

Negotiating *el Difícil*: Uses of English Text in a Rural Puerto Rican Community

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NEGOTIATING *EL DIFÍCIL*: USES OF ENGLISH TEXT IN A RURAL PUERTO RICAN COMMUNITY

Abstract

This article is an ethnographic account of the use of English texts in a rural Puerto Rican community. Data was collected during four months of participant observation in a K-9 school library/community center. Participants were observed using a great variety of English texts, regardless of their English proficiency levels. It was found that community members participated differently in English literacy practices (regularized uses of English texts) depending on their age. Adults read and wrote English texts related to the sociocultural domains of bureaucracy, health, and finances, while young people used English texts in the domains of entertainment and personal communication.

[second language literacy, literacy practices, English as a Second Language, language acquisition]

Introduction

After more than one hundred years under U.S. sovereignty, Puerto Rico has not experienced the language shift to English that occurred among so many other U.S.-colonized populations (Fishman, Conrad, & Rubal-Lopez 1996). Spanish remains the language of community life on the island. Schools teach English as a subject beginning in the first grade, and Spanish and English are co-official languages. However, the number of Puerto Ricans on the island who report speaking English is quite low, particularly in the rural areas (U.S. Census Bureau 2004). Indeed, English has earned the nickname "*el difícil*" (the difficult one). Rural

Puerto Ricans must confront English text on product labels and instructions which are often printed in English only, in college-level textbooks (though classes are generally taught in Spanish), and in interactions with federal agencies. This article describes in detail the types of texts in English used by members of a rural Puerto Rican community in order to understand the role that English text plays in their everyday lives.

Literature review

The study of literacy practices (i.e., ways of using text) has been developing in the fields of anthropology, education, cultural studies and sociolinguistics since the 1980s (Barton & Hamilton 1998; Heath 1983; Street 1984). However, studies of literacy practices in Puerto Rico have not been published (Ramirez-González & Torres-González 1996). Ethnographic researchers are just beginning to examine the second language literacy practices of communities in developing nations where speakers of local languages must navigate text in an international (often imposed) language (Street 2001). The context of Puerto Rico is important because of the politically charged nature of English that has resulted from U.S. colonization.

Puerto Rico serves as an excellent case for examining colonial language issues, particularly how vernacular speakers navigate the colonial language. As English becomes a global language, Puerto Rico offers a look at how speakers of other languages manage the role of English in the economy and in popular culture. There currently exists a theoretical debate about colonial language policy, imposed languages, and the effects of “international” languages. On one hand, researchers like Phillipson (1992) claim that English is a hegemonic language. On the other, researchers like Pennycook (1994; 1998) and Canagarajah (1999) show how the situation is much more complex by documenting how local populations both appropriate and resist imposed languages. This article contributes to this debate.

While officials in Puerto Rico lament the lack of bilingualism, U.S. institutions (including many universities) assume bilingualism (i.e., some universities require Puerto Rican students to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language, while others do not). The ethnographic approach used in this study is meant to paint a clear picture of language use in a particular community on the island using participant observation. Documenting community uses of English not only debunks myths about its use, but also can be used as a basis for English language learning and a demythologizing of “*el difícil*.” This better understanding of English use can lead to a refined conceptualization of “bilingualism” and more appropriate expectations within the educational system for bilinguals in the Puerto Rican context (Hornberger 2003). By documenting people’s participation in English literacy practices, I hope to show the variety of language skills they possess, and to open up the possibility for a rethinking of bilingualism that is more nuanced than the commonly held perception that bilinguals are “two monolinguals in one body” (Valdés 1993).

Theoretical framework

I view second language learning as sociocultural practice, which means that language must be understood as interwoven in social, cultural, and ideological practices. Bakhtin’s (1981) heteroglossic view of language in society is a rich theory of language that offers a way to discuss language and literacy practices in Puerto Rico. Bakhtin describes a world as full of language diversity. This diversity of language reflects social diversity, and is inextricably linked to ideology. Thus every utterance is *heteroglot*, that is, it is embedded in a context that is defined by the place, time, and social and historical conditions in which it is uttered. Further, all utterances are *dialogic*, or in dialogue with other utterances. People enter the world of language

as if entering a web of voices in dialogue with each other, each voice with a history of interactions with other voices. Thus, for Bakhtin, context is all-important.

Bakhtin (1981) also gives us tools to understand language learning. For Bakhtin, words are infused with the ideologies of their speakers. Thus, as one uses new words (including new words in other languages) these words “taste strange in the mouth” until they are appropriated and made one’s own (293-294). Language learning is not memorization of words and structures, but rather the gradual appropriation of words and discourses as people actively work to control and make their own the words of others. All words have history, but in Bakhtin’s world, every speaker actively can appropriate a word and change its historical path for his or her own purposes. Bakhtin’s philosophy of language helps us to understand the possibilities of a language when it is appropriated and used for one’s own purposes. Bakhtin (1981) asserts that language is never neutral, but rather that “each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life” (293). This deep appreciation for language embedded within sociocultural context is essential for the study of English in Puerto Rico, a language that has a long history of imposition and subsequent resistance that resulted from the Americanization campaign of the early 1900s (de Gutiérrez 1987; Torres-González 2002).

Bakhtin’s theory works together with that of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), who writes of the linguistic borderlands where Spanish and English rub against one another. Anzaldúa gives insight into the linguistic world of people living under two colonial systems—first, that of Spain, and later that of the U.S. This rubbing together of two ideologies (as embedded in two languages, Spanish and English, each with their own colonial histories) helps to contextualize language use in Puerto Rico and to consider this language use as a creative borderland practice. Anzaldúa describes border practices as the creation of something new and unique. For her, those

who occupy the borderlands should be commended for their creative production which is the result of the “rubbing” of two linguistic and cultural systems. Understanding Puerto Rico as just such a border space, then, opens up new possibilities of understanding English language use in a Spanish-speaking community.

Research methods

The results reported here are the core a four month ethnographic case study that examined the English literacy practices of a Spanish-speaking community in rural Puerto Rico. This study sought to understand the participant’s language use as it was embedded in sociocultural context, and asked the question: How do people negotiate English literacy practices? To explore this, I asked several sub-questions: What is the nature of English literacy practices? What channels of communication (oral, written, varieties of Spanish and English) are used to accomplish one’s communicative goals? What are the factors (e.g. class, gender, return migration, schooling) that matter in determining a person’s particular “communicative toolkit”?

Setting

Data was collected in the school library of a K-9 community school in a small town in the rural, mountainous central region of Puerto Rico called Ramonaⁱ with a per capita income of \$4,972. Ramona suffers from a 22.2% unemployment rate, and 59% of families live below federal poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).

The library was the heart of the school where students and teachers met for assemblies and workshops, and also relaxed and worked during their free periods. In addition, the library formally served as a community center when it was opened up on Wednesdays and Saturdays for community classes in computers, crafts, and English conversation with the help of a Title V grant. These classes were attended by students of the school and their families, including

siblings, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, as well as other community members such as high school students, school workers, and professionals. Informally, the library also served as a community center as many community members, such as relatives of school employees and parents of former students, came to use the computers, reference books, and newspapers. Many people also came to seek the assistance of the very capable librarian, Maria, for help with everything from filling out tax forms to writing letters to doing high-school research projects. The library was well-known as a place to get help and information.

Data collection

Data collection took place over a period of four months of participant observation as I worked as an assistant to the librarian. Data collected included over 75 single-spaced pages of ethnographic fieldnotes, in addition to analytic memos, interviews with focal participants, and audio recordings of talk around text. I aimed to observe all uses of English texts, participants' expressions of attitudes about English and Spanish, and how participants with differing levels of English proficiency accomplished their reading and writing goals in English.

Participants

Participants initially included everyone who trafficked through the school library, including students, parents, teachers, cafeteria workers, and other community members. After one month of observation, focal participants were identified (n=10; 6 female, 4 male; 6 adults, 4 children; of the 10 participants, 2 were return migrants) based on the following criteria: (1) the participant had been observed using English text, (2) the participant came to the library regularly enough to observe and informally interview frequently (at least once a week) and (3) the participant had a demographic characteristic of interest (i.e., age, gender, occupation, return migrant status). An effort was made to include focal participants from a variety of demographic

backgrounds. Though observation of others continued, the ten focal participants were observed particularly closely and were interviewed formally.

Data analysis

All interviews and audio recordings were transcribed for open coding along with fieldnotes. The research questions guided the coding. Data was analyzed and all English literacy events (or uses of English text) were marked. All English literacy events were then grouped together and re-coded, still guided by the research questions, in order to group events into analytic categories, looking for patterns and contradictions to patterns (examples of codes include text type and socio-cultural domain of textual use). I also coded this data for participant for analysis of how demographic differences such as age and gender might be related to the use of English text. Events representative of observed patterns or that contradicted or complicated these patterns were chosen for write-up.

Researcher's role

My role in the community necessarily affected my observations and analysis of the data. As the assistant to the librarian, I became part of the school community. I was a constant presence in the library as well as the teacher of the Saturday community English class. In addition, I lived with a retired teacher in the community who had worked at the school for thirty years. This retired teacher was my husband's aunt, and served as my cultural sponsor, introducing me to people and advocating for me as "buena gente" (a good, trustworthy person). Though I spoke some Spanish upon arrival to Puerto Rico, I improved rapidly with the help of all members of the community, who usually did not mind my observing, note-taking, and questioning as they chalked it up to my learning Spanish (though I explained to them that I was doing a study). In sum, I occupied an insider/outsider role, different because of being *gringa*, an

English teacher, and a doctoral student, accepted because of my family connections and my eagerness to learn Spanish.

Results

Everyday English text

In Ramona, there were a rich variety of texts in English in the environment. By “in the environment” I mean English text that appeared as part of everyday life in public spaces, work and home. These texts were a normal part of life in this community in that all participants were exposed to these English texts in some form everyday. The chart below outlines these everyday English texts.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Occasionally, these everyday English texts were commented on, giving insight into members’ meanings of these texts. The following excerpt took place at a technology training class for librarians in the local school district. The class was full of code switches into English as the leader explained various ways to search the internet. During the class, María, the librarian, leaned over to me and commented that some words are hard to think of in Spanish because they always appear in English. The example that she gave was “play” on a CD player or in a multimedia interface on the computer. María remarked that since “play” is always the word they use, she could not even tell me what the translation in Spanish would be. Although this may seem like a small, insignificant use of English text (some might argue that this text is not even read), it is significant because it shows how English words enter into the environment through text and are taken up by the community and used as part of everyday life.

Even the young participants occasionally noticed and commented on ambient text in English, as in this excerpt when the other librarian's assistant (Mari) and I took two students (including eighth-grader José) to the local shopping center for a fast-food lunch.

As we were walking back to the car, Mari pointed out that they were adding a "Sally Beauty Supply" to the shopping center. José said, "Mira, aquí todo esta en inglés." (Look, everything here is in English.) I said, "Si, y ¿por qué?" (Yea, and why?) His first answer was, "porque son PNP." (Because they're PNP [Partido Nuevo Progresista, the pro-statehood party]). I wanted him to explain more so I asked, "Pero, ¿por qué inglés aquí? ¿Por qué?" (But, why English here? Why?) José shrugged and said, "No sé, yo no sé." (I don't know, I don't know.)

This excerpt reveals several important aspects about how ambient text in English is understood. José, a 13-year-old eighth grader, immediately associated English with the pro-statehood party. He politicized this public use of English. José did not think of the companies represented in the shopping center as necessarily being from the U.S. just because they used English. Rather, he saw the use of English in his community as Puerto Ricans showing their political leanings. This relationship between signage in English and politics was expressed by other participants as well, though not everyone associated it with the PNP. When I asked the history teacher why so many local businesses had English names, he said that it was because of colonialism. Other adult participants said that it was because English was the language of business, and in particular the language of money. These multiple interpretations of everyday English text reveal that although the text might be a normal part of life, it is not un-analyzed by these politically-savvy participants, even the youngest of whom have an opinion.

What is normal? English literacy practices in the community

One of the goals of this ethnographic case study was to describe “what is normal” when it comes to the use of English text in this Spanish-speaking community. Hegemony, in the Gramscian sense, is the imposition of one group’s “normal” as normal for everyone. Researchers of colonial language are now beginning to present different “normals” in order to counter the hegemony of “one group, one language” (Canagarajah 2005). As I observed community members interact with and talk about English text, I noticed that participants expected certain texts to be in English, although the talk around the text was in Spanish, as in this excerpt about the day a group of teachers from the high school gave a presentation in the library to the ninth graders.

The presentation was about the different curricular tracks available to the students, and the requirements for graduation (how many years of history, math, etc.). Mari, the other librarian’s assistant, and I were sitting where we could hear the presentation but also chat with each other in low voices. Talking about the accounting track, a young female teacher said, “Los libros son en inglés—pero las clases son en español, por supuesto!” (The books are in English—but the classes are in Spanish, of course!) Mari commented, “Es cierto. Todos los libros para contabilidad son en inglés” (That’s true. All the books for accounting are in English.)

The teacher’s comment that, “The textbooks are in English—you talk in Spanish, of course!” seemed to capture the attitude of participants about text in English at school: That it was something normal, even natural to read in one language and talk about the reading in another. This use of text in English was so regularized in Ramona that it was second nature, to this teacher at least, indicated by her use of “of course.” Any participant who had gone to college

(like Mari), knew that in the university it was a regular practice of professors to assign text in English and talk about it in Spanish. Particularly in certain fields, such as accounting, reading English text was expected as part of work in that field. Thus, it was expected to read a textbook in English and talk around the text in Spanish.

In interaction with technology, English text was expected as well. Specifically, participants were adept at navigating the Windows PC interface in English, which involved clicking English text in menus (such as “start,” “all programs”), and making choices among selections in English (“print” or “cancel”). Though some of these choices are obvious without reading (the text “start” on the main menu labels a large green button that graphically indicates where to begin), reading is required for navigation, especially of warning messages that often present text and then ask the user to click “OK” or “cancel” in response to that text. It was made clear to me just how normal this use of English text was when the agriculture teacher sat down to use a computer whose language preference had been set to Spanish.

The teachers and I were gathered around Rita, the elementary school English teacher’s, computer in the back of the library, where the agriculture teacher and another young dark-haired female teacher were looking up job announcements on the internet.

Apparently all the non-permanent staff had to re-apply for their jobs every year and that is what they were doing. Rita’s computer was the only one in the library with the Windows interface in Spanish. The agriculture teacher was trying to print the web page he had found, and he faced the choice “aceptar” or “cancelar” (accept or cancel the print job). He couldn’t figure out what to do, it seemed, because he paused for a long time.

Maria, who had been looking over his shoulder and helping him along the way, commented with a laugh that he couldn’t figure out what to do because it wasn’t in

English. The agriculture teacher didn't comment. Maria told him to press "aceptar." He did so and continued with his work.

When a text that was expected to be in English appeared in Spanish, it confused this teacher. This shows just how taken-for-granted the use of text in English was. In fact, I heard Maria and her colleagues at a librarian's technology training workshop complain about computer interfaces set in Spanish and also Spanish language keyboards (which include a key for "ñ" among other characters). They said that they were so accustomed to using the English version that the Spanish version actually made navigation of the technology more difficult, despite the fact that Spanish was their first language.

These two excerpts about types of texts that are expected to be in English partially reveal what was "normal" with regards to English for this community. In certain domains of social life, such as in education, English text was quite common. And certain media of communication, such as the computer, were expected to be in English. Next I will turn to examples of English literacy practices, focusing on contrasts in participation.

Differing participation in differing English literacy practices

In my four months of data collection, I saw English literacy practices that ranged from small, incidental uses of English text (a 7th grader picked up a washcloth at a yard sale that was embroidered with the English word "Sunday;" as she inspected it, her friend said, "domingo"), to lengthy, academic reading and writing (a teacher studying for her master's degree read and summarized articles in English). In my analysis of English literacy events, I was looking for the factors that might influence participants' differing "linguistic toolkits," and thus their different uses of English text, factors such as gender, age, return migration, and military service. I expected to find that people who were English experts would use English text more, but actually

I found that even English novices participated in many different kinds of English literacy practices, especially if these novices were also young people. In fact, I found that community members' participation in English literacy practices varied most by two factors: age and English expertise.

Variation by English expertise

Participants had varying amounts of English language expertise, from novice (beginning proficiency) to expert (well-developed proficiency). This English expertise affected more *how* people participated in English literacy practices than *whether they did or not* or *what kinds of texts* they used. In other words, community members with varying levels of expertise participated in English literacy practices, but *the participation looked different depending on English expertise*. Also, participants of varying amounts of English expertise used (or attempted to use) *the same types of texts*, but had different strategies for doing so.

The following excerpts illustrate these findings by looking at how different people participated in a particular English literacy practice: filling out online forms written in English. Filling out English forms of all kinds was a very common practice in the community. Many of these forms (particularly paper forms) were filled out to communicate with bureaucratic institutions such as the Federal Student Loan Program and the IRS. The online forms discussed below, however, were filled out for interpersonal communication (setting up email or singles ad accounts) and for work (getting free library supplies).

José, the eighth grade novice English user, was a huge fan of popular music. Though his most fervent obsessions changed about every four to six weeks, they included Britney Spears, Jennifer López, and Gwen Stephani. For the first two months that I was at the school, the internet was up and running (later it went down and never came back up) and kids often enjoyed

their free time surfing the internet. I had watched José struggle to fill out the yahoo.com form to get an email account in the very early days of data collection (before I knew his name).

He asked Maria and me for help with almost every line of the form. He had to fill out the form quite a few times in order to successfully get the account. When he finally got the account and logged in, he attempted to write a fan email to Jennifer López. The email was in Spanish. As he filled out the email (which is a form in itself), he asked me in Spanish what to write on the “subject” line, and later what button to press to send it.

On another day, I observed José on the computer trying to surf the internet. The following excerpt shows a fairly typical interaction on the internet for José.

José was trying to open his Yahoo account, but he couldn't. He either can't remember the password or is typing something wrong, so he can never log in. He gave up, and started looking for J-lo sites. He couldn't find anything, so he tried typing in the address, “grami.com.” Unsure of himself, he asked me, “¿Cómo se escribe?” (How do you spell it?) I wrote for him on a piece of paper, “grammys.com.” He loaded the page and then asked me where to click to “ver todo” (See everything). I told him to click on “gallery” so that he could see some photos (though I think what he really wanted to see was the program itself, which wasn't there that I could tell.) He clicked around for a while, nothing really grabbing his attention. Then he clicked on “Latin academy,” then on “en español.” Text came up explaining the Latin academy. He clicked around some more and proclaimed, “A...no me gusta!” (Ah, I don't like it!)

José had difficulty navigating internet forms in English and his frustration was clear when he gave up saying, “Ah, I don't like it!” When a form called for him to supply text in order to move forward towards his goal of sending an email or viewing a webpage, his lack of English expertise

trips him up. Some of these bumps along the road to his communicative goal were not only English problems. His trouble navigating web forms also seemed to be related to his unfamiliarity with the genre (he visually did not know where to click to send, he did not quite understand the purpose of the “subject” line). However, some problems were specifically English related, such as misspelling key words like “grammy.” Regardless of the origin of the problem, José employed strategies for reaching his communicative goals. Whenever he got to a place where he could not go forward without help, he turned to me (or Maria) for assistance. José’s novice English did not completely prevent him from participating in English literacy practices that were important to him. However, he participated differently than others who were English experts because he needed the help of others. He did get frustrated, but this frustration did not keep him from repeatedly trying to navigate the web in English, which he got much better at as time went on.

Eugenio was a leader in the ninth grade class and president of the library club. Though still learning, Eugenio was well on his way to being an expert English user. We would have short conversations in English, and he enjoyed telling me about his family’s plans for a trip to Disneyworld in English. Unlike José, Eugenio rarely asked for my help when using the internet. Not only was he good at the English language part of internet use, he also seemed comfortable with the different types of texts on the internet and the methods for navigating those texts. I never saw him get frustrated or flustered while using the computer, and he used the computer a lot in his free time. One day I came upon him in the library and he told me, in English, that he was signing up for a new email address with the name “crazy_kid.” He said that he had put the settings of his email account in English too, and when I asked him why, he said “to practice my English.” I asked him what he wanted the email address for, and he said for “everything.”

Later that week, as I was working on the computer, I noticed Eugenio filling out an online form in English on the computer next to mine.

This time he was filling out a profile at americansingles.com. He was on the computer to my right, and I was doing some work at the computer at the left, but with an eye on what he was doing. He would read out loud to me in English the different parts of the form, then fill it in, which involved selecting toggle buttons to check off different options, such as “seeing movies” from a list of favorite pastimes. A few times he asked me for help, but most of the time he was just reading to me, and then thinking out loud the answers to the questions. When he had to write, he would write in Spanish. I asked him why he didn’t write in English and he kind of gave me a look as if to say, “Come on, are you kidding?” Eugenio is 15 years old, in 9th grade, and though I kept telling him that he was too young for the website, the librarian knew what he was doing and didn’t stop him. His code name on the website was “crazy_kid.”

In contrast to José, Eugenio navigated web forms smoothly. He saw internet use as a language learning experience. However, as he negotiated the form for the singles website, he chose to read the English and respond in Spanish. As he read to me the parts of the form, he was doing so more to share with me than to ask me for help. Unlike José, he did not need my coaching to navigate the (rather complex) web form. The help I gave him was incidental. Thus, Eugenio’s participation in the practice of filling out online forms was distinct from José’s. However, both young men participated in this practice.

The final English form literacy event shows the practice in a very different context. This event took place in a librarian’s technology training workshop. The workshop leader was showing participants a website where they could fill out a form and receive resource cards that

gave guidelines for finding certain information on the web (about health, education, etc.). All the librarians wanted to receive the free cards and were filling out the online form.

A young librarian, who was sitting to my right, called the workshop leader over while looking at the blank on the screen labeled “# of items.” She asked the workshop leader, “¿Qué pongo aquí?” (What do I put here?) The workshop leader responded, “El número de tarjetas.” (The number of cards.) The librarian nodded, saying, “Ah! El número de tarjetas.” (Oh! The number of cards.) Then the librarian asked about the blanks labeled, “How do you plan to use these materials?” and “Comments.” The workshop leader translated exactly: “¿Cómo va a usar los materiales y algún comentario.” (How are you going to use these materials and some comments.)

Like José, this teacher knew how to use available resources to accomplish her communicative goal. She easily negotiated the first part of the English form (her name, address, etc.), but when she was unsure she asked and got immediate help. Like José, her English proficiency level did not prevent her from participating in the practice.

Variation by Age

In the above excerpts, it should be noted that young people were filling out forms in order to facilitate interpersonal communication, such as sending email to a friend or to a fan website, or subscribing to an online personals service. The adults, however, were filling out English forms at work in order to get materials to use at work. This is one example of the major differences in the English literacy practices of young people and adults in this community. Young people used English text for interpersonal communication such as flirting, sustaining friendships, gossiping, getting attention, and general social bonding. They also used English text for entertainment, including playing video games and reading pop star websites. Adults, on the

other hand, used English text to interact with bureaucracy, such as the IRS, or to take care of their health, such as reading medical referral letters. They also used it for work and school.

Though some adults did use English text as part of entertainment, such as reading instructions for a craft project, using English text for entertainment among adults was rare. In this section, I will analyze in detail the social use of English text among young participants in order to understand this clear difference in the English literacy practices of young people and adults.

Young novice and expert English users alike used English for purposes very different from those of their adult counterparts. Particularly, these young people used *writing* in English for informal interpersonal communication, entertainment, and personal expression. This was very different from adults, who produced little English text outside of school or interacting with bureaucracy. As will be shown in the excerpts below, these uses of English text by young people had something intrinsically young about them. In other words, they were literacy practices characteristic of youth culture. The interesting thing, then, was that these practices were occurring in English, the *second* language of all the young participants.

We have seen José participate in many literacy practices described here. Though he was a novice English user, he was not a novice at flirting, a skill which he was practicing earlier than his other eighth-grade friends. Ana was a sweet, freckle-faced seventh-grader that had caught the attention of many of the eighth-grade boys. José was sitting at one of the computers in the far corner of the library during his free hour and I was by his side observing him. He had opened WordPad and was typing in English: I love Jennifer Lopez. Ana walked up and stood behind him, looking over his shoulder at the screen.

José typed (in English): Ana is not... I gave him a warning look, because his favorite word is “bitch” and I was afraid that that was what was coming next. He paused, then

said, “‘sperate, ‘sperate” (Wait, wait), looking at me, and giving me a “calm down” gesture with his hand. José continued writing: ...beautiful, because she is a beautiful woman. I exclaimed, “How nice!” José, starting to write again, announced, “Cambiando el tema.” (Changing the topic.) I laughed. José wrote: Cathy is not my nothing. José turned to me and said, “¿Así?” (Like that?) I said, “Yes, but what does it mean? ¿Qué significa? Es como una poema.” (What does it mean? Its like a poem). José laughed, then wrote: Cathy is very, very, very, very, very told. Again, he turned to me and said, “¿Así? ¿Cómo se escribe?” (Like that? How do you write it?) Confused, I asked him, “Significa alta?” (Does it mean tall?) He replied, “Sí” (Yea.) I told him “No” and he erased the “old.” I spelled slowly in English, “a-l-l.”

José used English text, typed on the screen, to flirtatiously communicate with both Ana and me. By means of the typed text, he was provoking Ana and me to react. As he typed, he flirted with breaking rules, both my language rules for him (I had warned him several times about his over-use of the word “bitch”) and social rules (threatening to insult Ana and me). This was clearly deliberate, as José sought to calm me down both verbally (“‘sperate, ‘sperate”/Wait, wait) and non-verbally (with a hand gesture) as he saw me react to his potential rule breaking. His writing English text became a performance for an audience, and José fulfilled his playful role as writer quite deliberately, announcing “cambiando el tema” (changing the topic) before he set himself to write again. Here, English text was mediating a social interaction. Why José chose to use English text for this purpose was not exactly clear. The fact that he was composing on the computer may have prompted English use, since English was the language of the computer. But English here also added to the suspense that José was trying to create in his flirty interaction. The fact that Ana had to decode was part of the teasing, and José’s use of English may have been

motivated by him trying to impress me. Regardless, this interaction showed the use of English text for purely social purposes.

Indeed, the English literacy practices of young participants were very social in nature. Interactions of young people huddled together around the computer were quite common, and because so many computer-mediated activities involved English text (web surfing, video games, etc.), English literacy practices developed around the computer. Pedro, an expert English user, and his friends loved to play video games. Pedro would often come into the library and tell me at length, in both Spanish and English, about video game levels, monsters, and even cartoons he watched on the Cartoon Network based on video games. At one point during the study he got the fever for the Sims, a game played by creating different characters and setting them up to live in a neighborhood where players guide them through their everyday activities and watch what happens. Pedro had decided to install the game on one of the computers at school and create characters based on me, his other teachers, and his friends.

Pedro was installing the Sims on one of the new computers. During the installation there was a Sims trivia game to play to pass the time, and Pedro and his friend were playing it. One question was, “What is the biggest thing that you can rob from a house?” and of the three choices the answer was “couch.” Another question asked “What character featured the voice talents of (a woman’s name)?” The answers were “policeman,” “mother,” and “chef.” Pedro’s friend said “Mother!” and then asked me to confirm if the name was a woman’s name. I said yes. The two boys read the questions out loud in English as they appeared on the screen, called out answers in English, and Pablo was in charge of the mouse so he was selecting the answers.

This English text led to group play, as friends interacted around the English trivia game together, reading out loud and calling out answers in English. Though they still asked for help (to confirm the gender of the actress's name), these participants navigated the English game quite smoothly by themselves. Though often English text on video game interfaces was quickly bypassed during play, this was a good example of English text as a critical part of the game. For these Spanish-dominant but English-expert young people, playing in English was fun.

Video games not only spawned both group and solitary play, they also, for some participants, led to more creative activity. For Lani, a quiet, smart ninth grader, video games inspired her to create her own game and aspire to be a video game developer.

Lani started our conversation in English by asking me if I was from New Jersey. I said yes, and she said that video game companies like Nintendo and others were there. I said that I didn't know but that I imagined so. She then told me that she wanted to design video games, and that she had some drawings to show me. She got up and went to her backpack and brought back a notebook. She showed me pencil drawings of about 4 different characters, 2 boys and 2 girls, in ripped punk-like clothes. The game was called "Shadow Sword." She also showed me that she had designed a sword and the lettering of the title, and also was working on a symbol which seemed like a knot or something (she said she was still working on it). She continued flipping through the notebook. She showed me songs that she had written in English. Both of them were about sadness or unrequited love. She also showed me two poems in Spanish, about similar themes. I commented on how sad they were, and she said that it is difficult when you are in love with your best friend. She then told me that she even told him, and that he turned red and said that he just wanted to be friends. I reassured her that yes, this was difficult! Lani

continued to tell me about things that she wrote. She said that she was working on a novel at home. I asked her in what language and she said in Spanish, because it is easier. Lani was an extremely creative person who drew on all of her linguistic resources in her creative endeavors. The daughter of an ex-military man, both of Lani's parents spoke both English and Spanish, and even though they spoke Spanish at home, they also taught her English. Lani wrote songs in English, as she told me, because she wanted to be a rock star, and it was easier to be a star if your songs were in English. Lani's astute assessment of popular culture led her to the conclusion that writing in English was important to reaching a wider audience, and thus getting more famous. English was also critical to video game use, as she named her videogame "Shadow Sword" in English. Although she had aspirations to publish, there was also something very private about her notebook filled with songs, drawings, and poems in two languages. She showed it to me with great care, and spoke of the emotions that led her to write. For Lani, English was part of her private life. But even in these private, creative endeavors in her notebook, Lani is true to which languages (in her judgment) should be used for what: English for pop culture (video games and songs), Spanish for literature (poems and novels).

Adult Literacy Practices Outside of Work and School

While young people's English literacy practices involved social bonding and creative endeavors, the English literacy practices of adults were much less entertaining. This was not a result of their English expertise as much as it was a result of their age and the responsibilities of adulthood. That is, as seen in the section above about forms, adult novice and expert English users alike participated in English literacy practices. However, the types of practices they participated in were very different from young people's because of the different responsibilities they had as adults. Below I detail two examples of adult literacy practices: reading medical

referral letters and reading an instruction manual. Both were typical English literacy practices for adults in Ramona.

Mani was one of the lunch ladies at the school. She always wore capri-length pants with sneakers, a nurse's scrub top and a great big smile. I was constantly in awe of how she remained cheerful in the face of much adversity, including serious medical problems and prematurely becoming a grandmother. Mani was born in Brooklyn and grew up there until she was about eight years old and her family returned to Puerto Rico. She told me that she did not speak English. However, I did see her read a lot of English text, including the medical referral letter that she had in her hand one day when she came to the library looking for a highlighter.

I asked her, “¿Cómo estas?” (How are you?) and she replied with a rocking hand motion and a protruding lower lip, indicating not too good. I said, “Regular?” (Just OK?) And she said yes. She had a letter in her hand. She explained in Spanish that she had to get some tests done. Referring to the letter, which was in English, she pointed to the phrases “thyroid scan” and “biopsy” and explained in Spanish (except for those words themselves) that she went to the doctor and had to have some tests, but there was some question as to whether it would be covered by her insurance or not. She came to find a highlighter (which she took from the carrel on my desk) to highlight these two phrases. When she was finished, she said goodbye and left.

A major difference between the health care system in Puerto Rico and in the U.S. is that in Puerto Rico patients shuffle paper work between doctors and labs personally. Patients take written referral letters and doctor's recommendations for lab tests to a laboratory and they receive the written results and must bring them to their doctors. Most of this paper work was in English, as Mani's letter was the day she came to look for a highlighter. When she appeared in

the library that day, it was clear that Mani had read the letter. Though her doctor had also likely explained the contents of the letter to her in Spanish, the fact that she came to highlight certain parts of the text means that she also had read it herself. This English literacy event was part of a larger interaction with the health system bureaucracy, as Mani negotiated with her health plan to see if the tests were covered. English literacy was crucial to this interaction.

Like Mani, Nori negotiated English text as part of her normal adult responsibilities. While working with her boyfriend to repair her Toyota on a Saturday afternoon, she asked if she could look at my car manual (also a Toyota) because she had left hers at home. We leaned on my car in the driveway as she flipped through the manual, which was written in English.

Nori asked me, “¿Cómo se dice coolent [en inglés]?” (How do you say “coolent” in English?) I responded, “‘Coolent’ o ‘antifreeze.’” Nori looked in the table of contents and found “maintenance and care.” She read the page number out loud in Spanish and flipped to that page. She paged through the section, but it didn’t say how to change the fluid. She looked in the table of contents for “coolent,” found a page number, and read it out loud in Spanish. Then she checked in the “a” section for “anti-freeze.” It wasn’t there. She looked back to “coolent,” read the page number out loud in Spanish again, then flipped to that section. Again, what she needed didn’t appear. “Este [trabajo] es pa’ mecánicos,” she commented. (This [work] is for mechanics.)

Nori was an expert user of English. Although she never lived in the U.S., she had visited relatives in Pennsylvania several times and had traveled around the country with them. She had a bachelor’s in accounting and had learned English very well in school. She also participated in the community English class at the school, traveling from San Juan to do so. Because of her training as an accountant, Nori used English text a lot at work. It was clear from this English

literacy event that not only could she read English text, but she could navigate the car manual quite well, using both the table of contents and index to look for key words. Although she asked me how to say “coolent,” which is actually a borrow from English, she was really just asking for confirmation of what she already knew, and probably would have met the same results if I had been standing there or not. Nori swiftly and deftly navigated the English car manual.

As I observed the English literacy practices of adults in Ramona, it was striking how decidedly un-fun they were. Many times reading English meant that something was wrong (a health problem, a broken-down car) or unpleasant (paying federal taxes, repaying a student loan). In contrast, reading and writing English for young people outside of class was part of social activity and youth culture. As I summarize the English literacy practices of the community below, it is clear that English expertise was not the most important factor in participation in English literacy practices, but rather the age of participants.

Summary of English literacy practices in Ramona

To summarize the English literacy practices observed in the community, below is a list of English texts used by participants and the social domains of their literacy activity while using the text. The table also indicates whether the domain included reading or writing activities. The final column indicates whether adults or young people (children and teens) participated in the literacy events of each domain.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

English literacy practices and age

Not only do people in Ramona live surrounded by English text, they also regularly read and wrote English text. This was true across English language proficiency levels. However, an important difference in the English language literacy practices of the community is revealed by

looking at the age of the participants in those practices (see Table 2). In the events observed that did not occur in the domain of school, writing in English among adults was restricted to filling out forms, while young people wrote many different types of English texts. Adult English writing was also limited to work (filling out forms to get free library materials) and specifically *financial* bureaucracy (IRS tax form, Federal Direct Loans application). This financial bureaucracy is conspicuously *federal*. The kinds of English writing tasks required of adult citizens of Ramona were often a result of Puerto Rico's political status as a colony.

In fact, both the reading and writing English literacy practices of adults in the community were patterned by a colonial system that is revealed when examining what texts occur in what languages. Because all goods that come into Puerto Rico must be imported from the U.S., participants read manuals and instructions in English (for example, the Toyota manual). Their interactions with all forms of bureaucracy, but particularly financial and medical bureaucracy, required reading and writing English text. Even important information such as storm warnings occurred in English (though not exclusively). Adult participants also used English text at school and at work. In short, the possibilities for English literacy practices for adults increased in those social domains that one would expect in a colonial system, those domains related to public life, where the colonial language and the local language rub up against each other. Very few English literacy practices were observed among adults in domains related to private life.

This was a major difference between the English literacy practices of adults and young people. For young participants, who did not yet have the responsibilities of public life outside of school, English literacy practices flourished in domains related to private life such as entertainment and interpersonal communication. But this finding is not unrelated to global language politics. In fact, just as adults are consuming the products exported by the metropolis,

so young people are consuming the cultural products of the center, including videogames, pop music, and cartoons. As in other countries around the world, in Puerto Rico young people often look to North America to see what's cool (Phillipson 2001). And this is not by accident; what is available to young people in terms of commodities of popular culture in Puerto Rico is North American and Puerto Rican, not global. North American pop culture is sold in stores, advertised on TV, shown in movie theatres, and piped into homes through cable. The language of these cultural imports is English.

The exciting and interesting thing, then, is the kinds of literacy practices that develop around these English imports. The English literacy practices of young people often occurred in groups, huddled around a computer. Young people also had networks of communication that involved English literacy practices. For example, if one participant went to Britney Spears' website, found a photo, and printed it in the morning, students would enter the library throughout the day to look for and print the same photo. This meant that the English literacy practice of one student could multiply throughout a day or week, with students helping each other to re-create the practice that resulted in the desired photo. Thus, the English literacy practices of young people were most often inherently social. This social interaction around English text most often occurred in Spanish, though it sometimes occurred in English with English expert participants, such as Pedro. Thus, the kinds of social activities spawned by the English literacy practice were multilingual.

English literacy practices and institutions

But why would this difference in literacy practices by age be so pronounced? One explanation surfaces when thinking about these literacy practices in terms of the institutions that they are associated with. Adult English literacy practices, particularly in writing, were often

associated with government. This institution is the responsibility of adults; it is part of adult life to deal with government institutions. The institution that dominates the life of children, however, is school. This study did not include observation of classroom literacy practices, but participants did comment on them. The general opinion of kids was that English class was decidedly not fun, much like dealing with government institutions in English was not fun for adults. Thus, English use was patterned differently by age because it is wound up in institutions, and the institutions with which people interacted were different according to age.

Conclusion and implications

Contrary to what might be expected, novice English language expertise did not prevent participation in English literacy practices in Ramona, but led to different types of participation. In addition, participation in different practices was a result of differences in life stage, and the interactions with institutions demanded of that life stage, not language expertise. Whether participants would call themselves bilingual or not, they participated in English literacy practices.

I have shown how English literacy practices were wound up in global capitalism, in terms of their relationship to commodities of popular culture, and in institutions, in terms of interacting with the federal government and schools. Both these larger forces are entwined with colonialism. Take, for example, the excerpt where the agriculture teacher is uncertain how to navigate the computer interface in English, which illustrated how certain texts were expected to be in English. Computers are distributed through the forces of global capitalism; they are developed, marketed, and sold by American companies. In Puerto Rico, people have become accustomed to using the interface in English, just as people in countries throughout the world in colonies and former colonies are taught subjects such as science and math in English or other

colonial languages. The anticipated language of certain texts, then, is related to systems of colonialism and colonial language policies.

Because computers and the internet were so consistently used in English, it could be hypothesized that technology developed English proficiency. However, this study did not measure proficiency or language development over time, but it can be said that technology provided authentic materials, domains of real, communicative use of English. We know that using a language for real communicative purposes, rather than strictly classroom-based uses, promotes language development. But as pointed out in the previous section, this influx of commodities of popular culture, facilitated by the internet, is not without its consequences in terms of cultural imperialism. In some ways, the Americanization campaign of long ago is still present, not as explicit policy in Puerto Rico, but as a continuing consequence of colonialism and global capitalism.

In conclusion, as a result of this study we can describe more accurately the reality of English textual use in a particular rural Puerto Rican community. Though this study cannot be generalized to all of Puerto Rico, it does debunk the myth that Puerto Ricans on the island do not know English at all. In fact, it shows that not only do they know it well enough to use it in their everyday lives, many of them must do so to accomplish their communicative goals and meet their adult responsibilities. More ethnographic research needs to be conducted in order to understand English language use in different areas of the island (such as in the metropolitan area of San Juan) which, I suspect, would contrast greatly with the results shown here. Deeper understanding of everyday English language practices should not only lead to a greater understanding of bilingualism in colonial contexts, but also to a better educational language policy for Puerto Rico.

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ⁱ All names of people and places are pseudonyms.