The Notion of *Second Languages*:
Responding to Today's Linguistic Ecologies

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Abstract: *This paper presents the results of an ongoing reflection for the past two years around the debates on English and languages within an academic team in charge of a new MA program in Colombia. In this paper, the author argues that the traditional binary opposition between second and foreign language, while useful in the past, may no longer be responding to the new language ecologies that technology and social mobility, among others, are proposing. The paper will first describe the current landscape, problematizing the idea of foreign language as a matter that transcends linguistic or geographic distinctions and that, when carefully analyzed, has turned into a source for unequal language practices. Then, the discussion will turn into how the notion of* second languages *(in plural) espoused by the MA program has become an alternative that opens new spaces to address issues of learning and equity, while being mindful of the new social contexts that have emerged for languages today. Some implications for education and research will bookend the discussion.*

Keywords: Second languages, learning, teaching, education, English, world languages

Introduction

English Language Teaching has recently found itself pondering how to respond to new and more complex demands (Graddol, 1997) as triggered by education itself, technology, and new views of languages. Ideas such as the postmethod (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, 2008), communicative tasks (Nunan, 2004; Vallejo Gómez & Martínez Marín, 2011), new links between language teaching and technology (Mora, 2011a; Mora, Martínez, Alzate-Pérez, Gómez-Yepes, & Zapata-Monsalve, 2012), ideas about diversity (Blommaert, 2012) and cosmopolitanism (Bennett, 1993; Bennett & Bennett, 2004; Golovatina, 2006; Golovátina-Mora, 2012a; Golovátina-Mora & Mora, 2011; Mora & Golovátina-Mora, 2011a, b) are an affirmation that the way we learn and teach English is changing. In addition, emerging concepts such as World Englishes (Canagarajah, 2003; Rajagopalan, 2004; 2010) and English as a *Lingua Franca* (Seidlhofer, 2005; Llurda, 2012) are inviting us to rethink the traditional models and find ways to address all these new realities. Therefore, we must find better ways to prepare our teachers from conceptual and practical standpoints.

As a language, English has the potential to be a tool for cooperation and comprehension, yet we must also be wary of how it can marginalize people (Luke, 2004; Pennycook, 2001). It ultimately depends on how we define it and frame it to respond to the new linguistic landscapes and configurations we find today. One key concern for researchers and educators is to promote definitions that transcend hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971) and unequal (Bourdieu, 1991) practices. In this regard, there is the growing question about the relevance and validity of the division between "second" and "foreign" languages (Bhatt, 2010; Nayar, 1997; Mora, 2011b). In recent years, scholars have questioned how this dichotomy addresses societal evolution of the uses of English (Graddol, 1997; Nayar, 1997). These concerns continue arising and the question of whether we should continue talking about "EFL" is louder than ever (Graddol, 2006; Mora, 2012c, d, e). This is especially relevant when technology has provided new forms of mobility (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011), turning language into a resource (Jørgensen, Karrebæk, Madsen, & Møller, 2011) rather than a monolithic entity.

This paper is the result of a process of academic reflexivity (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Mora, 2011c, 2012a) within a new MA program at Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana in Colombia. In this MA in

"Learning and Teaching Processes in Second Languages" (Mora, 2013), my colleagues and I have taken a stand to stop defining English in terms of second/foreign and think about *second languages* (Saville-Troike, 2006; Skutnabb-Kangas& McCarty, 2008). In our recent academic discussions about this notion (Mora, 2012c, d, e), we have argued that the notion of second languages becomes a necessary step to rethink today's language ecologies and in the search of more equitable frameworks for language learning and teaching today. To discuss our argument, I will first introduce a brief overview of the traditional binary and why it has become increasingly problematic. Then, I will discuss the program's notion of *second languages*, how we are framing it, and some potential implications for language research. While brief, the ideas in this paper are nothing but an invitation to join the conversation, as the matters of language equity are a uniting factor for language researchers and advocates in every corner of our planet.

Reviewing and Problematizing a Traditional Binary

It may not come as a surprise to most if we think about the framework to describe languages that permeated our learning process, especially those who became language teachers. We learned that there was a traditional distinction about languages different from one's mother tongue. We discussed the idea of "second" languages, meaning languages learned in countries where the language had an "official" status and people used it outside of schools and in their everyday lives. On the other hand, there was this notion called "foreign" languages, or those learned where said languages were "not official" and were mostly the domain of schools (Saville-Troike, 2006; VanPatten & Benati, 2010). In this binary, oftentimes mutually exclusive, one's competence in the language was always measured against that of "native speakers" (Cook, 1999; Mahboob, 2005; Medgyes, 1992, 2001; Moussu & Llurda, 2008). Thus, the closer one leaned toward that native ideal, the better and more qualified speaker one would be.

Needless to say, the existence of the binary and the figure of the native speaker as the only source of validation had some implications. For instance, the binary gave credence to the belief that unless one "lived" abroad, one would never learn the target language properly and that any other efforts would never yield optimal results. This also implied that schools would have to make any efforts to bring "real" and "authentic" language to the classroom, understanding these notions as incorporating materials created *for* and *by* native speakers of a language. Finally, this push for authenticity endorsed the figure of the native speaker as the legitimate language authority, an image that media and language schools themselves helped perpetuate (Mora & Muñoz Luna, 2012).

The Problem with the Binary

While the second/foreign language binary remains popular (in many cases, it is dogma), it does not mean there has not been any scrutiny around it. In fact, different scholars (Bhatt, 2010; Graddol, 1997, 2006; Mora, 2011a; Nayar, 1997) have raised questions about the limitations of the idea of "foreign" language and how it is not responding to today's language ecologies. I will discuss some of these points in this section.

The first problem that my colleagues and I have found regarding foreign language is the use of geography as a source of distinction (Mora, 2012d, e). The notion of second and foreign languages stems from *where* you are, assuming that where you are automatically validates the social uses and contexts of language. However, as recent studies on diversity and language have argued (e.g. Blommaert & Rampton, 2011), technology mediation has changed the landscape of how people interact with each other and has expanded the possibilities for communication (Mora, 2012c). The new configurations for language use that are arising from technology are undeniable (Thorne & Black, 2008) and having frameworks that disregard these realities would only cause more inequalities.

A second problem in the FL framework is the link between number of users and proficiency. If one only

relied on statistics such as number of native speakers and speakers beyond the B2 level from the Common European Framework (Council of Europe, 2001), then it may hold true that there are only a handful of places where a language like English is a second language. However, language is fluid (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010) and language users are becoming more creative about how to use to convey meaning in social settings (Jørgensen, et al., 2011). Today's realities show us that for some people, proficiency is not going to get in the way of their desire to use a language as a resource to expand the possibilities to express their thoughts and dreams, as Jørgensen and colleagues (2011) have argued in their discussions of language as a resource.

Then, there is a more literal matter in the idea of "foreign": Its actual meaning. While preparing some presentations about this issue (Mora, 2012d, e), I decided to look up the different meanings of "foreign" found in the dictionary. The definition of foreign showed me the following words: "alien", "not connected or pertinent" (Merriam-Webster), "strange or unfamiliar" (dictionary.com), "not germane; irrelevant" (thefreedictionary.com), "borrowed, distant, estranged, external, inaccessible, remote, strange, unexplored, unfamiliar" (thesaurus.com). All these ideas seem to relate to the same notion: that something "foreign" is something that does not belong to me. In the middle of this discussion with one of my undergraduate classes in 2012, one of my students started wondering how, if a language is something I use to communicate with others, a language cannot belong to us.

Some of these questions are not necessarily our creation. In recent years, a growing school of thought has risen to question the second/foreign binary and whether is it worth sustaining it (Graddol, 2006). Ideas such as World Englishes (Bruthiaux, 2010; Canagarajah, 2006; Rajagopalan, 2004), English as a *lingua franca* (Seidlhofer, 2005; Llurda, 2012), and regional varieties of English (Higgins, 2009; Jordan, 2011) are now raising questions about what the kind of standards we are using today and how valid they are in light of the expansion of English in today's world. Questions about some features of language acquisition that transcend location and are simply germane to learning at large (Ospina Lopera & Montoya Marín, 2012; VanPatten & Benati, 2010) have also triggered questions about what really constitutes a foreign language. There is also the influx of technology (Black, 2009; Labbo & Place, 2010) and how online media are providng more ways to access information and language learning resources that offer other possibilities to practice languages. We have also witnessed the emergence of ideas such as *additional language* (Thorne & Black, 2008) and *new language* (*nueva lengua*, Sanz, 2006) that are permeating other languages such as Spanish and Portuguese as ideas that reflect the new social interactions that languages are triggering today.

Finally, there is a large matter of language equity (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000) that we must address: The notions of second and foreign language, while binary, are *not* mutually exclusive and one can, in fact, find second language learning frameworks in otherwise called "foreign language" countries. The problem with this distinction is that is, more often than not, socially stratified (Finn, 2009). As some of my colleagues and I have observed, there are schools in Colombia (and I am certain this would happen in many other countries) whose students have access to state-of-the-art learning facilities, with access to computers for every student, extended hours for English instructions (sometimes taking up between ¼ and ½ of the academic schedule), including content-based instruction in science, math, and other subjects, the presence of native speaker teachers, immersion programs on a yearly basis, and other benefits. At the same time, there are schools that may have the English curriculum in place, yet lack the teachers to teach it. When you have schools with such copious resources, one cannot talk about "foreign" language anymore and what is happening instead is that second language instruction becomes a commodity that only a wealthy few can afford. A situation like this, from a human rights perspective (Mora, 2004) is by all means unacceptable and therefore we need other frameworks to reframe language learning and teaching.

The Notion of *Second Languages*: Pluralization toward Plurality

Our reflections and discussions in the MA program have led us to the point where we have chosen to talk about *second languages*, as a plural term. Our understanding of second languages begins from the notion of any languages learned *in addition* to one's mother tongue (Skutnabb-Kangas & McCarty, 2008). Whether one learns these languages at the same time or after the L1 is not a deciding factor, as some learning processes are related and transferable regardless of sequence (VanPatten & Benati, 2010). Equally important is the idea that the idea of second languages is not sequential (Saville-Troike, 2006). The pluralization of *languages* means that in a real-life context, any one language could be the second at a specific moment. The idea of second languages is then an approximation to concepts such as additional or new languages, as it acknowledges the diversity in language learning and that speakers may adopt other languages for a myriad or reasons, while advocating that adopting a second language in one specific scenario should never come to the detriment of other languages users already possess, even their mother tongue.

The notion of second languages becomes then a moment to recognize and even celebrate the diversity of contexts for language use (Carrió Pastor, 2010) and the emergence of new physical (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010) and virtual (Black, 2009) spaces to learn and use languages. It also highlights the dynamic character of languages (Jørgensen, et al., 2011), and how new communities of practice (Lave, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991) have arisen because of affinities in interests and hobbies (Black, 2009), where second languages become a source of unity. Talking about second languages also helps us understand that language learning today, whether English (Graddol, 2006) or otherwise, operates at a different pace, one that users themselves may actually dictate, thus providing further relevance to those local varieties of languages (Higgins, 2009; Jordan, 2011) and inviting us not to disqualify them as "inferior" blends of the so-called "standard" forms. Our work toward defining second languages also takes into consideration the constant appearance of new forms of text creation (Cope & Kalantzis,, 2009; Kress, 2003, 2010), including all the new forms of authorship and language use that Web 2.0, ICTs, and the digital world keep offering (Black, 2009; Mora, 2012c).

The Notion of *Second Languages*: Implications

Thinking about second languages as a way to break the traditional paradigm of second/foreign language is an invitation to rethink beliefs and practices, inside and outside the classrooms, and to rethink what it means to learn and teach languages today. We believe that a notion like this requires revisiting what we understand as "authentic" or "real" language. It can no longer be something that is the property of native speakers. Authentic language should be any form of language that one can use outside of class (Bedoya González, 2012), regardless of one's standing as "native" or "non-native" speaker. Language, then, is real if one uses it to share and discuss things that matter to one's life and communities. It is not geography, but social settings which should make language real. This also means that we need to rethink what immersion means. As Mora and colleagues argued,

> Immersion, in our view, can also be about using the target language to discover features about our own culture and communities. This would be, then, the first step before sharing our findings about ourselves with others around the world (Mora, Martínez, Zapata-Monsalve, Alzate-Pérez, & Gómez-Yepes, 2012, p. 2097)

This definition of second language is also an invitation for teachers to take risks. Teachers need to play with language and technology in class (Mora, et al., 2012a, b) and claim ownership of the language because they can use to communicate with their students. That also means that teachers and language researchers must learn more about how people are using English and other languages outside of school (Hull & Schultz, 2001) and how those languages help rethink those contexts. It also implies that we have to ask deeper

questions about what it means to learn languages today; especially when those are languages you might later teach. That latter question needs to be an essential part of professional development programs.

Our notion of second languages is also an invitation toward advocacy. While, as Mora and Muñoz Luna (2012) argued, this is not about "protectionism for protectionism's sake" (p.0418), it is important to call for equitable frameworks where teachers are valued for what is truly important. It is not fair that teachers' accents are more important than their content and pedagogical knowledge (Cook, 1999; Mora & Muñoz Luna, 2012), and as a community we have to become more active in how policy and curriculum are fostering or hindering these visions of teachers.

Finally, in this view of second languages and in the pluralizing of *languages*, there is also an invitation to revisit how we talk about <bilingualism> (Golovátina-Mora, 2012a, b; Mora, 2012b). We are worried that bilingualism has become the ultimate goal, when it should actually be the beginning of a much larger journey in language learning (Mora & Golovátina-Mora, 2011a). We believe that in this second languages framework, we need to think about how to move toward multilingualism (Pattanayak, 2000), all within the promotion of more humane language practices (Caney, 2001) and a more genuine appreciation for local languages (McCarty, 2009).

Coda: The Challenges Ahead

I have presented in this paper both a manifesto and a blueprint. Talking about *second languages* at a conceptual level will not suffice. We need to look very carefully at the realities of our schools and work toward more equitable practices while raising strong questions about our rationales and agendas to use English. Our team has proposed the idea of second languages as a way to start maximizing the best resource available in schools: the people who teach and learn there.

We cannot disregard the reality that English, for instance, can be a tool for either social awareness (Freire, 1979) or inequality (Pennycook, 2001). As teachers and teacher educators, we need to ask ourselves what kind of language speakers we want to prepare, keeping in mind that high competence should never happen at the expense of dehumanizing language users. This framework and the reflections of this paper are nothing but an invitation to work together to meet the new challenges that today's language ecologies are facing. As the author of these lines, I can only hope that readers will find the same inspiration that my colleagues and I have found as we prepare, through our academic endeavors, to meet these challenges and start envisioning solutions toward more equitable language practices.

Acknowledgments

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