

Interview with Dr. Alicia Pousada, professor of linguistics at UPR, Río Piedras
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1) What is the difference between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), and what are the implications for bilingual education?

BICS and CALP are concepts introduced by James Cummins in 1979 to account for the variation in the amount of time that immigrant children need to acquire conversational fluency vs. grade-level academic proficiency in a second language. *BICS* involves the ability to utilize social formulae (greetings, polite requests, apologies, etc.) and to be able to ask and respond to simple questions regarding immediately available objects and actions. *CALP* involves the ability to discuss and/or write about academic content in the second language the way a native speaker would. The basic difference between BICS and CALP is the amount of contextualization of the communication. For BICS, the speaker relies on facial expressions, gestures, and intonations produced in interpersonal interactions, whereas for CALP, the speaker needs to react to oral or written linguistic features or background cultural understandings that are abstract or distanced from the immediate communicative event.

According to Cummins' research (1981, 1984), acquiring BICS takes between one and two years, while acquiring CALP takes approximately five years. When teachers fail to factor in the BICS/CALP distinction, the result can be an erroneous evaluation of the students and their premature mainstreaming into regular English content classes. The essential thrust of Cummins' research has been that teachers should not assume that students who are fluent in everyday spoken English are also proficient in academic language. Likewise, teachers should not automatically consider that an academically delayed non-native speaker is in need of special education, when actually all the student needs is a bit more time to develop CALP.

The BICS/CALP distinction has had a considerable effect upon both bilingual and monolingual school policies and teacher training in the U.S., Canada, and the United Kingdom and has been used to determine exit criteria for certain programs. Nevertheless, it remains somewhat controversial among language theoreticians, since there is no clear consensus as to how to measure language proficiency or exactly how it is linked to academic achievement.

2) What is meant by “subtractive bilingualism,” what factors lead to this phenomenon, and how can it best be avoided?

This is another term originating from Cummins’ research. He draws the distinction between *additive bilingualism* (in which the native language and culture continue to be developed and valued while the second language is added) and *subtractive bilingualism* (in which the native language is subtracted as the second language is added). Cummins’ research suggests that students working in an additive bilingual environment are more successful than those working in a subtractive environment.

In Puerto Rico, these terms need to be interpreted in light of the specific native and second languages of the students involved. For most native Spanish-speaking students, there is very little danger that their Spanish will be displaced by the English taught in school, even in schools which are predominately or exclusively in English, because of the pervasive nature of Spanish outside of the classroom. There is, however, some danger that they may not fully develop CALP in Spanish if the school program does not give special emphasis to developing Spanish language arts. For native English-speaking students (either U.S.-born or return migrant) who are studying in Puerto Rican schools where the medium of instruction is Spanish, there is also very little danger of subtractive bilingualism because of the high status that their English skills give them and the likelihood that English is the language of their household.

The students in Puerto Rico who are in greatest danger of subtractive bilingualism are foreign students (e.g. immigrants from Asia, Europe, or the Creole-speaking Caribbean islands). As they acquire either Spanish or English as their second language, they may lose their native language abilities unless their parents make efforts to develop the vernacular at home or via special after-school programs, videos, or trips to their country of origin. Puerto Rican teachers should indicate to such students that their languages and cultures are valuable and worthy of maintenance, and should try to incorporate to some extent the different cultural backgrounds of these students into the classroom.

The main point is to demonstrate to all students that learning a new language does not have to mean the loss of the native language. Speech repertoires are flexible and can easily tolerate additions. Most people in the world matter-of-factly use more than one language variety every day without undue stress, and there is no reason that Puerto Rican students should be any different in this regard. Recognizing the inherent intellectual and interpersonal value of knowing and functioning in more than one language and culture will go a long way toward making students feel powerful and effective.

3) What is the current state of bilingual education in the continental U.S.?

Government-funded bilingual education in the U.S. began in the 1960's and had its heyday in the late 1970's and early 1980's. The 1968 Bilingual Education Act (Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act), the 1974 Supreme Court *Lau v. Nichols* case, and the 1974 Equal Educational Opportunities Act were the legal keystones in protecting the rights of minority students to receive education in a language they could comprehend. At its height, bilingual education was maintenance-oriented and available to many students. At present, there are a variety of models, most of which are short-term and transitional in nature.

Current attitudes toward bilingual education in the U.S. are at best dismissive and at worst, negative. Beginning with the Reagan administration, opposition to bilingual education has increasingly worsened. Anti-bilingual education lobbying groups such as U.S. English, English Only, and English First have significantly affected popular opinion with slick advertising campaigns full of dire warnings. A number of states (e.g. California, Colorado, Florida) have passed English-only legislation and/or done away with bilingual programs, and concerns about undocumented immigrants have heightened the tensions and fed the anti-bilingual education fires. Carlos Ovando (2003) concludes that language ideologies in the U.S. have periodically shifted in response to historical events and that underlying all of them has been a general resentment of special treatment for minority groups.

Bilingual programs currently in existence (utilizing either federal or state funds) can be classified as follows:

1. *Structured immersion* (ESL instruction with no use of native language)
2. *Partial immersion* (ESL instruction with a fraction of the school day dedicated to native language instruction in order to quickly transition students to English)
3. *Transitional bilingual* (extensive native language instruction along with ESL, with mandatory exit into mainstream monolingual English classroom; early-exit programs mainstream after two years or by the end of grade 2; late-exit programs exit in grades 5 or 6)
4. *Maintenance or developmental bilingual* (extensive native language instruction and ESL, with students remaining in program even after they become proficient in English; goal is to develop balanced bilingual skills)
5. *Two-way immersion* (speakers of both languages are placed together in a bilingual classroom; the goal is for both language majority and language minority children to become bilingual and biliterate)

The current administration in Washington favors types 1 and 2. Types 3, 4, and 5 tend to rely on state or local funding more than federal funding.

4) To which countries should Puerto Rico look for a successful model of bilingual education?

Despite the moves to dismantle bilingual education in the U.S., there are still excellent, well-designed programs that can serve as models. Quality bilingual education programs have been shown to promote academic success while simultaneously creating bilingual children (August & Hakuta, 1997). Two-way programs in which language minority children and monolingual English speakers learn each other's languages side by side are very promising (Lindholm & Molina, 2000). The Punana Leo two-way bilingual preschools of Hawaii are particularly exciting. An excellent resource for identifying successful models is Robledo Montecel & Danini Córtez (2002). This article examines the characteristics of ten highly successful bilingual programs located in Texas, Oregon, Illinois, Utah, Florida, Massachusetts, California, New York, and Washington, DC.

Outside of the U.S., I would recommend looking at the French immersion programs in Canada, the bilingual schools of the Netherlands, and the Schola Europea (European Schools) of the European Union. All are highly successful and could contribute ideas of utility in Puerto Rico.

5) What are the most common myths concerning bilingualism and bilingual education in Puerto Rico that you would like to dispel?

I would personally love for everyone in Puerto Rico to absorb the following points, which I emphasize continually in all of my graduate and undergraduate classes at the University of Puerto Rico:

1. *Using two languages with a young child does not lead to confusion, schizophrenia, or madness.* When children acquire two languages simultaneously in early childhood, they view them as part of one large system. It's common to hear fused words like *galleta-cookie* in the early stages. However, within a short time, children learn to distinguish their two languages, particularly if each language is spoken by a different caretaker (the one language-one parent approach).
2. *Learning a second language does not retard a child academically.* While there may be some initial delay while the child acquires academic proficiency in a new language, it is more than compensated for by the long-term intellectual, interpersonal, and economic benefits of being bilingual.

3. *Alternating between two languages (code switching) is not a crime.* Code switching is a natural phenomenon found wherever there are languages in contact. Teachers and parents should not waste their time trying to eradicate code switching, but rather should instruct children regarding the situations in which code switching may not be appropriate.
4. *Learning English does not mean losing Spanish or Puerto Rican identity.* Adding English expands the child's worldview, allows the child access to global resources, and provides many opportunities for employment in the future. Maintaining Spanish and Puerto Rican culture at the same time assures the child's identity and connection to his/her community.

6) At what age is it recommended to begin teaching L2 English writing?

The Academia Puertorriqueña de la Lengua Española indicated in 1998 that the best course of action in Puerto Rico was for children to acquire literacy in their vernacular Spanish before beginning literacy learning in English. This is in keeping with the International Reading Association's 2001 position that literacy learning is easiest in a child's native language, since it builds upon children's strengths and connects the unfamiliar to the familiar to maximize learning efficiency. The literacy skills developed in the vernacular transfer over to the second language, especially in the case of languages like English and Spanish which share a writing system and have many cognate words. However, the IRA also maintains that families have the right to decide the language of initial literacy.

Note that oral English should be introduced before attempting to develop written English, since children need a basic vocabulary and a feel for grammatical structure before they can make sense of written language. Thus one possible curricular timetable for a Spanish-speaking child in Puerto Rico could look like this:

Grade	Skills
Pre-K	Development of oral skills and reading readiness in Spanish
K-1	Continuing elaboration of oral skills in Spanish Development of basic reading and writing in Spanish Introduction of oral English via games and songs (language awareness)
2	Continuing elaboration of written skills in Spanish Introduction of basic written English utilizing a contrastive approach to maximize transfer of skills from Spanish
3	Continuing elaboration of both Spanish and English oral & literate skills at their respective levels of development

7) In your opinion, what is the biggest obstacle to the acquisition of English in Puerto Rican schools?

A huge obstacle is the lack of well-trained and communicatively competent English teachers who comprehend the mixed feelings that Puerto Rican students have toward the English language and who can serve as appropriate role models for the development of bilingual identities among the students.

Another significant obstacle is the lack of locally-relevant teaching materials in English. It is vital that Puerto Rican teachers and researchers begin developing materials for teaching English that utilize themes and illustrations reflecting Puerto Rican realities.

8) In what ways might these obstacles be overcome?

Teacher training is key. Part of the problem is presently being addressed utilizing funding from the No Child Left Behind legislation to train and certify English teachers. The universities have a huge role to play in this effort, since the English teachers will only be as good as their training. There must be an active effort to recruit competent English speakers in TESL programs and give them a solid background in applied linguistics, so they are fully aware of the second language acquisition process. They should also receive training in basic English grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary and be rigorously tested to ensure that they are appropriate models for the children. A teacher who mispronounces or cannot produce irregular past tense verbs correctly causes great damage, since the children learn the language incorrectly and then fossilize their errors.

Producing locally-relevant teaching materials should be a priority among Puerto Rican educators and academics. There is no reason why Puerto Rican children should have to continue to use books intended for use among either monolingual English children or immigrant children in the United States. They are neither of these, and they require materials that reflect their special needs. For example, locally-produced texts could feature social domains that are typically associated with the use of English on the island, like the airport, hotels, tourist industry, return migrant communities, universities, professional offices, and military bases, as well as locations in the U.S. like Disney World and the Puerto Rican communities of East Harlem, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Orlando where many Island residents have family.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to chat with you regarding these key issues in bilingual education.

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