

# **THE ROLE OF CHOICE IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING<sup>1</sup>**

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## **ABSTRACT**

It has been suggested by various researchers (Resnick 1993, Pousada 1996) that the learning of English has been impeded in Puerto Rico due to the imposed nature of the language in the educational system. As a corollary to this hypothesis, it has also been suggested that if Puerto Rican parents had a choice in the languages their children learned, there might be less resistance to the learning of English. This investigation explores the existing evidence regarding the effect that choice may have on instructed second language learning outcomes internationally. More specifically, it examines such notions as: motivation, coercion, mandate, obligation, self-determination, locus of control, decision-making, and psychology of choice, and documents how they affect the type of bilingualism achieved in given societies.

## **Introduction**

It has been suggested that the learning of English has been impeded in Puerto Rico due to its imposition in the educational system (Resnick, 1993) and that there would be less resistance to the learning of English if Puerto Rican parents had a choice in the languages their children learned (Pousada, 1996).

The primary goal of my presentation today is to review some international evidence of the effect that choice may have on instructed second language learning outcomes. I will be considering the issues of motivation, coercion, mandate, obligation, and self-determination, locus of control, decision-making, and psychology of choice. Based on my review of the international literature, I will make some generalizations regarding the way in which these issues affect the

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type of bilingualism achieved in given societies, and I will offer some policy recommendations for Puerto Rican language education.

### **Motivation: Different types and their implications**

*Motivation* is one of the most studied aspects of learning.<sup>2</sup> Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert (1972), social psychologists working in Canadian bilingual programs, considered motivation to be primary in enhancing or blocking communication between cultures. In 1985, Gardner focused on the *integrative* aspect of language learning, i.e., the emotional and psychological identification with the second language group and the desire to socialize with and even become like its members. For many years, *integrative motivation* was regarded as the most “desirable” motivation for foreign language students.

Since the 1980’s, the concept of integrativeness has been extended to include identification with the general cultural and intellectual values associated with the speakers of the other language, thus explaining the attraction toward languages in countries where few native speakers are present and direct interaction is virtually impossible (e.g. English in China).

For some Puerto Rican students, being just like Americans is important—they may attend English-only schools, listen to English language music, travel to the U.S. regularly, have U.S.-born and/or raised parents or relatives, and plan to live or study in the U.S. in the future. For others, English is viewed solely as a tool for obtaining a good job. Their motivation is *instrumental* rather than

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<sup>2</sup> For research on the role of motivation in general learning tasks, see Dweck & Leggett (1988) and Brehm and Self (1989). For a critique of the work done in applied linguistics on this theme, see Crookes & Schmidt (1991).

integrative, since there is little desire to emulate Americans, even though cultural imitation or syncretism may occur unconsciously. For still others, English and Americans are totally foreign, somewhat frightening, and perhaps repugnant, as they represent a perceived loss of local Puerto Rican mores and a form of cultural homogenization.

Two other types of motivation have been explored. *Intrinsic motivation* refers to learning something just for the pleasure of learning it, as opposed to *extrinsic motivation* which refers to learning in order to achieve rewards or avoid punishment. Traditionally, schools have relied on extrinsic motivators to get students to learn. The learning of English in Puerto Rico has been premised upon extrinsic motivators like fulfilling graduation requirements and getting good grades or jobs.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, many scholars now believe that reliance solely on external motivators fails to produce deep and long-lasting commitment to learning (Lepper, Greene & Nisbett, 1973). The most successful learners are those who combine intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Alfie Kohn, author of *Punished by Rewards* (1995), feels that both rewards and punishment are ways of manipulating and controlling behavior that destroy the potential for real learning. According to Kohn, one of the most thoroughly researched findings in social psychology is that the more you reward someone for doing something, the less interest he or she will have in that activity. Many people have had the experience of doing something just for fun and losing

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<sup>3</sup> The notion of rewarding students is deeply entrenched in educational practices on the island. Companies such as Ponderosa and McDonald's give students certificates, food coupons, award ceremonies, etc. for reading books, increasing grades, passing tests, etc.

interest once they got paid for doing it.<sup>4</sup> In Kohn's estimation, extrinsic motivators (like grades, praise, token economies, money) are counterproductive and even immoral, since they undermine the desire to learn, reduce commitment to good values, and diminish the quality of work produced. He refers to them, using the phrase coined by Deci and Ryan (1985:7), as: "control through seduction, rather than force." According to Kohn, what is needed instead is an engaging curriculum and caring atmosphere so that children can act on their own intrinsic motivation to explore the world and learn.

Strong, Silver, & Robinson (1995) found that student engagement could be measured by the degree of attraction to work, persistence despite challenges and drawbacks, and visible delight in task completion. Their model of student engagement is represented by the acronym SCORE which stands for Success, Curiosity, Originality, and Relationships, and Energy. Their research indicates that many times students fail to learn because skills are routinely assigned or assumed rather than systematically modeled by teachers. This is clearly the case with English in Puerto Rico. Teachers who hand out worksheets without explaining the principles behind them or who use Spanish in class instead of English are clearly failing their students. Poor results should not be surprising. Success occurs when students are given a clear idea of the work expected from them and a curriculum that arouses curiosity by presenting contradictions, mysteries or gaps, and personal connections. When students feel that what they

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<sup>4</sup> This position is borne out by Deci (1971) who found that when money was used as an external reward, intrinsic motivation tended to decrease, whereas when verbal reinforcement and positive feedback were used, intrinsic motivation tended to increase. This is true because the person sees the locus of control as residing in an external agent rather than in him or herself.

are learning is personally relevant, of value to others, and of high quality, then they are driven to learn more.

Chance (1993) distinguishes between *informational rewards* which reflect effort or quality and are very motivating and *contractual rewards* which are dependent on compliance and can be very demotivating. He recommends offering rewards at intermittent intervals, a practice which produces a *partial reinforcement effect* which makes desirable behaviors stronger and less likely to fall off when the rewards are not present. It also reflects the realities of day-to-day life more accurately.

### **Coercion, mandate, and obligation**

Many times rewards are not the issue, since the desired behavior is coerced, mandated, or obligated. *Coercion* refers to the forced submission to the desires of another by verbal or emotional means. *Mandate* adds the legal requirement to do so and subsequent punishment for failure to comply. *Obligation* brings in a moral element. All involve the rejection of choice, free will, and self-determination, and all have been operative in the history of English teaching in Puerto Rico.

Instruction via English was mandated after the U.S. military takeover of the island in 1898. All teachers were required to learn English, English-speaking teachers were given preferential hiring, and all high school and normal school candidates were examined in English (Cebollero, 1945). In 1902, the Official Languages Act declared that English was co-official with Spanish. Many North

American teachers were hired, the celebration of U.S. holidays began, schools were named after American patriots, and the raising and saluting of the American flag and singing of “The Star Spangled Banner” in school became a patriotic obligation (Negrón de Montilla, 1990 [1976]).

These mandates provoked understandable protest among the Puerto Rican populace; however, the passage of the 1917 Jones Act granting U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans undercut the protest and made the Americanization efforts and English mandate seem more acceptable.

The first Puerto Rican-born Commissioner of Education, Juan B. Huyke, imposed many draconian pro-English measures.<sup>5</sup> Despite popular objections on the island, the federal government in Washington held firm to the idea that the young Puerto Ricans would grow up with complete facility in English (Osuna, 1975: 376-7). A long string of contradictory and unsuccessful language policies ensued, ranging from teaching in English only to teaching Spanish and English together in varying distributions. It was not until 1948 that Spanish was finally made the sole medium of instruction at all levels with English as a required course from kindergarten through college.

Given this history of coercion, mandate, and obligation, we should not be surprised by negative attitudes or poor English skills on the part of Puerto Rican students. Medina (1994) points out that language imposition often causes an

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<sup>5</sup>These included regulations requiring the use of English in all official school documents, in extracurricular activities, and during visits by supervisors, a mandatory oral English test for all candidates for high school graduation, the ranking of schools by the students' English grades, the organization of English clubs and a pen pal program, the prohibition of materials written only in Spanish, and the mandatory testing of teachers in English with the forced resignation of those who failed (Negrón de Montilla, 1990 [1976]).

ethnic group to develop an unconscious and universalized imperative against learning that language. Thus Puerto Ricans may have resisted learning English as a means of retaining their native language and culture. In comparing Puerto Rico to countries such as Singapore and India where English was successfully implanted, Medina clarifies that these countries are linguistically heterogeneous and have acquired English for both internal and external diplomatic, commercial, and technological functions. For them, English is ethnically neutral and has not threatened their nationality. In contrast, in Puerto Rico, planning for bilingualism has always been viewed with suspicion as an attempt to usurp the vernacular.

On a global scale, the same pattern of resistance has been observed in many societies. During the Soviet domination of Poland, Russian was a mandatory subject. Despite strong linguistic similarities between Polish and Russian, many Polish students resisted for political reasons and failed to learn Russian well. Now, in the post-Soviet era, Russian is treated merely as another foreign language which some choose and others do not (Hroch, 1999), and English is increasingly favored for its utility in integrating Poland into global capitalism.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, in post-Soviet Uzbekistan, the 1995 law on state languages made Uzbek compulsory in the state administration, justice system, and mass media. Russian (previously mandated) was relegated to the rank of “other

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<sup>6</sup>Phillipson (1992, 1999) maintains that the replacement of Russian with English in the former “satellite” nations has been orchestrated and promoted by the U.S. and British governments and corporations for whom English teaching is big business.

national minority languages,” and Russian textbooks and signage are gradually being eliminated (Kuzio 2002).<sup>7</sup>

In Macao, a small island off the coast of China ruled by Portugal for more than 400 years, Portuguese was mandated as the sole official language and medium of instruction despite the fact that the majority of people spoke Cantonese. Only the Portuguese administrators, civil servants, and Macanese (mixed Sino-Portuguese individuals) employed Portuguese to any great extent. The overwhelming majority of citizens utilized Cantonese or English in their daily interactions and schooling. While English was never an official language, it was a required subject in most schools, the principal medium of instruction at the University of Macao, and the language of science and technology. It was also used a great deal in tourism, banking, commerce, pop music, and cinema and served as a *lingua franca* for the different ethnic groups on the island.

When Macao was reunited with China in 1999, Putonghua (Modern Chinese) became the official language. At the moment of reunification, there were Cantonese-medium, English-medium schools, Portuguese-medium, and Portuguese-Cantonese bilingual schools in operation (Mann & Wong, 1999). The Basic Law of the Macao Special Administrative region of the People’s Republic of China granted Macao autonomy in determining the language of instruction in its schools. Popular preference was for Cantonese-English bilingual or Cantonese-Putonghua-English trilingual instruction, with strong opposition to

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<sup>7</sup> One effect of the new policy has been a reversal in role relations between Russians who live in Uzbekistan and local Uzbekistanis. During the Soviet era, all Uzbek speakers were required to learn Russian, but Russians were not required to learn Uzbek. This non-reciprocal relationship caused friction, and now that the shoe is on the other foot, it remains to be seen how the ethnic Russians will react to the new mandates.

Portuguese in any official function.<sup>8</sup> This approach has thus far been successful precisely because it gives freedom of choice.

### **Self-determination and locus of control**

The flip side of mandate is self-determination. *Self-determination theory* has become very prominent in cognitive neuroscience (cf. Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2002), especially as applied to second language learning (Noels, 2001a & b). It is closely linked to the notions of *intrinsic and extrinsic motivation*, *student autonomy* (Benson, 2001; Spratt, Humphreys & Chan, 2002), and *locus of control* (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). In all cases, individuals view desirable outcomes as possible only if they perceive themselves as competent, others as honest and cooperative, and institutions or regulations as fair. If individuals consider themselves to be incompetent and see others and institutions as inept or corrupt, then all attempts at learning are judged as futile or at best wholly controlled by chance.

Many students in Puerto Rico judge themselves as unable to learn English due to personal limitations, incompetent teachers, or a system that doesn't comprehend their special needs (Pousada 1991); therefore we can conclude that they see the locus of control as residing in others and not themselves. Getting over this attitude may be the secret to unleashing their language learning ability.

*Self-determination* also refers to a democratic political process through which the citizenry is able to create an autonomous identity. In decolonization,

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<sup>8</sup>Portuguese will probably die off naturally in Macao or continue only in a creole form.

there is often a period characterized by efforts to shake off the hegemony of the “mother” country and language and exercise self-determination.

In the case of Lebanon, for example, French culture and language dominated after Turkey was defeated in World War I. The French created a French-style educational system and a constitution in which French was co-official with Arabic. French was the mandatory medium of instruction for mathematics, science, and social studies, and required for civil service employment. As a result, it became the property of the educated elite.

After independence in 1943, the Lebanese government tried to extricate itself from French hegemony by making Arabic the sole official language and mandating that all subjects be taught in Arabic in elementary schools. English was also introduced as an alternative to French, particularly in math and sciences, and English-medium universities were established. After the civil war which tore apart the country from 1975 to 1989, Lebanon was established as a trilingual state, with Arabic as the sole official language and English and French as required foreign languages.

French is now viewed as the language of high culture, while English is seen as the language of business, technology, and contact with the non-Arab world. In 1994, the government decided to leave language policy at the pre-school and elementary levels up to the individual schools (both public and private). According to Shaaban and Ghaith (1999), part of the reason for this *laissez-faire* attitude was the cultivation of a national image of a culturally fluid society.

This leads us to the nature of decision-making and the psychology of choice.

### **Decision-making and psychology of choice**

When individuals decide to do something, their psychology of choice is activated. To choose an action, they need a readiness or disposition to carry it out. In second language learning, a speaker must have a *willingness to communicate* (MacIntyre, Clément, Dornyei, & Noels, 1998). In one's first language, WTC is developed as one matures and is fairly stable. People can generally be described as good communicators or poor communicators, and while communication apprehension or dysfunction can be overcome, most people either learn to live with it or practice avoidance techniques. In one's second language, the situation is complicated by language proficiency.

It is important to note that WTC is not the same as language proficiency. There are proficient second language speakers who avoid second language communicative situations, and there are second language speakers lacking in linguistic proficiency who nevertheless seek out opportunities to communicate in that language. This is due to linguistic self-confidence, desire to affiliate with others, interpersonal and intergroup attitudes, emotional climate, communicative competence and experience, and personality traits, among others. Careful consideration of these factors would probably prove effective in improving language learning outcomes in Puerto Rico.

## **Bilingual development from a global perspective**

While I cannot yet claim to have carried out an exhaustive review of the role of choice in second language learning internationally, thus far my research has revealed five general patterns:

**1. Among children, the issue of choice in instructed second language learning is less salient, since it is usually their parents who choose.**

In every country investigated, language choice was made by parents. In no national constitution consulted was there any mention of children's right to free choice. Parents make the decisions, and children live the consequences. It should be noted, however, that just as adolescents have recently been given increasing autonomy with regards to their sexual health in terms of obtaining contraception, morning after pills, abortions, etc., in the future, the same autonomy could be extended in the arena of education. Thus, the question of student choice should not be rejected out of hand.

Within the European Union, since 1998, all students have been required to take at least one foreign language, and many are beginning in elementary school. Many European countries also require an additional foreign language. Eleven impose a specific foreign language, and in eight of these, the language is English. In four of the eleven, a specific additional foreign language is also imposed. Interestingly enough, when students are free to choose the foreign languages they want to study, they tend to select the languages which are obligatory. The languages most often chosen are English, French, and German,

in that order. Nevertheless there are 40 regional languages currently being taught in EU schools, thus some students must be electing other alternatives (Tiscali Europe, 2003).

One area which needs to be examined further is the ability of high school students to “opt out” of foreign languages. Beginning in September of 2004, the British government made foreign language classes optional after the age of 14 (Ward, 2003). As a result, more than half of the students decided to discontinue their language studies. Most affected were classes in German, with French also in decline. Spanish, on the other hand, has seen an increase in student enrollment. Concern has been expressed by the House of Commons Education Select Committee and the Confederation of British Industry, with both bodies urging adolescents to consider the utility of language skills for employment.

Next year at the UPR in Río Piedras, basic graduation requirements in English and Spanish will be reduced to 6 credits. It remains to be seen how many departments and how many individual students will still elect to include additional credits in English as part of their Bachelor’s degrees.

**2. Parental attitudes, motivation, and expectations are extremely important in assessing the progress of instructed second language learning among children.**

My review of the literature indicates that this is perhaps the most important factor in second language education. Parents strive to provide their children with maximal social opportunities and make choices for them based on possible gains

in terms of future education, employment, travel, social mobility, and prestige.<sup>9</sup> Parents in post-colonial societies view learning via the native vernacular as “learning on the cheap” and advocate the use of the former colonial language in order to assure their children’s futures. This is clearly visible in Pakistan where parents insist on trilingual education for their children with the provincial language (Sindhi, Punjabi), the national language (Urdu), and the official non-indigenous language (English). Efforts to convince the parents that early primary education solely in the provincial language might be more beneficial to the children have fallen on deaf ears (Yes Pakistan, 2003). They want their children to learn English at all costs.

In Zurich,<sup>10</sup> according to Swissinfo (2004), canton authorities plan to start English instruction in the second year of schooling beginning in 2006. Some parents and teachers are worried that teaching English to seven- and eight-year-olds could affect their learning of “high” German. Others express concern about the maintenance of French in the fifth year curriculum, since they feel that English should be the only foreign language taught in primary school.

In Nigeria, where English serves as the official governmental language and a *lingua franca* for the more than 250 ethnic groups, parents perceive English as a passport to success and will often use it at home rather than their mother tongues or Nigerian Pidgin English in order to help their children get

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<sup>9</sup> Parents have gone as far as to medically alter their children (see the cases of frenectomies in Korea for the purpose of improving English pronunciation documented in Choe, 2004).

<sup>10</sup>Switzerland is officially trilingual in Swiss German (*Schweizerdeutsch*), Italian, and Romansch, divided regionally by cantons; however, English is extremely popular as a *lingua franca*.

ahead (Ali, 2003). They are also turning in droves to expensive private schools in hopes that their children will escape the low English scores which characterize the public schools. In an attempt to revitalize state schools and bring those parents back, the Nigerian government has recently implemented a three-year teacher training program via radio called "Access to English."<sup>11</sup>

Almost exactly the same situation prevails in the South Pacific. Simanuklutz (1999) reports that the purpose of formal education in many Pacific communities has been to teach children English and parents back this approach, despite the fact that many of the children remain illiterate in their native languages. Regrettably, most of these children end up with less than optimal skills in English and do not obtain the jobs and college placements that their parents were hoping for. Notable exceptions can be seen in New Zealand where bilingual education is the norm for the indigenous Maoris, and educational success is more likely.

It appears that parent education would be key to assuring a better educational outcome for children, since uninformed or misinformed parents cannot make good choices.

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<sup>11</sup>Some years back, the United Nations policy of educating children first in their vernacular language was followed through most of the African continent. Nowadays, however, according to David (2003), "wherever one goes in Africa, parents demand to know why they should continue sending their children to school if all the education they got was in the language of the illiterate." And in virtually every case the official language is a European one, with English having special prominence.

**3. The line between choice and mandate is often blurred due to economic and societal pressures on the learner.**

Adults do many things that they can justify as “choices” but which are virtual mandates due to economic and social pressures. Learning English, for example, is so strongly linked to economic advancement around the world that the question of “free choice” is almost absurd. In speech communities in which various languages co-exist, each with its own function, the “choices” faced by speakers are even more problematic. “Choosing” not to learn a key language may condemn one to a sub-standard level of existence, just as “choosing” not to finish school may do. If students are forced to abandon school to make a living, then they are in essence being forced to abandon prestige language learning.

**4. At a policy level, choice is more complicated than mandate.**

Governments do not favor policies that give choice. Choice means tailoring curricula, books, teachers, etc. to different communities or subgroups within a community, and this is expensive. There is also the question of how to evaluate progress and success when the criteria vary from school to school. In this regard, the situation in Macao is distinctive since schools are given the choice of which language to use as medium of instruction, and parents are given the choice of which schools to send their children to (Mann and Wong 1999).

Given that many people have a strong vested interest (either economic or political) in maintaining English as a Second Language classes in Puerto Rico, the idea of letting students choose whether or not they wish to take English may seem threatening. However, there is also strong consensus that the present

system is less than optimal and that some change is in order. Were students to have freedom of choice, in my considered opinion, the most likely outcome would be some initial attrition in English classes, as students explored other language possibilities. Nevertheless, I believe that most parents in Puerto Rico (like so many around the world) would probably insist on their children taking English for pragmatic purposes. The new UPR English requirements I mentioned earlier will test the degree of influence that parents still have over college age students and the degree to which the students have internalized societal pressures.

**5. At a personal level, choice may be more satisfying than mandate.**

Most individuals raised in Western societies cherish freedom of choice and are willing to make many sacrifices to obtain that freedom. They tend not to do well when coerced or mandated to learn or do something.<sup>12</sup> The liberty to choose one's cultural expression is key in the development of self-concept in those societies that promote the well-being of the individual over the well-being of the group.

However, in those societies in which conformity to group societal or religious norms is more highly valued than the selfish needs of the individual (e.g., Japan, China, Iran), choice may be seen as divisive and threatening. Furthermore, societies like Lebanon may find themselves in the middle of Western and Eastern ideological stances and serve as brokers between those societies which favor individual liberty and those that favor communal cohesion (Shaaban and Ghaith, 1999).

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<sup>12</sup> Immigrants in Western societies learn this lesson very quickly and resist coercion or retain their native conduct even in the face of mandates to the contrary, as seen in the case of Hispanics and Native Americans in the United States.

Considerably more work needs to be done in this area to tease out the cultural perceptions of and reactions to choice and mandate.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

How can English teachers in Puerto Rico benefit from the points I've brought up today? To begin with, they can work on the "negative motivation" of students, while respecting their deep-seated feelings of ambivalence. They can discuss with students how learning English can expand their options, without in any way threatening their native Spanish. They can also explore their students' individual motivations and points of resistance and craft teaching strategies that include student choice and control.

In short, the issues I've raised today must become part of the public discourse regarding bilingualism in Puerto Rico if we are to go beyond the usual pronouncements and create innovative solutions. Knowledge of international models and precedents can certainly help us in the process.

Thank you.

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