



Puerto Rico, School Language Policies

Puerto Rico, a Caribbean possession of the United States since 1898, has experienced numerous language policies throughout its history. The term *language policy* refers to the official designation of particular languages for educational or governmental functions. Although Puerto Ricans are a primarily Spanish-speaking population, they were obligated for 50 years to receive their education exclusively or partially in English, as part of an Americanization effort aimed at displacing their native language and integrating them, culturally and linguistically, into the United States. Since 1948, when the first Puerto Rican governor of the island was elected, the language of public education has been Spanish, with English as a mandatory school subject from early elementary school up to college graduation. An extensive private school system offers varying amounts of English-medium education, including English monolingual classes, completely bilingual instruction, and English solely as a required subject. There are also some model bilingual public school programs.

The Spanish language has a powerful symbolic significance for Puerto Ricans because it represents their ethnicity, or sense of belonging to the Hispanic world, as opposed to their official nationality as U.S. citizens. Despite all efforts to replace Spanish with English, the Puerto Rican people have remained fiercely loyal to their mother tongue. In the 2000 census, only 50% reported being able to speak English, which is popularly referred to as *el difícil* ("the difficult one"). The maintenance of Spanish in Puerto Rico is the result of various factors, among them the world status and extensive literature possessed by the Spanish language, the small geographic size and large population of Puerto Rico, the high level of Spanish literacy of its people, and the active efforts of political elites and intellectuals on the island to defend their native vernacular and resist the encroachment of English.

It is the opinion of numerous scholars that the failure of many Puerto Ricans to learn English is a form of resistance to U.S. cultural dominance. While there is a small but vocal minority of about 5% who advocate for total independence for Puerto Rico, most Puerto Ricans are divided evenly between those who favor Puerto Rico becoming a state and those who favor continuation of the current commonwealth status, known as *Estado Libre Asociado* ("free associated state"), with some increase in local autonomy. Regardless of party affiliation, however, there is unanimous support across party lines for the maintenance of Spanish and Puerto Rican culture.

This is not to say that there are no competent English speakers in Puerto Rico. There is a strong correlation between higher social class and knowledge of English, which is somewhat complicated by the existence of working-class return migrants from the mainland United States who are fluent speakers of nonstandard varieties of English. Competent English speakers can be found in banking, international business, the tourist industry, the professions, academia, and the military. Nor can it be said that Puerto Ricans do not wish to learn English. There is nearly unanimous support for individual bilingualism, in this case the learning of two languages by individuals to further their personal and employment goals, and English language institutes have a flourishing business on the island. However, societal bilingualism (the officially sanctioned use of two languages throughout a society) is a notion many Puerto Ricans are uneasy with.

Historical Background

The often-contradictory changes in language policy in Puerto Rico prior to 1948 were primarily the result of the conflict between the U.S.-appointed governors' desire to incorporate the island into the union and the desire of the Puerto Rican populace to maintain its distinctive identity. During the first 2 years following the end of the Spanish American War (in which Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines were ceded by Spain to the United States), the U.S. government took a callous attitude toward the Spanish of Puerto Rico, deeming it not worthy of maintenance. The openly expressed policy was eradication of Spanish in order to create allegiance to all things American.

After the 1900 Foraker Act established a civil government and created the Department of Public Instruction, 10 different commissioners of education experimented with seven different language policies (see Table 1 below). Until 1948, the federal government in Washington had ultimate control over educational policies in Puerto Rico, since the president of the United States directly appointed the commissioner of education and had the power to dismiss the holders of this office whenever they proved ineffective. In addition to

implementing language policies, commissioners also created incentives for learning English, including bringing in English teachers from the United States, obligating regular classroom teachers to pass tests in English, providing extra stipends for those who taught in English, and examining candidates for high school graduation in English. Most notable among these policies was the "Philippines plan" promoted by Roland Falkner, which consisted of special English training programs, summer institutes, and obligatory weekly English classes for Puerto Rican teachers; \$10 monthly raises to teachers qualified to teach in English; and annual teacher testing in English, with the threat of suspension or even loss of license for any who did not pass.

At each juncture, the pro-English measures met with rigorous protests on the part of teachers' associations, parents, the intelligentsia, and outside evaluators. Many of the commissioners resigned in the face of public outcry at their policies. Mariano Villaronga, on the other hand, was forced to resign in 1947 because his pro-Spanish views did not find favor in Washington; however, in 1948, when Luis Muñoz Marín became the first elected governor, Villaronga was reinstated and rapidly made Spanish the instructional language at all levels of schooling, with English as a special subject. His policy has remained in force to this day.

The variable school language policies did not exist in a social vacuum, but rather responded to or were influenced by laws and events at an insular and an international level. For example, in 1902, the Official

Table 1 Language of Instruction in Puerto Rican Public Schools, 1900-2006

<i>Years</i>	<i>Elementary School</i>	<i>Intermediate & High School</i>
1900-1903	Spanish	English
1903-1916	English	English
1916-1934	Gr. 1-4 Spanish Gr. 5 both Gr. 6-8 English	English
1934-1937	Spanish	English
1937-1942	Gr. 1-4 Spanish Gr. 5 both Gr. 6-8 English	English
1942-1948	Gr. 1-6 Spanish	Gr. 7-12 English
1948-2006	Spanish	Spanish

Source: Adapted from Torres González (2002).

Languages Act declared that in all insular governmental departments, courts, and public offices, English was to be treated as co-official with Spanish and translations and interpretations from one language to the other would be made when necessary to ensure that all parties could follow the proceedings. Spanish would continue as the language of municipal offices, courts, and the police force. While not aimed at the educational arena, the law provided a legal rationale for the inclusion of English in the local curriculum.

The periods of most active reaction against English-only language policies tended to coincide with the flourishing of groups that openly criticized the U.S. government and sought independence for Puerto Rico (e.g., the founding of the Free Federation of Workers, 1906; the Partido de Independencia, 1911; the first Socialist Party of Puerto Rico, 1920; and the Nationalist Party, led by Pedro Albizu Campos, 1922). Periods of severe unemployment, like the Great Depression of 1930, which crippled the economy of Puerto Rico, made insistence on English-only education for an impoverished Spanish-speaking population an impossibility. Commissioner José Padín's policy of utilizing Spanish as a medium of instruction through the eighth grade reflected this reality.

Teachers played a critical role in the protests against what was termed the "cultural colonization" of the island. For example, in 1911, the Puerto Rican Teachers Association petitioned Commissioner Edward M. Bainter to implement Spanish as the teaching medium in the first grade, with content courses divided between Spanish and English up to the eighth grade. English would continue as the language of instruction in all high schools. Rural schools would be exempt from the policy due to their lack of resources and would teach in Spanish only. As a result of the teachers' protests, the annual English exams for teachers were abolished, and the Puerto Rican Legislature created the special post of Supervisor General of Spanish to oversee the teaching of Spanish in the public schools and ensure that Puerto Rican children continued to learn their vernacular in school.

Similarly, in the early 1920s, teachers' protests against Commissioner Juan B. Huyke's policies forced the Puerto Rico legislature to request a study of the school system. The famous Columbia Study of 1925 to

1926 recommended the use of Spanish as the medium of instruction until the seventh grade. Huyke called this "the suppression of English," since he felt that bilingualism could most easily be achieved during early childhood. However, many well-known Puerto Ricans denounced the imposition of English, and Huyke resigned amidst public outrage.

In 1943, on the eve of the U.S. entry into World War II, the U.S. Senate's "Chavez Committee" denounced the fact that despite 45 years of U.S. rule, Puerto Ricans were still limited in English skills, and accordingly, Commissioner Gallardo was formally reprimanded. However, as more and more Puerto Ricans surpassed an elementary school education and were enrolled in intermediate and high school programs (where instruction was in English), public resistance to teaching exclusively in English again mounted. In 1946, a bill was presented in the Puerto Rican Assembly to make Spanish the medium of instruction at all levels, with special attention to the teaching of English. This was vetoed by interim Governor Manuel A. Pérez. The bill was then sent to President Harry S Truman to see whether he would override the governor's veto, but it was retained by the Department of the Interior until the deadline for approval had passed. A federal lawsuit to obligate the passing of the bill was rejected by the U.S. Supreme Court. Nevertheless, the protests continued, and Gallardo finally resigned in 1946.

Recent Developments

Despite the stability of the educational language policy since 1948, language continues to be a bone of contention in Puerto Rico, particularly among politicians. In 1991, for example, the Official Language Act of 1902, which gave co-official status to both English and Spanish, was revoked by the Partido Popular Democrático (Pro-Commonwealth Party) in what many observers saw as a political ploy to gain votes. The new law (Law No. 4) declared Spanish to be the sole official language, although it recognized the importance of English on the island and did not alter the school language policy. This move prompted the government of Spain to award Puerto Rico with a medal for its defense of the Spanish language, and supporters of the new law exulted in this symbolic triumph. However, in January of 1993, when the Partido Nuevo Progresista (statehood party) came back into power, Governor Pedro Rosselló, fulfilling a campaign promise to return English to its original status so as to facilitate the eventual acceptance of Puerto Rico as a state, promptly revoked the "Spanish-only" law and signed into effect Law No. 1, which essentially conformed to the stipulations of the original 1902 law. In 2003, the Commission of Education, Science, and Culture of the Puerto Rican Senate produced a report on language in Puerto Rico, which concludes that it is precisely this sort of politicization of the conflict over bilingualism that has led to language learning problems among Puerto Rican children.

Given the demands of the "information age," parents and educators are deeply concerned about the difficulties that many Puerto Rican children have with both English and Spanish. To this end, the Department of Public Instruction (now Education) has experimented with various programs to improve the language mastery of children in public schools, including bilingual programs for return migrant students and a Project to Create the Bilingual Citizen, which featured intensive summer English camps and the teaching of math and science in English in certain schools. There has been considerable debate since the early 1980s regarding the right time to start English instruction. The Academia Puertorriqueña de la Lengua Española (Puerto Rican Spanish Language Academy) analyzed the situation in 1998 and recommended the teaching of literacy in the mother tongue before the teaching of English. In 2003, a "curricular framework" for English was developed by the Department of Education; however, by 2007, implementation was not yet complete. Shortly after, funds from the No Child Left Behind legislation were utilized to train and certify all English teachers in Puerto Rico and improve other critical aspects of the teaching process, such as instructional materials and school facilities.

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[Further Readings](#)

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