

*Being Bilingual in Borinquen:
Student Voices from the University of Puerto Rico*

Edited by Alicia Pousada

Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017

ISBN: 978-1-4438-8994-0

195 pages; \$73.00 [cloth]

REVIEWER: Elizabeth Taveras Rivera (et1283@hunter.cuny.edu), Hunter College, CUNY

Being Bilingual in Borinquen: Student voices from the University of Puerto Rico, edited by Alicia Pousada, is a rare opportunity to understand how language policies affect and influence students' lives. Pousada takes readers through a quick overview of language policy in the Island, focusing on policies enacted after the United States (US) gained political control of Puerto Rico (or Borinquen, as it was called by its indigenous dwellers), in 1898. Once the historical context is established, we embark on a multidimensional journey in which language development interweaves with linguistic identity to bring a deeper understanding of the writers' transnational experiences. The book ends with an analysis of the data, and a call for language planning that is inclusive of students' voices, as the Island prepares students to compete in global markets.

In seeking to brand Puerto Rico as a model for other Latin America nations, reaping the benefits of its good neighbor practices, the United States positioned English language mastery as key to the Island's economic development. Initially, monolingual English teachers, transplanted from the US, and US-trained Puerto Rican teachers worked to meet the needs of Puerto Rican students as the formal educational system expanded. Yet, the promise of bilingualism continues to elude islanders. While much research has focused on Puerto Ricans' limited English proficiency, this edition is an opportunity to celebrate those who have attained bilingualism on the Island.

The "twenty-five linguistic autobiographies" shed light on the process, ideologies, and teaching methods that support or constrain second language acquisition. Most of the entries were written by students who grew up in Puerto Rico.

Guided by a general list of questions, included at the end of the book, graduate students from the University of Rio Piedras give voice to their

bilingual/bicultural evolutions. The questions helped Alicia Pousada examine how context, attitudes, and individual characteristics, such as age and personality, influenced students' motivation to learn a second language. The questions focused on the writers' home influences, second language development, school experiences, language use, and perceived benefits of bilingualism, but there were no questions to engage the students in an exploration of language and politics. Even though all students followed the general format, each entry is a microscopic view of the writer's second language acquisition.

The autobiographies were divided into three segments. The first part, "Made in Puerto Rico," focused on ten Puerto Rican natives. The second section, "Nuyoricans and Other Early Childhood Bilinguals," brings the stories of twelve transnational Puerto Rican students. And in the final segment, "Immigrants to the Enchanted Island," we learned about the language evolution of three immigrants. The third group is composed of English monolingual students who studied Spanish in the US and traveled to Puerto Rico to increase their Spanish fluency. The overwhelming majority of the students were introduced to their second language early on, and many came from bilingual homes. Most of the students who grew up in Puerto Rico attended private schools. They reported greater gains in developing English language fluency than those who attended public schools. Instead, the public school students credited their bilingualism to self-studies and college coursework. Students from the Puerto Rican diaspora attributed their Spanish language proficiency to their parents' active involvement in maintaining ties to their mother-tongue.

The participants spoke to the *problematique* of gaining fluency in all four domains (speaking, reading, listening, and writing) without the support full-immersion programs provide. One area of concern was the need to actively seek opportunities for practicing English or risk losing their skills. In addition, as many of the participants were the only bilinguals in their circle, they were frequently called upon to act as interpreters or translators for their families and friends.

Furthermore, the Puerto Rican students stated that their language competency in Spanish fluctuated for each domain. Some of them reported that they lacked the skills they needed for college-level coursework. They shared

that others questioned not only their allegiance to Puerto Rico but also their Puerto Rican identity. Nonetheless, while others might be ambivalent about the benefits of bilingualism, the narrators saw their multiple linguistic repertoires as unifying and complementary.

Each student advocated for their dream of bilingualism--no matter whether they were working against one-size-fits-all classes, in which differentiation was not the rule, or were seeking and engaging in activities that supplemented their learning, such as traveling abroad. A great many of the writers became teachers, and they strove to create authentic learning opportunities in their classrooms, based on their lived-experiences. They were also empathetic to the struggles of bilingual learners who live in monolingual worlds.

Being Bilingual in Borinquen brings the writers' passion for learning, their joy in their ability to express themselves in different languages, using specific language features for full expression in both their public and private lives. The writers represent a diverse community, in terms of sociolinguistic and economic backgrounds, yet they are bound by their belief in the overarching gains of bilingualism. These benefits extend beyond the academic and financial gains, to include a broader sense of community and the ability to engage with others at a deeper level.

Puerto Rico's school system is undergoing a major overhaul, with school closures common throughout the island and teacher retention, tenuous at best. This edition can help policymakers, educators, and families understand how bilingual development and identity practices that will sustain long-term maintenance of both languages. The volume adds to the data on English language acquisition and gives voice to recent graduates of the system. The data can inform policymakers of the current needs of students in Puerto Rico. Moreover, the data can be used to reverse the long-term pattern of stunted bilingualism in the Island.

Bilingual education professionals can use this compilation to connect second language acquisition theory to practices that foster language acquisition and support the development and maintenance of both languages. Among the methods mentioned by the authors are the importance of integrating real-life learning opportunities, the use of community resources, the use of media, particularly music and movies, and the differentiation of

teaching through groupings, when teaching each of the four language competencies. Teachers of bilingual students are reminded that proficiency in one domain does not mean proficiency in all areas, and that proficiency in one language does not translate into others. Therefore, careful planning is necessary to help students address their needs and build on their strengths.

The writers identified structural barriers that continue to undermine English language acquisition for students in Puerto Rico's public schools, which serve approximately 75 percent of all students: limited school funding, low teacher retention, limited access to teachers who are fluent in English, and limited professional development for language teachers. The narrators also present policymakers with a clear picture of how class and migration shape students' experiences with language. The narratives bring to the fore the importance of understanding how learning and emotional needs differ and converge. These are areas that can be addressed through funded professional development opportunities.

Lastly, the book offers varied testimonies about the benefits of living in two languages for parents and families interested in fostering bilingualism among their children. The book will help lay people understand the process of bilingualism and demystify what it means to be bilingual. It also stresses the role of families and communities in the educational process. Parents can use the book as a guide when looking into study programs: What are the teachers' competencies in the second language? What resources does the school have for students?

Being Bilingual in Borinquen: Student Voices from the University of Puerto Rico captures the complexities inherent in becoming and living as bilinguals in a context that is nuanced and multilayered. The narratives become the individual strokes to create a complex and detailed picture of bilingualism. The participants' dual-language mastery is integral to their identity and is a glimpse into the future, a space in which engaging in multiple worlds is possible.

Many factors impact second language acquisition: students' and families' motivation and outlooks towards bilingualism, access to bilingual educational settings, school funding and resources, as well as teacher mastery and training. The ways language policies integrate multiple languages into the national culture, and the value afforded each language impact the populace's relationship to bilingualism. Alicia Pousada meets and exceeds her

goals, presenting a range of experiences through which to better understand language development. Readers will find themselves immersed in the linguistic trajectories in *Being Bilingual in Borinquen: Student voices from the University of Puerto Rico*.