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### Paper 4:

From Reading Lyrics to the Creation of  
Multimodal Texts: Reading the Word and the  
World with Young Learners from a Public  
High School in Colombia

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# From Reading Lyrics to the Creation of Multimodal Texts: Reading the Word and the World with Young Learners from a Public High School in Colombia

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## Abstract

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*This paper shows a Colombian public high school classroom-based experience where young learners (YLS) have been engaged in the creation of multimodal texts to foster literacy along with cultural and intercultural awareness from some song lyrics in English. This, the author argues, provides an alternative to the texts offered to teach and learn English in Colombia by different national and multinational publishing houses and the requirements of a globalized society.*

*The experience stems from a project-based learning method where YLS have been involved in sustained, collaborative real-world investigations ranging from the reflection on their local culture, values and social problems to the way they are reading and writing traditional and multimodal texts.*

*The paper reports the uses of literacy in public high school English classes, as well as awareness for the local culture and social issues in both YLS and community. Because of the experience, students have broadcast their multimodal projects in the local and regional TV channels. Findings also reflect on the uses and creation of materials that connect the teachers' experiences, knowledge and expertise with their students' lives, needs, expectations and language level so they can interact and deal with their local culture, social problems, values, history and diversity (Henao, 2015).*

## Introduction

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Cameras, cellphones and the different ways of communicating with one another, joined with the existing diversity of a multicultural and beginner in second languages education country as Colombia have changed the meaning and approaches to language learning and teaching (Mora, 2014a). This is particularly

visible in terms of literacy, uses of learning and teaching materials, etc. during the last years, especially for YLs and teachers.

This paper report results on a Colombian public high school classroom-based experience where YLs have been engaged in the creation of multimodal texts to foster literacy along with cultural and intercultural awareness from some song lyrics in English as an alternative to the texts offered to teach and learn English in Colombia.

I will present my experience in five different sections. First, I will introduce the reader to the context of the experience. Second, I will lay out the foundations that frame this experience. Then, I will discuss some personal experiences in language policies in Colombia woven with the timeline for this experience. Finally, the model and modus operandi of the experience will be shortly described, bookended with a short conclusion about this practice.

## The Context of the Experience

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As part of the requirements for being an official public teacher in Colombia after the year 2001, teachers might decide in a public hearing, during merit-based criteria, a place for teaching (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2002), and Santa Bárbara, as one of the few villages near the city with vacancies for teaching English, was on my mind. Santa Bárbara is a small village located in the Antioquia's southwest, it is about one hour and a half from Medellín by bus. Only five public high schools provide the educational service to a population of about 30.000 inhabitants; two of them are located in the urban area and three in the rural area so most of its community is countryside people.

This municipality, on one hand, has been marked in Colombia's history for many violent events; however, two of them were of particular note in it: the massacres of February 1963 best known as The Cairo's cement manufacture workers massacre of 1963 and the presence of paramilitary groups during the 90's and the beginning of 2000. On the other hand, it would be appropriate to point out that, public high school institutions in Santa Bárbara do not have more than two hours of English class a week with 10th graders who have been the YLs selected for this classroom-based experience.

## Foundations That Frame this Classroom-Based Experience

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Before turning to the YLs' work and describing the motivation for this practice, we need to consider some foundations that informed this experience. As the main goal for this project was the creation of multimodal texts to generate cultural awareness using the lyrics of songs in English by YLs, I will make brief comments and introductions about literacies in the English classrooms, mono-modal texts and

multimodal texts, cultural learning and awareness, alternative teaching materials, songs and lyrics when teaching English.

### **LITERACY IN ENGLISH CLASSROOMS IN COLOMBIA**

According to Kaestle (1985) the concept and research of literacy has continually developed and changed for the last fifty years; however, as Mora (2011, 2012) has argued, this is an emerging concept in the English classrooms in Colombia due to the fresh beginning of the national agendas for improving the learning and teaching English processes in the country.

Lankshear & Knobel (2003) expressed that it goes beyond the act of traditional reading and writing or decoding some words, it is about the reality in which we are, and not a separate construction of the society to perform in better jobs, be citizens, and even thought the construction as a single person per se or as Freire and Macedo's (1987) would define it, "reading the word and the world," on a daily basis.

This way, we can understand literacy in English classrooms in Colombia as the process of interpretation and creation of texts using different ways and means including technology, English as a second language and different ways of expression, in addition to the oral and the written word (Mora, 2012, 2014b).

### **FROM LINEAR TEXTS TO MULTIMODALITY: THE YLS' GENERATION**

Since the fast growing of technology and the ICT uses in education, YLs are demanding more than reading and writing a textbook or decoding some words in a text, the act of reading and writing a linear or mono-modal text as a paper or book is just one of the many ways for naming a text. Nowadays, words, images, graphics, movement, gesture, texture, music and sounds embrace what we title a text (Multimodality); they are no longer linear. The contact with and use of technology to produce texts have become a new form of capital, communication has evolved from mono-modal to become multidirectional and multimodal (Kress, 2010).

Multimodality is not an unfamiliar topic for nowadays young students; on the contrary, it would engage YLs classrooms without any problem because this generation can easily relate to multimodality. For Miller (2007) YLs who were born after 1981 have digital technology as a natural piece of their reality and bringing multimodality into the classroom will help make classroom content relevant and closer to them.

### **CULTURAL LEARNING AND CULTURAL/INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS**

According to Moran (2001) a cultural learning process involves series of encounters with cultural differences presented through organized participation in the language-and-culture curriculum. Fenner (2008) claimed that these encounters are interactions and prompts to make simulated situations as close

to real interactions as possible. For him, interactions can take place with spoken or written authentic texts where YLs have opportunity to re-interpret their perception of the world, as well as the world outside the classroom in which the authentic text appears. Fenner also claimed that developing cultural awareness needs a continue communication between written and oral texts because it is where learner encounters a second language as culture in classes. Similar perceptions flow from Byram & Grundy (2002) about intercultural awareness, when they assimilate it as the process of becoming more aware of and increasing understanding of one's own culture to increase international and cross-cultural understanding. That is why English language teaching in YLs that aims to raise cultural awareness, should start, from the learner's point of view and takes their experiences as a starting point.

### **UNDERSTANDING ALTERNATIVE TEACHING MATERIALS**

According to Woodward (2001), an alternative teaching material could be any material used during the English classroom other than course books. The idea of course books include since textbooks and workbook to recordings and other material offered in a package from any publishing house.

An alternative material is also referred as an "authentic", "real life" or "homegrown material". The term authentic or real life material is a designation used for the kind of material which are not mass-produced or with artificial language as textbooks for instructional discourses; that is, materials which are not prepared for learning English issues or with a natural communication (Kramersch, 2000).

Harmer (2001) contributes with a supplementary definition for alternative teaching materials, 'homegrown materials' or the materials made by teachers or, in our case, by YLs themselves such as slides, videos, pictures, worksheets with exercises, articles from news-papers or magazines, books and so on. In conclusion, alternative teaching materials could be authentic, self-made by teachers, and does not include the kind of artificial language that often occurs in traditional course books.

### **SONGS AND THEIR LYRICS WHEN TEACHING TO YLS**

Learning, teaching and using songs in the English class is not a new thing. Songs in English learning and teaching have been proven not just as a complete alternative or authentic material for learning an L2 but as a great tool for stimulating and motivating YLs to learn English, and for providing historical and sociocultural context and content to the learner (Cheung, 2001; Plagwitz, 2006).

According to Murphey (1992) the core part of songs when we use them for learning a second language is the song's lyrics, that's the part we use the most for learning and teaching activities in the classrooms; moreover, because lyrics, like the poetry of the song, allow many different interpretations, permitting different kind of activities according to teachers' creativity.

## Behind the Scenes

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For the purpose of this paper, I will refer to “Behind the Scenes” as those aspects, situations, reflections and realities that happened outside and inside the classrooms without any preparation, but helped to model and brought ideas to consolidate this classroom experience.

### **BEHIND THE SCENES #1: CONTEXTUALIZING LANGUAGE POLICIES IN COLOMBIA BEFORE AND DURING THE EXPERIENCE**

The English language learning and teaching and the educational system in Santa Bárbara as in all the Colombian territory had some of the best changes from 2004, these changes were mainly because of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR; Council for Cultural Cooperation, 2001) and the Decree 1278 (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2002).

Though the CEFR became a reference in Europe since 2001. In Colombia, it became the reference in the learning and teaching of languages since 2004 by the beginning of the National Bilingual Plan (2004–2019) (Ayala Zárate & Álvarez V, 2005). This plan intended for the public educational system to train bilingual teachers and students focused on the CEFR as a reference. As the different concepts of the language level to reach began to be used nationwide (A1 to C2), new ways of conceiving and practicing the language learning and teaching in Colombia began to flourish (Usma, Quinchía & Rodas, 2013).

Prior to the adoption of the CEFR as the Colombian reference, some universities were instructing pre-service language teachers about it because Colombian language students and teachers had no frame of reference for the learning and teaching of second languages. In my case, I faced some of these issues and received that information when I was pursuing my B.A at the U.P.B before 2004.

According to Decree 1278 (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2002), Colombia, as a nation, will ensure the teaching profession by suitable professionals where having a professional degree, experience, performance and abilities, will be the essential attributes for being a teacher in Colombia. Whereas that seems a normal thing when thinking about the quality in education, we must reflect on what was happening before this Decree. A decree, we should add, that was issue about ten years ago, if we take into account that first full time high school teachers under this law began in 2005, just one year after the adoption of the CEFR as a reference in Colombia.

### **BEHIND THE SCENES #2: BEGINNING MY TEACHING EXPERIENCE IN A PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL**

As one of the “new teachers” in Colombia, learning and teaching English to YLs in public schools has been a big challenge. On the one hand, because of the different language policies changes teachers had to face. On the other hand, because teachers must face new ICT uses, new ways of teaching and

learning of our times, and the pressure to teach English to participate in a global economy, all of which require workers capable of functioning in two languages (Mora, 2014b).

However, my own experience might serve as a better example. It was 2002 and Colombia, as a nation, had still not begun with any reference for the teaching and learning of languages in public education yet (De Mejía, 2005). I still recall my first words to my principal and the academic coordinator of the first institution where I taught,

I would like to know the process of the students in order to know where to begin with them, they looked at each other, smiled and told me we have not had any language teacher who holds a bachelor degree in languages, so you can start from scratch.

It was my first year in the public sector and I did not know where to begin, I looked for the English curriculum in the institution but it did not exist. At that point, I knew my tasks as a public English teacher were going to be more than going to share some English in class with my students. I tried doing a diagnosis of the current situation but things were worse than I thought; students were not only absolute beginners in English but they expressed they hated English class, they had a terrible attitude towards the English learning and it seemed as if they wanted everything except English classes.

During some time, I looked for and tried with different textbooks; however, the most I tried to use them, the most uncomfortable with both my students and my own styles and roles I felt. I even found and used some English curricula and textbooks from different institutions located in the same village. However, I had the same feeling that they did not respond to YLs' needs, previous knowledge, expectations and language level, the local culture and history, among many others. That pushed me to change the way I was reflecting about textbooks and education in order to connect the texts I was bringing to my classrooms with the YLs' lives and experiences (González, 2013; Janks, 2014).

The experience of being a public English teacher, the readings and the classes at that point created a twofold effect. On the one hand, I realized that educating and teaching English to YLs was not merely a matter of training them in a certain set of skills, or transferring them the books, course books and textbooks I used to study when I was at the university or someone else recommended me (Freire & Macedo, 1987). On the other hand, I became more aware that the teaching profession infiltrates ethical and ideological decisions, the syllabus, classes rules, assignments, assessment criteria, teacher's role, YLs' roles, style and, of course, the selection of the teaching materials. (Johnston, 2003; Luke & Woods, 2009).

At this point of my career, I had used songs and music as part of my classes, for beginning a new topic, for practicing and learning new vocabulary, listening, pronunciation and reinforcing past topics, where I could see an improvement in learning and motivation for the English class when teaching to YLs (Gabriel, 2007).

One of the facts which called my attention when using songs in the classes was that most students began to feel touched by most of the lyrics, and began to share their feelings and stories with me and the classmates. It was not uncommon to hear my tenth-grade students say, “that song was made for me or my situation,” “everything in that song is real,” or “what that song is describing happens or happened to me” (Murphy, 1992).

That situation made me think about the idea that YLs began to write small texts, six to fifteen lines, about their impressions, feelings and stories lyrics could brought to their mind. Students, consequently, started showing and sharing not just their context, situations, dreams, stories and issues. In addition, they showed improvement and motivation in the learning activities we were proposing in English to such an extent that some contests about their writings inside the different classrooms began to succeed.

A few years later, in 2007, after seeing how YLs were using ICT with cellphones, tablets, cameras, computers, etc., I came up with the idea of creating some multimodal texts. These texts, no longer than five minutes maximum, began from the writings they had created from the lyrics we had shared in the English classes while having the local culture as the main reference.

Nevertheless, the YLs’ project was still at a very early stage, so after showing these multimodal texts to the board of director in charge of the local T.V. Channel of the village, they accepted them to be share in the local television programming where more than 20.000 of viewers began to watch and follow the YLs works. Besides, these multimodal texts began to be the basis and the alternative teaching materials for reading and writing activities with the other YLs.

Through this classroom experience, YLs were the ones who performed their investigations in order to share their multimodal texts and findings with classmates, family and community through the local and regional TV channels as an opportunity to demonstrate what they had learned in English class. During this research, YLs showed narratives and biographical-narratives as the most used methodologies during the project. We also relied on observations and interviews as data collection techniques for achieving the students’ goals.

During the English classes, multimodal texts and printed material continued to be created from YLs. However, students now discovered that they were not just making alternative teaching materials and multimodal texts but appropriating language policies and reality to our practices (Usma, 2009), allowing another way of teaching and learning which go beyond the traditional methods (Kumaravadivelu, 2006) and reclaiming the local to be in the English classes (Canagarajah, 2005).

## The Classroom-Based Experience Model and Modus Operandi

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A project-based learning (PBL) was the chosen model for this YLs' project. PBL is a model of organizing learning around projects. Some of the definitions found in the literature agree that projects are elaborated tasks, based on provoking inquiries or problems. PBL include learners in the design, problem-solving, or research of activities or facts. Projects give students the opportunity to work autonomously and have realistic products or presentations (Bédard, Lison, Dalle, Côté & Boutin, 2012; Guzdial, 1998).

A project-based learning actively engages YLs in the problem-solving, learning process through planning, doing, and completing projects. This teaching model embraces the belief that students learn best by applying concepts to and from authentic world scenarios. (Bartscher & Nutter, 1995; Diehl et al, 1999; Sockalingam & Schmidt, 2011).

From our experience, I would like to recommend five actions or assignments into every academic period of all the four public high schools in Colombia should have:

1. YLs, individually or in groups, choose a song for analyzing its lyrics: the lyrics should be observed and analyzed under a given topic. Some of the selected topics in the past have been values in the village, social problems, the family, the school, culture in Santa Bárbara, common people, landmarks in the village etc...
2. YLs should write a story, poem or response paper from the lyrics, having into account the given topic and the local culture and context.
3. YLs created a multimodal text based on their story, poem or response paper and the selected lyrics.
4. Some of the multimodal texts were selected among YLs to be broadcasted in the local and regional T.V. channel.
5. Broadcast multimodal texts were taking as alternative teaching materials for reading and writing activities in English Class among YLs of other grades.

## Conclusions

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During this classroom experience, YLs could create texts with words, images, graphics, movement, gesture, texture, music and sounds, multimodal texts (Kress, 2010) from the analysis and reading of lyrics. Furthermore, we shared the creation of these multimodal texts with the community, classmates and other students. At the same time, others have used these texts as a resource for new learning and activities with students and this way acting as alternative teaching material for English classes (Harmer, 2001; Kramch, 2000; Woodward 2001). This, in turn, allowed taking into account the local culture and context

from a critical point of view where YLs could understand and live literacy, or using Freire and Macedo's words (1987), to "read the word and the world."

Through the experience of making multimodal texts, YLs have been in the process of increasing understanding of one's own culture beginning from their own realities and points of view. They have been able to take their experiences as point of departure toward cultural and intercultural awareness (Byram & Grundy, 2002; Canagarajah, 2005; Fenner, 2008). This, in turn, focuses the English curriculum on local context culture, ties it more tightly to the CEFR, and makes it more student-centered. As we have our curriculum today, we have managed to concentrate more deeply on sociopolitical issues that have affected and impacted students' communities (Freire, 1970).

YLs have created situations that helped them gain perspective on local issues, which also engage them in dynamic activities that made sense in the context in which they are living, integrating multiple modes of expression and incorporating technology in their lessons (Canagarajah, 2005; Gonzáles, 2013; Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). This way, YLs and teacher can establish connections between the texts they read and created and their lives, providing meaningful spaces for interaction (Janks, 2014), advocating for an active position (Lau, 2012) and conscious engagement (Janks, 2012; Willis, Montavon, Hall, Hunter, Burke, & Herrera, 2008) in the interpretation and creation of different texts (Mora, 2012).

In closing, YLs began to question cultural and linguistic matters in text consumption, interpretation, and creation (Hammond & Macken-Horarik, 1999), interrogating the texts they read during the process; furthermore, they disrupted the commonplaces and contexts, questioning and permitting multiple viewpoints to focus on sociopolitical issues and their surroundings to promote social justice (Ko & Wang, 2013; Labadie et al., 2012; Luke, 2012).

## Author's Note

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