

Searching for Words, A Commitment to Building with and from Writing Centers: Review of a Translingual Book

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Abstract

The book *Buscando las palabras while writing. Conversations between writing centers in Latin America and the US*, edited by Gleen Hutchinson and Andrea Torres Torres, and published in 2024 by Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, allows, in their words, for the connection between a creative process that has no limits and the variety of advantages found in translanguage. From this perspective, the text explores representation and academic writing from Latin America, drawing on a diversity of experiences, practices, and reflections that account for the agency, power of change, and criticism of writing centers in relation to academic writing. Both the researchers who participated in the volume and the tutors at the writing centers at Florida International University and Pontificia Universidad Javeriana wrote in Spanish and English together with other colleagues from Colombia, Mexico, and the United States, with the aim of learning from each other and seeking new perspectives. This review seeks to highlight some key and valuable elements of this commitment to dialogue about academic practices and literacies from a bilingual perspective. Thus, this review concludes that *Buscando las palabras while writing* is a book whose potential lies in its ability to enable other discussions from different points of view and perspectives, both from teachers and students.

Keywords: Writing centers; Collaborative writing; Bilingualism; Languages; Teaching

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Buscando las palabras while writing. Conversations between writing centers in Latin America and the US is a polyphonic book that cannot and should not be reduced to a few lines because that would not do it justice. My aim and proposal in this review is to draw attention to some aspects that I personally, as a writing partner and professional still (or always?) in training, consider particularly relevant. The editors mention that every language is its past and its present, and that it is always in contact with other languages. In this same vein, I think it is pertinent to question the new writing and dialogic practices that are taking place in writing centers and their relationship with various institutional and academic frameworks.

Regarding these new practices, the editors note that:

Buscando las palabras while writing permits the connection between a creative process with no limits and the variety of advantages found in translingualism. Its authors researched writing center philosophy and practice, and the politics of language, which add needed contributions to a transnational conversation. De esta manera, los investigadores que participan en el volumen y los tutores de los centros de escritura de la Florida International University y la Pontificia Universidad Javeriana escribieron en ambos idiomas, along with faculty from Colombia, Mexico, and the United States, with the purpose to learn one from another, en busca de nuevas perspectivas para eliminar barreras culturales y demostrar that we are all translingual in the end. (contraportada, párr. 2).

In relation to this paragraph, Vanessa Solano Cohen (personal communication, October 24, 2024) stated that the book aims to consider academic writing from a Latin American perspective, which is why it is so valuable that such an academic space has been created, bringing together not only the perspectives of teachers and tutors, but also two languages that sometimes seem distant and even antagonistic. In this sense, it is worth asking about the problem of representation, that is, what does it mean to internationalize from the perspective of language and how can this be done? Questioning this allows us to propose other forms of writing that go beyond Anglo-

normativity, which, at least in academia, seems to be the fundamental rule; for example, by going beyond pedagogies to construct prefabricated meanings through words (Hutchinson and Torres Perdigón, 2024, p. 25) and, furthermore, setting aside the presumption that, specifically, Latin American university students will never cease to be “eternal beginners in the written language” (p. 134, italics in the original). This seems to resonate with some of the views shared by FIU tutors, who affirm that, for them, their relationship with Spanish involves this (p. 187): constant reflection, not to say anxiety, about “speaking and writing well” in Spanish with those who “are” Latin American. This issue arises because there is a contrast between themselves (the FIU students) and the others (“Latin Americans”). In this regard, they also point out that, partly because of the space they share with their Colombian peers and partly because of their own Latin American names, surnames, and ancestry, they would like to represent themselves as (young) people with sufficient command of the languages that, at least in theory, they should be able to handle not only in academic terms but also in social and cultural terms and, ultimately, in political terms as well (p. 187). Perhaps intentionally or curiously, the tutors themselves, in this conversation they had, somehow appealed, in their own way, to the three threads proposed by Hernández Zamora (for his definition, p. 135, which is the quote I copy on the following page). This allows us to interweave some of the young people's “practical” questions or reflections with the adults' “theory” and shows that, contrary to what one might think, young people do also think about all these “pedagogical” issues in their work with peers. That is why, I insist, it is so valuable that this book also includes the voices, feelings, and thoughts of these student tutors regarding translinguaging—understood as a [...] “switch between languages [...] [that] is seen as deliberate” (p. 8)—and their own everyday experiences, in their own terms as students. Whether they are from Latin America or perhaps the more Latino United States, translinguaging takes on new and unexpected dimensions, which are not without encounters and opportunities, but also tensions and limitations.

With this initial presentation in mind, I would also like to highlight that, in this era of globalization and knowledge exchange, which is also mediated by transmedia, this book emerges with a proposal that is striking for the field of language studies and university writing centers. That being the case, after presenting why I consider this proposal and its structure to be striking,

I would like to focus specifically on a dialogue with some excerpts and quotations to address, for example, issues related to dropout rates and the importance, for the Latin American context, of thinking about translanguaging and (academic) writing in university settings. All of this will ultimately lead me to present some conclusions and an invitation that will bring together some of the most important elements of both the book and this review.

With the emphasis I have placed, I want to draw particular attention to how it is possible to combine two different languages in the same discourse without altering either the reading or the meaning, but rather ensuring its fluidity and clarity. The rest of the book is written in the same deliberate way, but, I insist, in a way that is natural and pleasant for the (bilingual) reader. Thus, it is the same languages, with their different voices and through different hands, that interweave perceptions, ideas, and reflections that do not lose anything by being written in the other language (the non-native, non-usual language); on the contrary, they gain more power and meaning.

Buscando las palabras makes a striking proposal and statement because, first, and with the intention of expanding on or clarifying what has already been said in the introduction, I would like to point out that this work was written in two languages (English and Spanish) and, second, by twenty female authors (only four men participated). Of all these authors, five are tutors at their respective writing centers, Florida International University (FIU) in Miami and Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (PUJ) in Bogotá. Due to the formative and practical nature inherent not only to university students but especially to university writing students, this brings me back to writing as a practice, which [...] “is not learned except by doing it, *buscando las palabras while writing*” (p. 7, emphasis in the original). It also refers more to [...] “a constant negotiation to form meanings with a series of available resources than [to] an obedient use of writing rules” (p. 7). Thus, it is interesting to think about both aspects, the variety of languages, voices, and ways of writing that, as will be seen throughout this text, intersect and come together to weave a text, a collaborative fabric. The above also resonates with the idea expressed in the text itself: thus, I too will speak of “a knot of three threads” (p. 135) in this review. In this regard, and only as a reference, these threads, in the book, are:

1) el hilo académico, es decir el papel central de la escritura en la formación universitaria; 2) el hilo político, que tiene dos lados: la creciente exigencia de aumentar la “productividad académica” y el creciente llamado a descolonizar, democratizar y horizontalizar la escritura y el conocimiento, y 3) el hilo pedagógico, referido al reto de enseñar a escribir a estudiantes cuya educación lingüística y letrada es muy precaria, y lograr que respondan a ambas exigencias: producir escritos de nivel universitario, inteligentes y publicables, y producir escritos con voz que expresen sus identidades y subjetividades auténticas. (p.7, quotation marks in the original)¹

In terms of structure (pp. 10–12), the work is divided into four sections: an introduction by the academic editors. This is followed by research on translanguaging, which presents two texts related to translanguaging and writing centers, and the perceptions of collaborators and participants regarding writing in Spanish and English. The next section shares reflections on case studies of writing programs, based on writing across the curriculum and around training strategies. Finally, this last part shares a dialogue between academics and tutors that, rather than concluding or closing the book, raises new questions and suggests other ways of thinking and writing in two languages, of understanding the work of tutoring, and of expanding the meanings of writing centers.

Specifically, I found the book striking because, on the one hand, it proposed the use of two languages (English and Spanish) that, rather than being interspersed, merged almost naturally. This made me not only think but also see that the text was a fabric, which can be seen from the title itself and seems to be an invitation: “This book, then, deliberately combines languages—in this case English and Spanish—to discuss writing, translingualism, and writing centers” (back cover, paragraph 1). Although the exercise is deliberate, it is still interesting to reflect on how one language is interwoven with another, which can be seen not only in the presentation itself, but also here:

¹ Translator’s note: All quotations were left in their original form to respect the translingual nature of the source text.

Toda lengua es su pasado y su presente. También está siempre en contacto con otras lenguas, lo cual genera transformaciones constantes. Languages are not homogeneous nor fixed cultural entities. However, al escribir tendemos a creer que el sentido se fija y queda inmóvil. (back cover, para. 1)

On the other hand, and to continue with the striking aspect, I would also like to highlight, in relation to the above, that the combined use of the two languages enabled, sometimes with the support of technology, the participation of young people, tutors from both writing centers. This, in turn, enhanced and generated dialogues that might not have been possible in other contexts and moments. An example of this is the joint reflections that took place in the workshops shared and co-directed by the student tutors from the two writing centers (p. 165), prepared and taught by two tutors from the Javeriano Writing Center in Colombia. There were two moments: the first, starting on page 165, and the second, starting on page 187 of the book. The first is the one I just mentioned, the preparation and delivery of workshops by two Colombian tutors, who reflect on their preparation, implementation, and subsequent feedback. The second part reflects the impressions that these Latin American tutors had of these activities organized by their colleagues. The exercise itself, as will be seen below, allowed the students not only to get to know each other, but also to share their experiences and best practices, as well as the challenges posed by changes in code and language. The FIU participants, in a space designed by themselves, shared these thoughts:

Diana Rivero: I think, overall, the experience went really smoothly. I was surprised to see how smoothly it could go, you know, with all these miles in between both universities and even the small language barrier, at times. But we were able to communicate really well with one another because of technology. WhatsApp was so useful in communicating and sharing our ideas and asking questions. Because, you know, even though we speak Spanish, writing it can be difficult sometimes. So, we would ask them for advice on our Spanish text, and then they would ask us for advice on their English text (p. 183).

This short excerpt highlights how languages can unite (weave) relationships with other people, and points out that although there may be physical or linguistic barriers, there is always the possibility, with translanguage, of overcoming these obstacles. In other words, this example

illustrates how technology (which can also be considered a system of multiple languages; consider the transmedia mentioned at the beginning and its relationship with, precisely, *buscando las palabras*) allows people from different cultures to communicate.

Therefore, it is very important and necessary to share this joint work, if we want to promote this dialogical and critical approach to the work, impact, and significance of both tutors and directors in the management and expansion of writing centers. These spaces certainly have, as discussed in the book, a great potential for agency to reflect on the difficulties of and in academic literacy, specifically in a context such as Colombia's, where only 55.38% of all young people have access to higher education (National Higher Education Information System [SNIES], 2024), it is revealing and worrying that few people are able to attend university. The book highlights this with the example of the Universidad del Norte, in the department of Atlántico; according to the results of the national university entrance exams, various deficiencies were exacerbated by the pandemic (Universidad del Norte, 2021).

In this regard, the statements made by the editors themselves are significant. In the introduction, they explain it as follows:

Tal y como se conocen en los contextos latinoamericanos y estadounidense, los centros de escritura apoyan y acompañan procesos de literacidad de estudiantes en diversos países y lenguas. En el día a día de estas instituciones estamos en contacto con las angustias, dificultades y necesidades de negociación del sentido de estudiantes de muchos campos del saber que cuentan con historias con la escritura muy diversas. Pero, precisamente por acompañar con tutorías personalizadas y procurar apoyar de la mejor manera posible la escritura de otros, tal vez tendemos a olvidar la propia ideología del lenguaje que tenemos y cómo la visión (con frecuencia normativa) que podemos tener de las lenguas puede transmitir la idea de que escribir en la universidad significa únicamente adaptarse a unas normas de una variedad culta de una lengua o, en ocasiones, al léxico técnico de un campo disciplinar). (pp. 8 y 9)

Thus, the work and agency of writing centers can contribute, at least in terms of academic literacy support, to accompanying these processes of admission, retention, and, hopefully, timely and successful graduation. Because, in addition,

[...] la escritura facilita que el estudiante se incorpore a su comunidad académica como un miembro activo y participativo (Morales y Cassany, [2008,] p. 13). Lo anterior disminuye la posibilidades de deserción y fomenta la equidad para todos los estudiantes, pues se generan estrategias que promueven el éxito académico de manera general en la educación superior

In addition to the above, it is also worth highlighting the possibility, which always requires reflection on the part of (all) stakeholders, of not only pointing out or repeating the rule, but also challenging it or, otherwise, grounding it in the context shared with students. This is why the strategy of languages for student retention (pp. 95-132) is significant, as it seeks to address the use of language to improve retention and successful completion among university students. This, of course, resonates with the aim of this text: to connect translanguage with decolonial and sociolinguistic demands and opportunities, particularly with regard to Latin America (pp. 20 and 134). This is inspiring because, as a synthesis and as I mentioned in the case of a department in Colombia, it reflects on the relationship between writing centers, academic literacy, and student dropout rates (in Latin America). It is significant, then, that this book brings together people from two seemingly distant and different contexts and allows, beyond cultural, social, and linguistic barriers or borders, the tutors themselves to share writing and reflection as peers with their teachers: thus, beyond all differences or hierarchies, the collaborative exercise of writing enables equity among all authors.

This review, in relation to translanguage, presented and discussed a text that, from a situated and reflective position, questions the challenges and difficulties, as well as the insights and opportunities, of writing practice and its meaning in dialogue with others through language, based on the work of writing centers. This is a language that is permeated by and in tension with inter-, sociocultural, and technological issues, and which seeks to confront cultural barriers to demonstrate that, in the end, we are all translingual (back cover). In the words of its editors, then, the book [...] “is an argument supporting a translingual approach to writing centers. Such an approach can help us have a more expansive view about language, linguistic justice [for a definition, see p. 101], and transnational collaborations, between writing centers” (p. 32).

Thus, I would like to reiterate how this book enables tutors to listen from the very fact of being a tutor, at least supporting students to continue studying, while, at the same time and in a cross-cutting manner, reflecting on writing in the curriculum and with equity as the center and destination of all educational and writing activities. For all of the above reasons, I would like to close with an invitation: reader, dare not to reproduce—not to copy, not to make a remake—but rather, from your place of enunciation, find or construct the possibility of making this same book, with other people and from other places, raising other questions and concerns. All of the above in order to, perhaps, achieve a rhetorical awareness, a concern for the reader, and the link between the act of writing and critical thinking, ultimately achieving equity through language (p. 78), or, perhaps in other senses (but with shared intentions), weaving together the academic, political, and pedagogical threads (p. 136) in a task that, far from being easy, is increasingly necessary and relevant. *Sapere aude*, reader!

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