

# FOSTERING ENGLISH INSTRUCTION IN PUERTO RICO FROM A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE\*

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## Abstract

This keynote address considers how the problems in teaching English in Puerto Rico compare to those experienced by other nations around the world. Solutions created in different societies are contemplated to assess their relevance to and potential viability within a Caribbean context. The speaker first presents background information regarding the role of English as an international *lingua franca* and the conceptual models that have been suggested in order to categorize the spread of English world-wide. She then attempts to fit Puerto Rico into these models, reflecting on the discrepancies between the Puerto Rican case and that of other countries and the need to consider alternatives to the usual ESL / EFL dichotomy. This is followed by a brief summary of the current situation of English in the schools of Puerto Rico and the proposal of a new focus to language instruction, namely that of language awareness. Afterwards, the author considers the characteristics of exemplary international language instruction programs and points out which of these are already functional or in progress in Puerto Rico and which are sorely lacking. Finally, she proposes concrete actions that can be taken by teachers, both individually and collectively, to truly foster English instruction on the island.

## Introduction

Good morning. I am honored to have been invited to present the keynote address today. My thanks to Petríñ Fiol Silva, Metro chapter president and *TESOLGram* editor, and the members of the Metro chapter board for having facilitated my participation this weekend. I hope that my comments merit their faith in me.

Today we are gathered to honor the English teachers of Puerto Rico by discussing ways in which language instruction can be fostered. Being an English

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instructor in Puerto Rico is definitely a tough job, and the public focuses continually on the problems rather than celebrating the success stories. Every year the newspapers, airwaves, and conferences resound with somber statistics<sup>1</sup>, and columnists, political candidates, and news commentators take turns promoting their favorite theories and sweeping solutions regarding the teaching of English. For example, in a recent column in the *San Juan Star*, lawyer Neftalí Fuster stated that: “the public education system of Puerto Rico is unable and unwilling to teach English to the children of our poor and middle class families (Fuster 2006: B-14). Very helpful and supportive, right? Ironically, many of the same voices that clamor for more English instruction are of the opinion that the presence of English is somehow a threat and responsible for the problems that Puerto Rican children have in Spanish.<sup>2</sup> As Schweers and Vélez (1992) so aptly observed, we’re damned if we do and damned if we don’t.

There are a myriad of reasons for this conflicted situation, many of which I have addressed in past articles and talks (Pousada 1996, 1997, 1999, 2000). However, today I want us to step back a bit and consider how our problems in teaching English in Puerto Rico compare to those experienced by other nations around the world. I want us to contemplate the solutions created in other

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<sup>1</sup>For example, in October of 1999, the Department of Education revealed that only 40.7% of third year high school students were competent in English according to the Puerto Rican Test of School Competencies (*El Nuevo Día*, October 12, 1999, p. 4). Later on, in July of 2006, the number of ninth graders proficient in English was reported as being 55%. The improvement from 1999 went unnoticed; however, the newspaper did comment that this was a drop from the 2005 rate of 61%. (*San Juan Star*, July 13, 2006, p. 5).

<sup>2</sup> When in July of 2006, the Department of Education announced that only 44% of the 297,000 students tested in grades 3-9 were proficient in Spanish, this immediately gave rise to public commentary regarding the neglect of Spanish due to the attention being paid to English. (*San Juan Star*, July 13, 2006, p. 5).

societies and see if they fit within our Caribbean context. And then I want us to put the most workable of those solutions into action, so that we can stop lamenting the past and get on with the present and the future.

Before taking you all on this global journey, let me give you a peek at the roadmap. I will first present some background information regarding the role of English as an international *lingua franca* and the types of descriptive models used to categorize the spread of English in different speech communities. I will subsequently attempt to fit Puerto Rico into these models, reflecting on the discrepancies between the Puerto Rican case and that of other countries and the need to consider alternatives to the usual ESL / EFL dichotomy. Afterwards I will briefly comment on the current situation of English in the public schools and propose a new focus to language instruction, namely that of language awareness. Once this is done, I will consider the characteristics of exemplary language instruction programs around the world and point out which are already functional or in progress in Puerto Rico and which are still lacking. Finally, I will propose some concrete actions that can be taken by teachers, both individually and collectively, to truly foster English instruction in Puerto Rico.

### **English as a language of global communication**

Today English, once a tiny language restricted to small parts of the British Isles, is considered a “world language” (Brutt-Griffler 2002). Welsh linguist David Crystal (1997: 61) estimates that between 1.2 and 1.5 billion people around the planet now speak some form of English and reports that the second and foreign

language learners of English combined have already surpassed native speakers in number (Crystal 2004: 8-9).

English is hailed globally as the language of science, technology, business, and diplomacy. It is a primary language of mass entertainment and news reporting and the default language of the Internet.<sup>3</sup> Airplanes the world round take off and land via communications in a variety of English referred to as Airspeak. Currently, English has special status in over 70 countries as either an official language or the language of government and is the preferred foreign language taught in over 100 countries (Crystal 2004).<sup>4</sup> According to Spichtinger (2000), English serves as the medium of education in the secondary schools of 18 countries and in at least some of the elementary schools of 35 countries. It has even become the *de facto lingua franca* of the highly multilingual European Union<sup>5</sup> and is spoken by 69% of the citizens of Denmark and 71% of the people of The Netherlands (Spichtinger 2000:41). No wonder that Dr. Abram de Swann (1998: 65), Dutch expert on transnational societies, refers to English as “the center of the linguistic galaxy.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Although this position is being challenged as the small languages of the world find their salvation on the Web.

<sup>4</sup> According to the United Nations website [<http://www.un.org/Overview/unmember.html>], there are currently 192 nations represented in the U.N.

<sup>5</sup> A recent study by the European Union’s statistical body revealed that over 92% of high school students in the EU are studying English, as compared to only 33% learning French and 13% learning German (*The Economist*, March 1, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> In Spain or Italy, where only 13 and 19% of the respective populations report speaking English (Spichtinger, 2000:41), no doubt the perception of the epicenter of the linguistic galaxy differs.

**ENL / ESL / EFL model**

The most popular characterization of the different roles of English around the world is the three-pronged English as a Native Language / English as a Second Language / English as a Foreign Language model, clearly described in 1998 by Tom MacArthur.

The English as a Native Language approach is how most people in Great Britain, the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia are taught once they begin formal schooling.<sup>7</sup> It presumes birth or very early arrival in a country where English is either the predominant language or the only language given official recognition. Oral proficiency in English is a given from the outset. Materials and teaching strategies are based on the linguistic structures, literary genres, and cultural references normally acquired by monolingual speakers of English.

ESL and EFL are categories that apply to non-native learners. Generally, in ESL situations, only English is utilized in the classroom. Teachers are usually native or near-native speakers of English and are rarely proficient in any of the languages of their students. Typically, the vocabulary and linguistic routines of daily life are taught with the goal of accelerating the cultural adjustment to the new setting. At the college level, foreign students are prepared to compete in English-speaking academic environments. In the U.S., for example, ESL classes proliferate in the elementary and secondary schools, universities, community centers, vocational centers, and even at some job sites.

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<sup>7</sup>It should be noted that Fishman, Cooper & Conrad (1977:57) counted Puerto Rico as being part of the ENL nations because it was a US territory and English was an official language.

In contrast, an EFL approach is utilized primarily in places where students do not usually have an opportunity to employ English daily.<sup>8</sup> Depending on the resources available, classes may be given exclusively in English by native English-speaking teachers, but world-wide, of necessity, non-native teachers are most often utilized, and grammar, reading, and writing are emphasized more than oral communication. In many cases, EFL classes are not provided until high school; however, there is a growing tendency toward starting English earlier whenever possible. Parental demand for English classes is at an all-time high internationally, as are extraordinary measures like the frenectomies practiced in Korea to surgically sever the tissue called the frenum underneath the tongue that supposedly makes it difficult for Korean youngsters to produce distinctive English language sounds like /r/ and /l/ (Demick 2002).

A typical example of EFL would be the system in China, where the majority of English teachers in the public schools are non-native English speakers and not fully fluent in the language. Given this reality and the excessive number of students per class (averaging about 45), English teachers in China tend to concentrate on grammatical rules described in textbooks and to employ translation as a teaching technique (Catalupo 2000, Gale 2003).<sup>9</sup>

Are either of these models of English teaching appropriate for Puerto Rican students?

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<sup>8</sup>This may be questionable in areas like Singapore, Hong Kong, or Papua New Guinea in which nativized or indigenized versions of English or even English Creoles have become the norm in certain social domains.

<sup>9</sup>Nevertheless, the Chinese are very conscious of the need for English in order to carry out commerce with other countries, and they are actively recruiting English teachers from the U.S. In addition, there has been an explosion of private schools that claim to teach English, and the demand for English classes is high. (Lam 2002, Bolton 2002)

In Puerto Rico, return migrants, North Americans, and other foreigners use English. English is present on street and commercial signs, in product names, in instructions for taking medications and using electrical appliances, on cable TV, in newspapers, magazines, and Hollywood movies, within the Federal Courts, and in tourism. English is a required school subject from kindergarten through university graduation, and bilingual Headstart programs are springing up around Bayamón and San Juan (Bliss 2005). Moreover, there are countless commercial institutes dedicated to the teaching of English.<sup>10</sup> Nor should we forget the constant migratory flow between the U.S. and the island. A motivated individual can count on many opportunities to acquire English while living in Puerto Rico.

But the situation is not so simple. For many Puerto Ricans, English continues to be a foreign language used only when there is no other option. Even though the aforementioned opportunities exist, few individuals take advantage of them. In the schools, English is usually not the favorite subject of most students, and many English teachers (despite their training and their best intentions to use English exclusively) end up giving their classes primarily in Spanish. Students then acquire the attitude that English is a “Mickey Mouse” class that requires no real effort and effectively cease to strive and expand their knowledge. Only those with highly motivated (and financially secure) parents who send their kids to private schools or special public school programs where English is actively promoted, end up feeling comfortable in the language.

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<sup>10</sup>One enterprise even put up huge billboards depicting a woman screaming in terror with bold headlines asking: “¿Miedo al inglés?” [Fear of English?].

As a result, many students enter the university with considerable gaps in their English knowledge.<sup>11</sup> For them, English is definitely a foreign language. Nevertheless, it cannot be compared to other foreign languages like French, Italian, or Portuguese, since only a tiny minority of elementary or secondary schools teach these languages, they are not mandatory, and the few students who opt for studying them do so voluntarily, a fact which assures a more positive motivation (Lambert 1969, Norris-Holt 2001). They enjoy a certain “cachet” because they are associated with the arts rather than with business or technology. In addition, as Romance languages, their linguistic similarity to Spanish makes them easier for Puerto Rican students to learn.

Puerto Rican linguist Emily Krasinski (2003) notes that if we look at individuals, rather than the Puerto Rican society as a whole, we can see that for some, English is a foreign language and for others, it is a second language. In fact, within the language repertoires of each individual, there may be domains in which English is alternately ESL or EFL. This implies that any curriculum aimed at teaching Puerto Rican students requires utmost flexibility in order to attend to the specific needs of subgroups with different linguistic profiles.

For those who are dead set on retaining the “ESL” term in Puerto Rican education, despite these contradictions, the *Curricular Framework* for the English

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<sup>11</sup> In May of 1999, the College Board reported that the 11,103 high school students who took the English exam obtained an average score of 443 (from a total of 800 points), evidence of significant problems in their command of the language. At the U.P.R., Rio Piedras campus, about one third of the student body graduating yearly can be described as having limited English proficiency (Krasinski & Soucy, 2000).



Program published by the Department of Education of Puerto Rico in 2003 presents a way to legitimize this custom. The document states that:

...by moving away from the traditional definition of teaching and learning ESL and stressing the meaning of “second” as sequential in terms of the timing, i.e., sequence of language acquisition, we can move away from the traditional concept and its various emotionally and politically charged connotations. In this way, we can clarify and establish the order of acquisition of L1 (Spanish first) and L2 (English second) in Puerto Rico. Thus, a chronological sequence is established and the term ESL becomes more neutral and less politically and socio-psychologically charged. (p. 8)

### **Kachru’s model**

In a now famous attempt to go beyond the ENL / ESL / EFL model, Indian linguist Braj Kachru (1982, 1985, 1990) conceptualized the spread of English as three concentric circles corresponding to the way in which English is acquired and utilized in different countries (see Figure 1).

The Inner Circle contains the countries in which English is the national vernacular with official functions. This includes the United States, Great Britain, Ireland, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

The second circle (the Outer Circle) contains the former British colonies, in which English is an important element of daily life with official or semi-official functions and is taught as a second language.<sup>12</sup> Kachru coined the term “new Englishes” to refer to the varieties that became indigenized or locally adapted in

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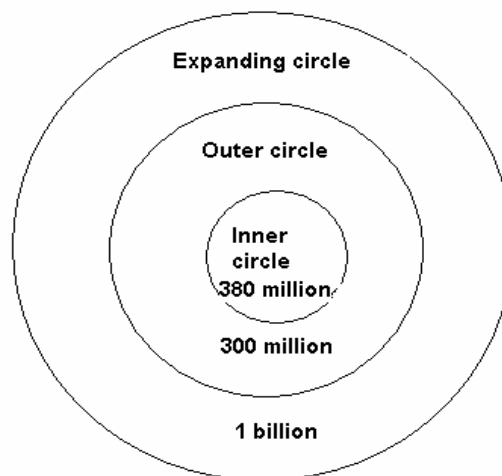
<sup>12</sup> This includes India, Singapore, Malawi, the Philippines, Nigeria, Ghana, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Zambia, etc.

the Outer Circle, and those that were later transplanted elsewhere he called “diaspora varieties.”<sup>13</sup>

The third circle (the Expanding Circle) contains the countries that were not colonized by the members of the Inner Circle and do not grant English an official role, yet do recognize it as an international language. This is the most rapidly growing circle.<sup>14</sup>

**Figure 1: The expansion of English**

[Based on: Kachru 1982, 1985, 1990]



Note: The figures included here are the maximums postulated by Kachru. However, given the growth of the world population and the explosion of English worldwide, these estimates are quite modest, according to the most recent statistics.

<sup>13</sup>These include the African-based, English-lexifier creoles in the Caribbean and in Europe, Canada, and the United States, by means of a second much later transplantation. Note that they are called “new” because it is only recently that they have been officially recognized and institutionalized. They have actually been around for a long time.

<sup>14</sup> It includes Japan, Greece, Poland, China, Russia, Germany, Iran, Vietnam, the Scandinavian countries, Israel, Latin America, etc.

While the circles model corresponds very closely to the ENL / ESL / EFL model we just discussed, Kachru's categories do not give pre-eminence to "native" English speakers, but rather present them merely as the historical beginning of a process which has long since outstripped the original Anglo-Saxon point of origin.

According to Kachru's model, Puerto Rico would fall within the Outer Circle due to its colonial relationship with the U.S. and recognition of English as an official language. Nevertheless, the placement of the island within this circle implies a second language teaching approach which (as we have seen) is problematic.

In recent years, Kachru has rethought his circles model in terms of three "English-using speech fellowships" (1997:220).

(1) The **norm-providing fellowship** is often seen by laypeople as the most legitimate, embodying "proper English." The varieties of English contained in this fellowship are bolstered by dictionaries and grammars and, aside from minimal differences in spelling and lexicon, have fairly clear norms.

(2) The **norm-developing fellowship** contains the "new Englishes" whose norms are still being established and for which dictionaries and grammars may only recently have been produced or are in the process of being produced. We could make a good case for Puerto Rico as a member of the "norm-developing fellowship," given the growing number of studies pointing to the development of a distinctive Puerto Rican English (Nash 1982; Walsh 1994; Fayer, Castro, et. al., 1998; Dayton & Blau 1999).

(3) The **norm-dependent fellowship** relied on British English in its early years, but the tides have now turned in favor of American English, even in Europe.<sup>15</sup>

### **Moag's model**

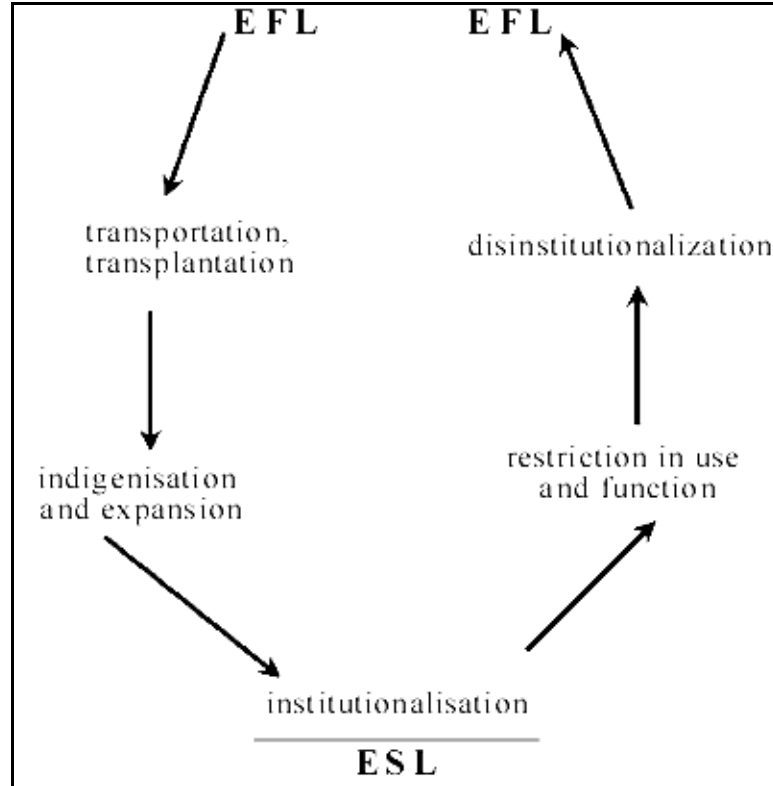
Another model commonly invoked when discussing the spread of English is that of Moag (1982, 1992). Figure 2 graphically illustrates the cyclical connection between ESL and EFL posited by Moag for English in post-colonial societies. English (as a foreign language) is first transported and transplanted to a new territory via settlers, then indigenized (as a native variant of the language is born), and finally institutionalized in its new form. This new variant of English is then taught and used as a second language primarily in social institutions like education and government. In some cases, it is eventually restricted in use and function to certain social domains, ultimately deinstitutionalized, and then seen again as a foreign language by the general population.<sup>16</sup>

Moag's model (developed to describe the situation in Fiji) is useful in analyzing the historical development of the New Englishes like that which exists in Malaysia alongside various local languages. There is now a new generation of urban Malaysians for whom Malaysian English is their first language and whose ancestral languages have been discarded (Schneider 2003: 261).

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<sup>15</sup> Ironically, while Americans had a hard time getting jobs teaching English in France or Spain during the 1970's and 1980's, now such teachers are actively recruited.

<sup>16</sup>Graddol (1997:10) describes the process as a form of language shift. EFL speakers may become ESL speakers and ESL speakers may eventually regard the indigenized language as their native one and thus turn into ENL speakers.



**Figure 2: Moag's English life cycle: Adapted from Moag (1982 & 1992)**

Moag's model can be applied in part to the Puerto Rican situation, not to predict the loss of Spanish, but rather to substantiate the progressive development of a markedly local variety of English called Puerto Rican English by scholars such as Dayton & Blau (1999), Fayer, Castro, et. al. (1998) and Walsh (1994). As Nickels (2005: 235) points out, Moag's model suggests the possibility of a "recycling" option in which English periodically reappears alternating between foreign language and second language status depending on particular historical "catalysts." This may account for some of the irregularities and inconsistencies observable throughout the history of English in Puerto Rico.

### **Quirk's model**

A complement to the Kachru and Moag models is that of British linguist and grammarian Randolph Quirk (1988, 1990). Quirk divides the spread of English into three types:

(1) the **imperial** (in which the spread results from colonization by a small foreign population, as happened in Africa and Asia during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries),

(2) the **demographic** (in which the spread occurred via the large-scale migration of English-speakers into an area, as happened in North America, Australia, and New Zealand), and

(3) the **econocultural** (in which the economic and cultural centrality of English has led to its current spread throughout the world, including Europe and Latin America).

Puerto Rico is fairly easily placed into Quirk's econocultural category. While there was colonization by a small group, English did not become the sole prestige language or the only language of power, so it was not true imperial spread. It was definitely not demographic spread, since there was no large-scale migration of English speakers, although one could argue that, in the future, English-speaking Puerto Rican return migrants could constitute such a group. Economic and cultural factors are the most likely reasons for the persistence of English in Puerto Rico, as evidenced by the growing demand for English in the Puerto Rican labor market and the unflagging appeal of English language movies, television, and popular music. Nevertheless, the legal status of Puerto

Rico as a U.S. territory and the division of the Puerto Rican “nation” between the continental U.S. and the island give the need for English learning in Puerto Rico a somewhat different spin than that found, say, in Latin America or Europe.

### **Alternative approaches to teaching English in Puerto Rico**

Everything I’ve presented here today indicates that English in Puerto Rico is, as Nickels (2005) puts it, perpetually “between circles.” How can we categorize it then? And what types of materials should we be buying or writing for our classrooms?

One alternative to the binary division between ESL and EFL is English as an Auxiliary Language or EAL. This label (used by linguist Elite Olshtain back in 1985 with reference to Israel) is applied to situations in which English is official or co-official but not the mother tongue. The term is heard primarily in the former colonies of African and Asia (e.g. Nigeria, the Philippines) where extreme multilingualism is the norm or in countries in which the national language is not a language of wider communication, as is the case of Hebrew in Israel or Dutch in The Netherlands. However, it could easily be applied to Puerto Rico and would bring an end to the constant debate with regard to ESL vs. EFL and to the notion that English is “threatening” Spanish. Something that is “auxiliary” is surely not a threat.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Interestingly enough, this fear that English is somehow displacing the native vernacular is not shared by people who live in highly multilingual and multicultural settings like that of Nigeria. Nigerian scholar Joseph Bisong (1995:123) remarked that: “There is no way three or four hours of exposure to English in a formal school situation could possibly compete with, let alone threaten to supplant, the non-stop process of acquiring competence in the mother tongue.”

Another alternative is English as an International Language, a variety that includes all features common to the standard varieties of English around the world. As Henry Widdowson, British expert on African and Asian varieties of English, describes it, EIL is a “range of self-regulating registers for international use.” (1998: 399) It does not belong to the Inner Circle, but rather to all the circles. In fact, Widdowson insists that “in the conception of EIL that I am proposing here, notions of Inner and Outer Circles are irrelevant.” EIL also has the advantage of being neutral with regard to the relative status of the languages of a given speech community (Spichtinger 2000). The EIL approach could be useful in Puerto Rico in defusing tensions related to the employment of non-native vs. native English teachers, since EIL implies shared ownership by all those who utilize English for whatever purpose.<sup>18</sup>

It is worth pointing out that changing labels or placing Puerto Rico within a typology does not, in itself, resolve any concrete issues. Much work is needed to design curricular materials directed toward the specific needs of Puerto Rican students. Currently available ESL or EFL-oriented materials are not adequate and tend to lack local relevance.<sup>19</sup>

Let us now take a brief look at the local scene.

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<sup>18</sup> Higgins (2001) investigated the issue of ownership of English in an experimental design in which Inner and Outer Circle speakers of English judged the grammaticality of 24 sentences. Their comments were analyzed for linguistic cues that indexed their sense of ownership. Interestingly enough, the two groups were not as different as expected, indicating a growing sense of ownership toward English among Outer Circle speakers.

<sup>19</sup>Locally relevant materials in English are slowly making their appearance. (e.g. Ilsa López’s new book, *Stories from Here and There*, which you will hear more about during this conference).



## English in the public schools of Puerto Rico

The role of English in the public schools of Puerto Rico vacillated considerably prior to 1948 and has been a focus of constant debate in the years since. For those who need a review of this history, I would recommend checking out my 1999 article titled “The singularly strange story of the English language in Puerto Rico,” which appeared in *Milenio* (see the bibliography at the end of your handout for an Internet link to the article). It is vital that every teacher of English on this island be aware of the historical imposition of English in the schools and the public resistance to attempts to displace Spanish as language of instruction. Awareness of this background helps enormously in understanding the ambivalence with which English is viewed by both students and parents.

In more recent years, the Department of Education has attempted to overcome this ambivalence by developing efforts like the Proyecto para Formar un Ciudadano Bilingüe (Fajardo, et. al. 1997)<sup>20</sup>. Currently, the DE is pinning its hopes on the sizeable federal funding provided by the 2001 No Child Left Behind

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<sup>20</sup> This program was intended primarily to reform the teaching of language at the kindergarten through third grade levels. Put briefly, it had seven focal points: (1) reading in Spanish beginning in kindergarten and reading in English starting in the second semester of first grade, (2) teaching English and Spanish in blocks of 90 minutes beginning in junior high, (3) integration of English into science and math classes, (4) voluntary English language immersion laboratories and Spanish writing clinics for high school students, (5) professional development of and certification of English teachers, (6) teacher exchange program with U.S. schools, and (7) revision of teaching and supervision in the areas of English and Spanish. The project ran into serious difficulties when then-Education Secretary Victor Fajardo received a 12-year prison sentence for embezzling \$4.3 million in education funds.

legislation.<sup>21</sup> An extensive analysis of both of these efforts would require more time than we have available today, and I will reserve it for another venue, although I will refer you all to James Crawford's excellent article on the reasons why the National Association for Bilingual Education is currently critical of the NCLB (Crawford 2004).

Nevertheless, an examination of international language education plans makes it clear that to be truly effective, a language education policy needs to be an integral part of the curriculum with recurrent funding for the long haul and flexibility to deal with student linguistic and academic variability. In Puerto Rico, as long as there is an inadequate tax base for the funding of education, as long as educational plans are subject to the vagaries of local elections, as long as

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<sup>21</sup> The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is the name for the reauthorized (and amended) Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). The highly problematic nature of this legislation can be seen in many recent articles that discuss the damage being done in schools with high numbers of Hispanic students. (See Crawford 2004, Keller 2006, Zehr 2006). English as a Second Language learners are granted three years for assessments in their native languages, after which they are required to demonstrate proficiency on an English language assessment. Nevertheless, at present, very few states provide native language tests, and most are for Spanish. Furthermore, many of the so-called native language tests are translations of the English language test, a practice which is considered invalid by psychometricians (August and Hakuta 1997).

Under NCLB, just 10 months after entering a U.S. school, ELLs in schools receiving Title I funds are given English language assessments which may not be valid or reliable for their population and most likely will not reflect their true proficiency (Crawford 2004). In addition, NCLB does not address the true problems involved in the education of second language learners (i.e., the shortages of ESL and bilingual teachers, the uneven allocation of resources, the inadequate instructional materials, etc.). Instead, its narrow focus and punitive sanctions have led to teaching for the tests, abandonment of successful programs, demoralization of experienced educators, and the rejection of ethnographic and other qualitative measures of linguistic and academic proficiency.

In Puerto Rico, NCLB funds (to the tune of more than \$604 million) are being utilized to strengthen English instruction and generally improve public schooling. (This is part of the \$1.4 billion received from the federal government for various educational programs on the island (U.S. Department of Education 2003). In August of 2002, it was discovered that only 15% of the schools in Puerto Rico met federal standards. (Associated Press, August 5, 2002), and there has been a concerted effort since then to address the problems revealed. NCLB, as implemented in Puerto Rico, has no intent to displace Spanish as the primary language of instruction. Assessment of English proficiency is accomplished via the Puerto Rican Academic Achievement Test created in 2003 specifically for the island's population.

reliance on federal funding exceeds local commitment to education, and as long as one-size-fits-all standards replace thoughtful planning, the basic problems will continue.

Now, as you know, whatever happens at the elementary and secondary school levels eventually impacts the university level. At the UPR in Río Piedras, we have a great mix of English competencies among our students, since English is not used as an entrance criterion. Those students who have enjoyed good pre-university training or have personal exposure to English tend to get high scores on the ESLAT exam or the English Advanced Placement exam and are placed in intermediate and advanced classes. Some end up majoring in English or other fields like Natural Science and Public Communication in which English is very common and necessary.

Unfortunately, every year more students arrive with a very low level of English proficiency, a heavy load of bad learning habits, defeatist attitudes toward English, and few expectations of changing their situation. They enter the lowest level English classes where an attempt is made to remediate their skills. Some have learning problems, but the majority are average (or even bright) students who have simply given up or settled for less than their potential in English. The saddest thing is that in spite of very dedicated and well-versed professors, with all likelihood, many of these students will graduate without significantly improving their English competence.

Resolving this linguistic deficit requires a concerted planning process on the part of the Department of Education and the teacher training institutions of

the island. (The beginnings of such a process can be seen in the *Curricular Framework* for English mentioned earlier.) Providing more exposure to oral/aural activities before or simultaneously with courses that focus on reading and writing are totally feasible steps that can be taken by both the high schools and the universities. Providing courses that are more intensive in nature is another feasible reform. International experiments with language learning point to the need for at least 20 hours a week exposure to the target language in order to see noticeable improvement. In comparison, the UPR currently offers a maximum of 7 hours a week of English language training, clearly inadequate for the development of bilingual skills.

### **Language awareness as part of the curriculum**

A highly productive approach to language teaching which has been taken in many other countries is the development of language awareness as a standard part of the elementary, intermediate, and secondary school curricula. I have written about this in two different issues of the *TESOLGram* (in 1997 and 2006), but briefly, language awareness entails developing explicit knowledge about and sensitivity to language issues. Promoters of Language Awareness believe that developing conscious understanding of how language is structured, used, and acquired, helps people with their interpersonal interactions, work relations, professional activities, community life, and family socialization practices.

Founder E. W. Hawkins (1984) maintained that people's insights into native language structures, functions, and valorization provide points of reference that help them to overcome their "linguistic parochialism" (1987:17) and modify ethnocentric attitudes, serving as a bridge to foreign language learning.<sup>22</sup>

Language awareness has become part of the curriculum in a number of European nations<sup>23</sup>, as well as in South Africa, Canada, and the U.S., and it is definitely worth exploring here in Puerto Rico. It goes considerably beyond what we usually consider to be Language Arts and should be incorporated across all areas and levels of the curriculum, since language is intrinsic to the learning carried out in all subjects.

### **Integrating language awareness into the Puerto Rican school curriculum**

Incorporating Language Awareness concepts in Puerto Rico would be relatively easy via songs, poetry, and games in the early grades to sensitize the youngest students to the joys of language. In the upper elementary grades, the children could be guided to observe and work with their native language in action as they acquire familiarity with English. In junior high and high school, they could elevate their language awareness to explicit and systematic knowledge of their first two languages and thus facilitate the eventual acquisition of a third.

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<sup>22</sup> When language awareness is extended to include consciousness of how specific language practices are used to position people socially, it is referred to as Critical Language Awareness and has great application to post-colonial or neo-colonial societies in which issues of language choice are mediated through power relations.

<sup>23</sup>Included here are Great Britain, Holland, Germany, Poland, and Greece.

The Language Awareness curriculum could be aimed at answering the questions that children naturally wonder about, e.g.:

Why doesn't everybody speak the same language?  
 Are Chinese or Japanese harder to learn than French or Italian?  
 How come English and Spanish are sometimes the same and other times different?  
 Why is English spelling so weird?  
 Why can't we just read everything in translation and forget about learning languages?  
 Why is the Spanish in old time books so different from the way we talk now?  
 Why does my Dominican neighbor sound different from me?  
 How do babies learn to talk anyway?  
 How do deaf people talk with their hands?  
 Do animals have languages? Can they understand us?  
 Why do people say one thing with their mouths and something different with their bodies? Which one should we believe?

In essence, the objective would be to develop a love of language among our students, no matter their ages, by responding to real language issues in their lives. When language becomes compelling in this way, they will want to learn more about it. Leaving explicit grammar for high school and letting younger students develop their own sense of language functions and forms will go a long way toward reducing fear and increasing delight. Students trained in this manner will be more secure in their own cultural and linguistic identity, more tolerant of other cultures, and more willing to interact with individuals of other groups.

To accomplish this, teachers themselves must pass through the process of consciousness-raising, so they can impart Language Awareness in a sensitive and meaningful manner. In other words, Language Awareness preparation must be incorporated into pre-service and in-service training.

Language awareness education is clearly "a good thing" (as Martha Stewart would put it). However, there are other "good things" going on in

international education that Puerto Rico would do well to take note of, and some are already in operation right here on the island.

### **What changes are needed based on the experience of other nations?**

In September of 2001, the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington D.C. carried out a survey on language teaching in 19 nations<sup>24</sup> (Pufahl, Rhodes & Christian 2001). Various characteristics of exemplary programs were identified that can serve as a guide for us (see Table 1).

**Table 1: PRESENCE IN PUERTO RICO OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF EXEMPLARY ENGLISH PROGRAMS AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL**

	<b>CHARACTERISTICS</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>BEGINNING</b>	<b>NO</b>
1.	<b>Early start</b>	X		
2.	<b>Articulated curriculum</b>		X	
3.	<b>Rigorous training and appreciation of teachers</b>			X
4.	<b>Use of technology</b>		X	
5.	<b>Integration of language and academic content</b>		X	
6.	<b>Communicative methods</b>	X		
7.	<b>Focus on learning strategies</b>			X
8.	<b>Clear criteria for final competencies</b>			X
9.	<b>Maintenance of mother tongue</b>	X		

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<sup>24</sup> The countries represented in the study are: Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Chile, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Luxemburg, Morocco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Peru, Spain, and Thailand.

**1. Early start to foreign language study**—The most successful programs began in the early elementary grades. This is already done in Puerto Rico; however, the benefits of the early start are partially undermined because our programs do not comply with all of the other characteristics,

**2. Well-articulated curriculum**—The majority of the European nations (as well as some of the others in the sample) follow the standards for language teaching established by the European Council in 1996 and share terminology, objectives, methods, materials, evaluations, and training. We do not have this consistency in Puerto Rico. With every new government administration, the planners change and the wheel is reinvented to the detriment of the students. Great strides were made with the preparation of the *Curricular Framework* for English in 2003 which laid out the basic parameters for both teacher training and classroom practices. However, the active implementation across the island schools is only beginning.

**3. Rigorous training and appreciation of teachers**—Successful international programs have well-trained and well-paid teachers.<sup>25</sup> Puerto Rico is definitely behind in this category. In 2005, then-Education Secretary Gloria Baquero pointed to a lack of fluency on the part of teachers as an obstacle to achieving bilingualism in Puerto Rico (Bliss 2005: 5). Governor Acevedo Vilá has publicly committed himself to doubling the number of English teachers in Puerto Rico over the next ten years, and Resident Commissioner Luis Fortuño has

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<sup>25</sup> In Morocco, English teachers go through five years of intensive preparation. In Finland, teachers are recruited among the best of the high school graduates, and the profession is respected and competitive. In The Netherlands, all language teachers study abroad to improve their skills.



advocated bringing in teachers from the U.S. for a generation or two to fill the gap. Such proposals understandably upset teachers' unions and do little to improve the skills of the existing English teachers.

The sad reality is that our most proficient English students do not choose education as a major and prefer to develop careers in more lucrative fields. Many students go into education when they fail to be accepted into any other major. This pattern clearly must change if we are to improve English education on the island.<sup>26</sup> Standards for admission to and retention in teacher training programs must be raised, so that future teachers develop themselves academically as much as possible. At the same time, teacher pay scales must be elevated, so that the profession becomes attractive to new teaching candidates and so the public can perceive of teachers once again as professionals<sup>27</sup>.

Once in the classroom, teachers must be encouraged to develop excellence among their students. One way to do this that has proven effective internationally is through school incentive plans, in which success is rewarded through extra stipends. This works best if it is available to all the teachers in a successful school or program, since this fosters cooperation and a healthy group dynamic. It is least effective when it pits teachers against each other, since competition can create discord (Neufield 2006). The No Child Left Behind legislation includes provisions for such incentives, but unfortunately also

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<sup>26</sup>The results of lowering standards for students majoring in education can also be seen in native language instruction. Witness the recent news reporting that the level of linguistic competence in Spanish of public school teaching candidates is equivalent to that of a 9<sup>th</sup> grader. (Maestros con F en español, *El Nuevo Día*, August 28, 2006)

<sup>27</sup> UPR-Cayey President Ram S. Lamba recently called attention to the fact of lower entrance requirements for education students. In his opinion, this contributes to the loss of prestige suffered by the teaching profession. (Roldán Soto 2006: 31).

prescribes punitive measures which can demoralize teachers working with historically underserved communities.

**4. Comprehensive use of technology**—The most successful international language programs utilize the Internet, chat groups, databases, video technology, and educational television programs with subtitles (instead of dubbed programs). In Puerto Rico we are only beginning to explore these possibilities.<sup>28</sup> The Escuela Digital recently developed by the UPR at Cayey and the Department of Education<sup>29</sup> is a promising project that should be recommended to all practicing and future teachers. Others need to be launched.

**5. Integration of language teaching with academic content teaching**—This was tried in some public schools under the Proyecto para Formar el Ciudadano Bilingüe with science and math classes being taught in English. At the UPR in Río Piedras, it is also practiced in some first and second year English courses. Incorporation of a Language Awareness curriculum across the board would go a long way toward fulfilling this criterion of excellence.

**6. Utilization of communicative methods**—The schools of Puerto Rico have been utilizing a communicative approach for quite some time, along with a constructivist view of the educational process. In this respect, we are ahead of many other countries.

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<sup>28</sup> I am personally involved in a project called the Bilingual Chat Community which utilizes bilingual Internet chats to link students studying Spanish at the North Carolina State University with Puerto Rican students taking the Intensive courses in Developing Functions of Oral English in the English Department in Humanities at the UPR, Río Piedras. In the College of General Studies, on the same campus, computers are utilized in intermediate level English writing classes.

<sup>29</sup> Available at: <http://edhelpdesk.cayey.upr.edu/edportalmambo/index.php> .

**7. Focus on learning strategies**—This is not consistently practiced in Puerto Rico outside of the isolated efforts of individual teachers and tutoring centers like the Centro de Competencias Lingüísticas in General Studies at the UPR, Río Piedras. This is another element that can easily be added to pre- and in-service training.

**8. Clear criteria for final competence**—In almost every nation surveyed, there were clear criteria for competence evaluated in exit exams in order to graduate from high school and universities. While the public school system in Puerto Rico does test English skills through the Puerto Rican Academic Achievement Test,<sup>30</sup> graduation or grade advancement do not depend on passing it. The UPR requires two years of English for graduation but does not establish a clear and measurable criterion for final competence in the language.<sup>31</sup> As long as courses are passed, everybody's happy until the student goes on to the next educational or professional level and discovers the gaps in his/her preparation that limit future options.

**9. Mother tongue maintenance**—This is accomplished in Puerto Rico, much to the credit of the Puerto Rican people and educators, but in a semi-defensive manner. A lot of time is wasted debating the supposed threat represented by English. It would be far better to address the real issues behind falling test scores.

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<sup>30</sup>This test has been in function since 2003. Prior to that year, the island utilized the Prueba Puertorriqueña de Competencias Escolares. The latter was found to be inadequate under NCLB and was replaced with the current instrument.

<sup>31</sup>Even the newly reconceptualized Bachelor's degree at the UPR, Río Piedras does not operationalize the level of English proficiency required for exit.

**What can you do to help?**

If you really want to help foster English teaching in Puerto Rico, you need to commit yourself to becoming the best model you can be for our children by perfecting your own language skills to the maximum. This means reading extensively in English, traveling, watching movies and television in English, becoming a keen observer (not judge) of new words and patterns that arise in the language, and transmitting to your students the excitement that you get from the language. Bring in photos and souvenirs from your trips to English-speaking countries. Play English pop music in class. Have English-speaking friends or relatives stop by to visit and chat with your class in English. Make the language come alive for the kids.

You also need to constantly enhance your intellectual and pedagogical skills by taking every training opportunity that presents itself, pursuing advanced degrees whenever possible, learning from veteran teachers, and never becoming complacent or defeatist about what you do. Your attitudes (good, bad or indifferent) transmit themselves to your students and once forged in young brains are very difficult to undo. Another teacher along the way will thank you for the effort.

Finally, I'd like you to actively consider and apply models or solutions (like language awareness training) that come from places where the issues of multilingualism and language learning are treated matter-of-factly instead of with the hysteria so often seen in the U.S. Our students deserve a healthier outlook on the use of two languages in their lives.

**Conclusion**

In closing, my comments today have not been offered in order to impose foreign models in Puerto Rico, but rather to amplify our horizons and point to other possibilities that exist in the world. It is vital for Puerto Rican educators to develop a broader vision of the future communicative needs of their students. The teaching of English is not a problem specific to Puerto Rico. It is a matter that is being attended to all around the globe, and we can learn a lot from our colleagues in other countries. It's time to begin. Let it happen!

Thank you.

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