent on context. Speaking English does not have much capital in the life contexts of the informants for this study, though reading English has some.

The informants’ literacy in Spanish, however, has far greater capital (Luke, 2003). Through Spanish they negotiate their world: their work life, their political interests, their leisure time. Literacy in Spanish helps them to be community members, activists, farmers, and family members. Literacy in English, however, is part of a constant struggle to get information, which

the brothers participate in because of their position as educated, concerned farmers and citizens. Though it does help them in their position as community leaders, it is not because English literacy, in and of itself, gives them prestige. It is because of the way that other farmers can access information in English through them, and thus can bypass the English language struggle themselves.

The Roles of Language Brokers

Chucho and Jacinto's position in the community can thus be seen as that of language "brokers." The farmers in the nucleus come to Jacinto for help in part because of his ability to negotiate texts and access information in both Spanish and English. Even Jacinto, with all his talk of difficulty with English, can use it well enough to help someone who has little or no English reading ability.

Between the two brothers, Chucho is the more proficient in English. Thus, he is positioned to act as a language broker for Jacinto in their farming business. When he needs to ask for help while reading English, Jacinto reports, "Yes, I ask Chucho. I also look in the dictionary." When I asked him if he thought Chucho was an expert in English, Jacinto said with a laugh, "No, but he knows more than me!" As the status of English as a global language continues to dominate, the role of these language brokers, those who have some proficiency in English and act as resources for community or family members who have less proficiency, is an area that deserves exploration.

Conclusion

The saliency of English in the domains of work and politics is not so surprising when viewed through the lens of colonialism. The U.S. dominates Puerto Rico economically and politically, and in those two domains English dominates as well. What drives Chucho and Jacinto

to read in English is access to information. It is precisely that lack of access to information in the vernacular that a colonial system supports, and, in fact, relies upon (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1998; Pennycook, 1994). In order to maintain control of Puerto Rico, the U.S. must convince Puerto Ricans that they need the U.S. This perceived need is reinforced in the educational system and even in the homes of Puerto Ricans where English is seen as the key to opportunity.

The status of English and its importance for economic success are not questioned, and it remains similarly unquestioned in countries throughout the world that are trying to gain access to the world market. Why does Jacinto need to turn to reading in English to get information about world politics, when Spanish is the first language of more countries in the world than any other language (Comrie, Matthews, & Polinsky, 2003)? Why does Elías have to send his brothers articles about tropical agriculture from a Midwestern U.S. university when his brothers live in, and were educated in, the tropics? Why are the textbooks used in agricultural science in English, when so many Spanish-speaking countries have well developed agricultural science programs with texts in Spanish?

What is fascinating about this case is how it shows the subtle alternatives that individuals and communities employ to overcome the lack of access to information in these two key domains of work and politics. They do not accept English, learn it, or make it their own; Spanish is not threatened in Ramona, Puerto Rico. Instead they take only the English they need, and they employ language brokers to access information that they cannot access any other way. In a tradition long a part of Puerto Rican culture and history, they resist.

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¹ All names have been changed