

“We Don’t Have To Speak The Same Language To Get Good Food”

: Investigating The Literacy Habits of Migrant Restaurant Kitchen Workers

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Background Information

Ron is the executive chef of a resort on Cape Cod that supports weddings, functions, and three restaurants. Cape Cod depends on migrant workers to support summer tourism, who also make up the majority of Ron’s kitchen. This creates an abundance of literacy within the kitchen.

As of Fall 2023, Ron’s kitchen had 32 workers, representing 12 countries, with 8 languages. Ron struggled severely with reading and writing growing up, and still finds it difficult to spell and write in English. This gives Ron insight on how to navigate literacy abundance, as he understands the difficulty his migrant co-workers have with English literacy.

Research Questions

- How does literacy function amongst migrant restaurant kitchen workers?
- What teaching practices are used to navigate the abundance of literacy, culture, and backgrounds inside a restaurant’s kitchen?

Methodology

I conducted three interviews with Ron via phone call, each lasting roughly one hour, over the course of one month. This project is a qualitative study, applying scholarly research to the content of semi-structured interviews.

Results

- In Ron’s kitchen, **food literacy** is acting as a gateway for English literacy, in turn, migrant workers are using these learned literacies as means of **social upward mobility**.
- The **literacy abundance** within Ron’s kitchen is driving potential **change and adaptation** in the conventions of learning English.
- This kitchen environment demonstrates that literacy today **demand the ability to change** and shows that a **flexible and adaptable approach** creates more opportunities for learning literacy.
- Restaurant work **is much more than just cooking**, as those working in Ron’s kitchen **navigate across cultural boundaries** in unique ways, adding nuance to our understanding of literacy and writing studies.

“I don’t wanna make ‘em feel bad—ya know? They gotta do stuff they be comfortable with... It’s their kitchen, not mine.”
— Ron

If we fail to acknowledge teaching practices outside traditional education, then we are inhibiting outside experiences and literacies from entering the classroom.

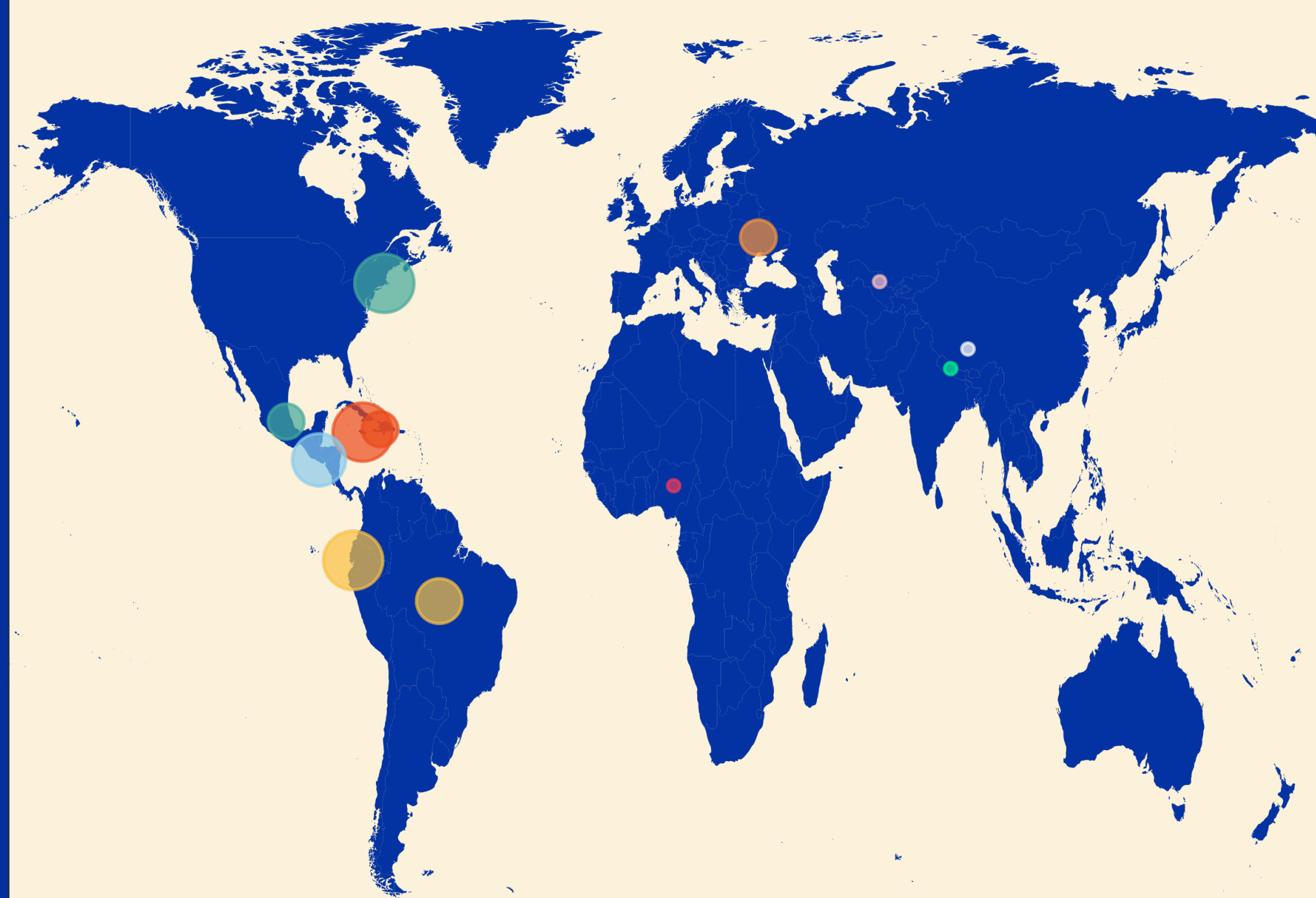
Scan this QR code to visit my website for the full paper

Ron’s Glossary

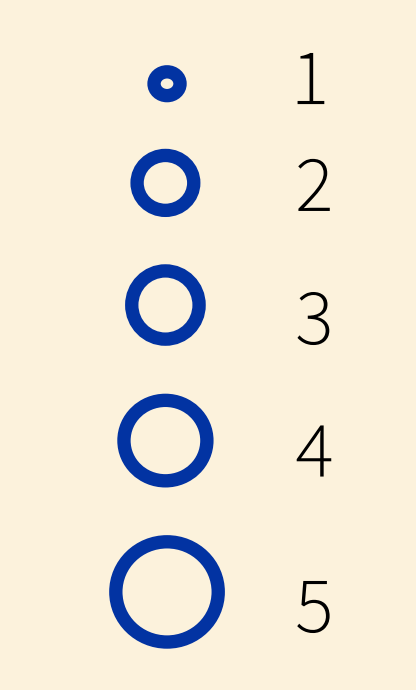
Vegetable / Protein	Abbreviation
Chicken	Chix
Steak	K
Shrimp	Sh
Onions	O
Peppers	P
Butternut	BNut
Romaine Lettuce	Rom
Spinach	Ich
Steak - Onions - Peppers	KOP

- When using the glossary for navigating the kitchen menu, Ron’s coworkers are **actively coordinating literacy abundance** to perform their job, a glossary that his coworkers collaborated on to create.
- Ron’s glossary acts as **interpretive materials**, further allowing changes in literacy standards to create space for **nontraditional learning practices**.
- While the glossary doesn’t fully engage with the **transfer of phonetics**, it offers **an easier way to help** migrant workers with a new, unfamiliar alphabet.

Countries Represented in the Kitchen (out of 32 employees)



Population (per region)



Regions

