The observed city.
A service of second language teaching

By: Margarita M. Llano Gil /margarita.llano@upb.edu.co
Translation: Jean Paul Mejía Holguín
Photos: Research Group / Natalia Botero

Physical, cultural spaces and the world of video games generate routes for careful reading and analysis in several languages.

The city speaks through multiple languages to those who want to read, smell, feel, listen to, and interpret it. The city, as Roland Barthes would say, is a speech, communicates with us, and offers us physical and virtual spaces that invite one to travel around it.

The student research group "Literacies in Second Languages Project", LSLP, from the School of Education and Pedagogy at Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, seeks ways to understand the messages of the city and translate them into pedagogical alternative proposals for language teaching. LSLP's coordinator, Professor Raúl Alberto Mora, Ph.D. in Language and Literacy from the

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, summarizes the beginning of the proposal in two projects. For the first one, on urban literacies, the students, divided according to their interests, address the nature of the messages in English and other languages in the city, including the different kinds of messages present, initially from the analysis of physical spaces such as advertisements, bookstores, libraries, restaurants and shopping malls. In the second phase of the project they explore what he calls language-in-transit, that is, cultural spaces such as graffiti, tattoos, and fashion. In the second project they study the practices and uses of English in the context of the different genres of video games, from the direct perspective of the gamers, and characterize the functions and forms of use as a resource of participation in them.

The research, novel in its object of study and applications, uses ethnographic methodology with non-participant and participant observation, since the students, sometimes, belong to the groups that they analyze.

Opening the senses
to deeply
read the city.

For LSLP student researchers, the city is seen as literacy. They enrich the language when they use the term, affirming that it goes beyond literacy because of the meanings that are obtained from the messages analyzed. Opening the senses and finding these meanings will lead to changes in the pedagogical process.

English permeates the city. It is important to mention that other languages such as French, Italian and Mandarin also appear, for example. Thus, the advertising and messages that appear in it they change, and these new texts move to the classroom as objects of study. One case found is that of overcoming the traditional apostrophe in the names of different businesses, perhaps the most ordinary among us for many years (example, Mondongo's) to find much more elaborate ads: We dress the city. They have even found messages that refer to music and literary quotations, just to mention two examples.

Routes and findings

They built itineraries from routes, divided by teams to analyze fashion, graffiti, and tattoos. In relation to tattoos, they find that those who tattoo others do not necessarily understand English or the language in which the tattoo is requested. They only follow the customer's tastes and the economy of the language it seeks. After all, competence in a second language is not the subject of inquiry, but what the language itself invokes.

Fashion, graffiti, tattoos, advertisements, bookstores, video games, and others, as valuable sources of information.

For them the coexistence of languages is clear, what they call the metaphors of the ecosystem. Also the coexistence of routes, that is, some tattoo experts are graffiti artists. Everything is analyzed.

In terms of fashion, they start working on shopping mall windows, T-shirts, graffiti; they construct a taxonomy and go to boutiques, designers and people who wear outfits with messages in English and other languages. They have found that men are more conceptual and seek more political and humorous messages. Women, instead, are more interested in design or motivational messages, "Believe in yourself". Given the economics of construction in English, the designer finds it easier to create in this language than in Spanish, of course, combining text with images and colors. They also analyze trends in what researchers call seasons: school season, parties, and cultural events, local and international, to name a few.

Research Group: Michael Hernández, Sara Uribe, Tyrone Steven Orrego, Tatiana Salazar Patiño, Sebastián Castaño, Tatiana Chiquito, Daniel Ramírez, María Camila Mejía Vélez and Raúl Alberto Mora Vélez.

Videogames

Electronic games are also an object of study, not the one mechanic in its answers, but the complex one, where there are narratives, design and stories in its structure. It is a form of communication in digital spaces where players use the language to express victories and generate strategies to win, for example. Several students are gamers themselves (participant observation), and virtuality gives them the possibility of interacting internationally in real time. This allows them to find: the profile of the player; the superdiversity that originates in spaces outside the physical city; the massive inclusion in the networks and the interaction of people of diverse ages and provenances. It is a global connection that serves to tell stories that can be analyzed.

The work does not finish at this point, the next phase will be the analysis of how all this influences the teaching practice.

Fun, current, participatory in much of its process, but most important, rigorous, this research and its two projects are an option for interesting alternative proposals to didactics and traditional pedagogies for language teaching.

A student research group featuring creative, active and innovative students in didactic proposals.

Data sheet

Project Name: English Literacies and Urban Cultures in 'Medellín City'; Second Language Literacies, Video Games, and Gaming: A Digital Ethnography
Keywords: Physical spaces; Messages; Literacy; Second language; Language in transit
Research Group: Literacies in Second Languages Project (LSLP) student research group, ascribed to Pedagogy and Didactics of Knowledge Research Group
School: Education and Pedagogy
Project Leader: Raúl Alberto Mora Vélez
Email: raul.mora@upb.edu.co