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Invisible Labor in the Academy

¿Libertad de cátedra?

Examining the Visibility of Plausibility

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Abstract

This article examines the cultural circumstances and labor paradigms that shape language-focused teaching and learning at a Colombian university. Drawing on transcripts from interviews conducted during 2019, I present the voices and experiences of faculty who teach English language writing and oral communication. They give voice to the phenomenon of invisible labor by drawing attention to the question of plausibility. Interviewees indicate that their work is shaped by tensions regarding the plausibility of English language coursework. On one hand, there is the issue of making English academic writing culturally plausible for their students. On the other hand, there is the issue of making this course work professionally plausible. In what follows, I illustrate how these two strands of performative labor shape faculty experience. Because there is a distinct divide between the types of language classes taught by contingent vs. non-contingent faculty, I further suggest that the former group is disproportionately tasked with enacting both types of labor.

The histories and circumstances of the global hegemony of English have long been a focus of research across the social sciences and humanities. For instance, sociolinguists examine the valuation of language variation and critique discursive constructions of social inequality. Linguistic anthropologists have similarly given much attention to the interrelationships between language, ideology, and power across a variety of geographic regions. Further, work bridging the study of language and political economy has focused on the material conditions that shape linguistic choices (Gal 1989; Irvine 1989; Woolard 1985).

Shifting valuations regarding linguistic choices and language variation are often shaped by the social limitations and affordances that come along with specific employment contexts. For example, the literature on language labor has examined communication technologies as experienced across diverse service economy contexts (e.g., Rahman, 2009; Cameron, 2000;

Duchêne & Heller, 2012). In regard to university institutionalization, Bonnie Urciuoli's work has been influential (2003, 2009, 2014). In their review of the literature on language labor and management, Urciuoli and LaDousa have suggested that, "conceptualizing 'the language part of work' entails conceptualizing the worker and the social world into which the worker fits, a world defined by capitalism" (2013, p. 180). In the present case, conceptualizing the "language part of work" entails conceptualizing the professor and the social world into which the professor fits. This world is, of course, defined by capitalisms that create cultural and pragmatic inconsistencies regarding academic freedom, or *libertad de cátedra*.

This article examines the cultural circumstances and labor paradigms that shape language-focused teaching and learning. Drawing on transcripts from interviews¹ conducted during 2019, I present the voices and experiences of faculty who teach English language writing and oral communication at a Colombian university that I'll refer to as La Universidad.² They give voice to the phenomenon of invisible labor by drawing attention to the question of plausibility. Interviewees indicate that their work is shaped by tensions regarding the plausibility of English language coursework. On one hand, there is the issue of making English academic writing *culturally plausible* for their students. On the other hand, there is the issue of making this course work *professionally plausible*. In what follows, I illustrate how these two strands of performative labor shape faculty experience. Because there is a distinct divide between the types of language classes taught by contingent vs. non-contingent faculty, I further suggest that the former group is disproportionately tasked with enacting *both* types of labor.³

Cultural Plausibility: "Academic writing may not work the same way here in Colombia"

Writing in regard to Colombian higher education, Blanca Yaneth González Pinzón has suggested that, "reading and writing did not always appear to be matters associated with the process of acquisition and development of the language. In many cases, we find them linked with different daily and cultural activities of the peoples" (2010, p. 122). Indeed, the ideologies that perpetuate the globalization, and iconization, of English don't account for local cultural contexts. It is also notable that these ideologies often shape what might be considered unlikely contexts: writing and language learning programs. The presupposed value of English language proficiency has the potential to reify harmful language ideologies like standard American English, neutral global English, and the like. Such valuations also solidify intellectual inconsistencies, which shape the day-to-day work of language-related teaching and learning. In

¹ The names of all participants have been anonymized. This research was approved by the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute IRB. Approval #1794. This article is based on transcripts totaling just over 19,000 words.

² Interviews were conducted in English. Transcript excerpts embedded as audio files have been run through voice changing software to protect research participants' anonymity. Transcript excerpts presented in the text have been pruned for readability and utilize the following conventions:

- : elongated speech
- self interruption

³ A Spanish language translation of this essay follows.

this case, interviewees teach English language academic writing, and they often draw attention to the cultural and professional inconsistencies that characterize these endeavors.

This section focuses only on the work of cultivating cultural plausibility. The following transcript excerpts all relay details associated with teaching English academic writing to students who are enrolled in La Universidad's foreign language teacher training (FLTT) program. As such, the question of professional plausibility is not an issue in these cases. As Sofía stated in her interview, these students "know they need this. They know they cannot be mediocre teachers." We will, however, see that these students still require their teachers to do the labor of cultivating cultural plausibility.

One interviewee, Carolina, is particularly concerned with co-constructing meaning with her students.⁴ When asked to what degree she would characterize her work as invisible, behind the scenes labor, she replied by discussing the emotional labor that comes along with negotiating writing tasks that are meaningful for her students in their own cultural contexts. Further, she seems to frame this preoccupation in contrast to larger programmatic ideologies:



The ideologies of writing are very conventional in the sense that they tend to follow theories about writing that have been developed in English speaking countries. I see a big influence of theories that were developed in English speaking countries. To me, that is, of course, important, but it's also problematic. We have very different realities here. There are many dynamics of academic writing that I don't think my students have developed, for example, through secondary schools—in Colombian schools. And the tendency has been to think that the students are not good at writing, to think they're not good writers, to focus on what they lack. But I do think that we haven't looked at the fact that we have a different cultural background here, that we have a very strong oral tradition. These kinds of programs that follow this logic of academic production miss out on looking at our local picture: who our students really are and what they need. Of course, this leads us to question what kind of academic writing, whose academic writing, and what for. I think there's a lot of work to do there.

And so, the work of reconciling institutional or programmatic expectations with one's own cultural traditions, local context, and teaching philosophies becomes an added layer within the experience of teaching English academic writing. This layering involves meeting programmatic outcomes in student-centered, plausible ways. Such tasks are often driven by relatable, transparent teacher-student communication, so in some sense, this labor is deeply visible. It is often at the forefront of how students see their professors and their education. For example, Andrés recounts the perspective of one of his students:

One of my students in Academic Writing this semester said something like, "you know, we're trying to learn how to write academically in English. This is a foreign language for us, and we don't even know how to do it in Spanish. We don't know how to write academically in Spanish: in our mother tongue." Since they don't feel this need for

⁴ In what follows, the speaker icon indicates audio available in online version.

writing academically in their first language, they don't care about writing academically in English.

Andrés and his colleagues, then, must actively build this plausibility in their classrooms. It becomes an element of their overarching class narrative. Other interviewees also reflected on having these ongoing conversations with their students. For example, Sofía also draws attention to the cultural inconsistencies her students experience:



For them, it's like this: no matter what you're writing about, you get creative. I guess the only reason for this I can think of is that we just don't write in our own language that much. And when we do, it's in a very particular way. I can tell students, "Hey, we don't use slang in our academic papers." Then I'll be reading the papers, and they've written as they'd speak, and I'll think: "but I said no. Why are you still doing this?" I guess culturally, we just don't get it.

Note Sofía's pronoun use in this last sentence. Instead of locating "the problem" squarely with the students, she echoes the perspective expressed by Carolina above. Rather than focusing on what the students "lack," Sofía conceptualizes the reticence to engage with the conventions of English academic writing as a cultural matter that shapes *collective experience*. Sofía's words do, however, imply that there is, nonetheless, a correct way to be "gotten." Andrés similarly weighs in, noting that his students



believe academic writing is something they have to do, but they don't understand why. They don't understand the purpose of academic writing, and this is also something you have to cope with. It's like a burden. I have to convince my students that the course is important for them. I have to do it strategically.

Yet, in another sense, cultivating this plausibility is not necessarily a part of the job description. For example, Carolina draws attention to the fact that her program uses theories of writing developed in English speaking countries as a baseline of knowledge. Insofar as these theories are regarded as a sensible, obvious, or one-size-fits-all body of knowledge, the struggle to reconcile them with local or individualistic cultural circumstances may be completely overlooked when it comes to top-down assessment mechanisms. Andrés, for example, illustrates how faculty and student experiences are shaped by the long arm of university assessment and ranking procedures:



I think the program is trying to teach students to write academically to be able to become not only teachers, but also researchers and writers so they can share their knowledge, experiences, etc. I think this is because universities are ranked based on their publications. There is pressure—there is institutional and political pressure. This also comes from the government, like the Ministry of Education issuing these policies about how to rank journals, how to rank universities, how to rank research groups. I think we are kind of trying to have our [undergraduate] students respond effectively to these policies, so we have this burden. It's a load. It's a heavy load. It's a personal burden.

It is evident that, at least in Andrés' view, institutionalization and governmentalization push the faculty toward labor enactments that are, if not unique, highly nuanced. This "layering" of efforts appears to be very visible for Andrés. While it is unlikely that the work of cultivating cultural plausibility would be explicitly rewarded, or "seen" in an institutional sense, La Universidad clearly benefits from the nuanced labor that is being enacted by Andrés and his colleagues.

Professional Plausibility: "Why do we have to do this? Why are you forcing us to?"

Here I change gears to illustrate the work of cultivating professional plausibility. Whereas the previous section presented interviewee's thoughts on educating students who are enrolled in the foreign language teacher training program, here we will consider the circumstances associated with teaching English to students who are enrolled in other programs and schools across the La Universidad campus. As Sofía has noted, "When you go teaching in other faculties, the students are like, why do we have to do this? Why are you forcing us to?" In the case of educating students campus-wide, we will observe how the issues of professional and cultural plausibility dovetail to compound labor expectations.

Official communications from La Universidad describe the purpose of their foreign language initiatives as promoting multilingualism and linguistic diversity. While La Universidad continues to employ faculty who specialize in teaching and translating a range of foreign languages, an English for everyone policy has been in place for several years. This policy requires all undergraduates to successfully complete five English courses in order to meet their foreign language graduation requirements.

In the past, students had been able to choose from a variety of languages to satisfy these requirements. For example, faculty indicate that many students in the School of Law pursue graduate work in Italy, so languages like Italian and Portuguese are more professionally beneficial than English. In such cases, the English for everyone policy ignores students' professional needs by explicitly iconizing English as *the* foreign language. Drawing on her experiences teaching students across the campus, Sofía indicates that, "they are just learning English for general purposes, and they are like: why?"

What's more, a small percentage of students at La Universidad are native speakers of one of the nation's many indigenous, or ancestral, languages. This means they are already studying in a second language when they pursue higher education in a Spanish language context. The English policy, however, disavows their linguistic realities by explicitly assuming that all students speak Spanish as a first language. Requiring such students to complete five English classes is, in effect, requiring five classes in a *third* language. In fact, faculty report that approximately 10% of the undergraduates enrolled at La Universidad are indigenous, and approximately 3% of them are bilingual in their own languages. In the past, students could certify Spanish as a second language for graduation purposes, but this new language policy changed everything. Now it must be English.

Sofía further problematizes this policy:



The fact that they just have this language policy for everyone says a lot about what they believe language is about, and what bilingualism is about, in a country where we have like 60 or 70 indigenous languages. Students who come here with their own language and their own bilingualisms are not being valued.

Of course, institutionalized limitations on linguistic diversity and students' language choices are also deeply imbricated in the faculty experience. Since these limitations come in the form of campus-wide requirements, they amplify pre-existing faculty labor hierarchies through their impact on course loading, curriculum, and general faculty security. These are circumstances that can be tracked across national borders. For example, the American Association of University Professors indicates that, as of 2015, "non-tenure-track positions of all types now account for over 70 percent of all instructional staff appointments in [U.S] American higher education." The AAUP also notes that "contingent appointments are often clustered in programs with very high levels of predictability—such as freshman writing courses that are required for all students."

Faculty at La Universidad similarly indicate that the English for everyone policy is enacted across the campus almost entirely through a reliance on contingent labor. With approximately 30,000 undergraduate students enrolled and a five course per student graduation requirement, this is not terribly surprising. Sofía indicates that



Full time [non-contingent] teachers focus on teaching mainly here in the foreign language teacher training program. Rarely will we take some classes in different Schools. When we do that, we get paid in addition to our salary, so they don't tend to like that we take extra courses anywhere else. Those teachers who are paid by the hour, are the ones who mainly teach the classes in the rest of the university. In general, most of our teachers are adjunct teachers. Way more than 50% [hold contingent appointments].

Whereas Sofía draws attention to this labor model in order to problematize it, Maritza feels that this hierarchy is immaterial, that the experiences of teaching are necessarily similar for all faculty:



I don't think that there is a difference between what, for example, full time faculty do and adjuncts do. No. I think it's the same program, and so they all have to comply with it, whether they are full time or lecturers or adjuncts. They have to just follow the program.

If the work of teaching can be understood as a series of asocial, apolitical enactments, then perhaps Maritza's suggestion is accurate. It does, however, seem clear that other faculty—people like Carolina, Andrés, and Sofía—do experience their work in social and political terms. What's more, faculty who teach across the campus (outside of the FLTT program) confront the work of cultivating professional plausibility *in addition to* cultural plausibility. In this way, it is not merely a matter of following the language program guidelines. These interviewees consistently foreground the multiple layers of invisible labor at La Universidad. Faculty work

both within and against cultural inconsistencies to make English academic writing plausible within a Spanish language context. The contingent faculty majority similarly works within and against cultural inconsistencies as they try to make English academic writing professionally plausible to students who may have absolutely no professional stake in learning that language.

Interviewees indicate that some programs, like medicine or administration, previously had their own English programs that followed an English for specific purposes model. In contrast, the new policy works from an English for general academic purposes perspective. Interviewees noted that *libertad de cátedra* doesn't apply in these contexts. Sofía notes that "it's more restrictive." Andrés suggests that "it's different." The exact degree—and the specific experiences—of this restriction and difference is something to be explored in future research. All signs, however, point to the fact that, at La Universidad, discussions around labor tend to be focused on the time investment involved with teaching—especially offering feedback on student writing at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. This is highly visible labor. Yet, interviewees consistently pushed our conversations toward the more intangible elements of their work: cultivating cultural and professional plausibility.

Conclusion

All of these circumstances may be interpreted as an example of the degree to which diversity is foregrounded in Colombia's national project. As Sofía has suggested, "They mention it. It's beautifully written in the policies, but when it comes to the implementation, everyone's exactly the same. Everyone comes from the same academic background. Everyone should just learn this language [English] because they all learn it in high school, but it's not really like that." Schools, teachers, and students across any given national context face uneven access to resources. The Colombian context is no different than, for example, the United States context. One does not, unfortunately, need to look very far to see how North American language policies can flatten diversity, oppress "non-standard" voices, and otherwise perpetuate racist ideologies. Even though North American academics are employing many of the same theories of reading and writing within the largely English-speaking contexts of their original production, they should similarly be regarding them in terms of their contextual limitations and affordances.

The globalization of English may be regarded as a map whereby individuals are socialized and slotted into institutional hierarchies comprised of "idealized performances" (Goffman, 1956, p. 23). Because higher education is often experienced in highly performative, emotion-laden, and hierarchical terms, universities constitute obvious sites for examining the discursive constructions of power that underwrite "professorial" subject positions. Andrés persuasively illustrates his experience of teaching English academic writing at La Universidad, indicating: "It is not invisible for me. I can see it, and it's very demanding." The question of what types of labor are visible to whom remains a complicated one. Whereas this work of cultivating cultural and professional plausibility *may* be visible to students in their individual classrooms, it is *certainly* visible and tangible for the faculty themselves. In contrast, the visible/invisible

dichotomy does not seem to stretch to fully account for the institutional perspective. Instead of been seen or unseen, this type of labor is simply presupposed. It is not hidden. It is demanded.

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