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Angela L. Carrasquillo
Richard E. Baecher
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CHAPTER 6

Achieving Linguistic and Communicative Competence in Two Speech Communities: The Puerto Rican Return Migrant Student

Alicia Pousada
University of Puerto Rico

The Puerto Rican people have been characterized as a "divided nation" due to the fact that almost as many Puerto Ricans live off the island as on it. The island's unique political and economic relationship with the United States has made migration between the two an expected part of the lives of many Puerto Ricans (Bonilla & Colón Jordan, 1979; Colón Reyes, 1984).

Return migrant students constitute a significant portion of the school population in Puerto Rico. In 1984, Rivera Medina calculated that at least 10 percent of the public school enrollment had received instruction in the United States. The 1987 student census carried out by the Bilingual Education Program at the then Department of Public Instruction identified more than 13,000 students from the United States who had entered the Puerto Rican public schools during the previous three years alone.

Return Migrant Students

Return migrant students have a difficult task before them. With meager assistance from the school system, they are expected to develop the standard Spanish skills necessary to complete their education. At

the same time, they are expected to learn the myriad of cultural details required for a comfortable adaptation to the norms of the school and their island-born peers. In technical terms, what they must do is simultaneously develop linguistic competence (i.e. the mastery of the phonological, grammatical and semantic features of a linguistic code) and communicative competence (i.e., the ability to use the code appropriately in a given social setting). The latter is critical because language is not merely a string of utterances. It is a communication system requiring knowledge of socially shared meanings, cultural symbols and referents, plus comprehension of the world view of its speakers.

Both linguistic and communicative competence must be developed according to the norms of the new speech community in which they find themselves. By speech community is meant that group of speakers who share a common linguistic code and the norms for its appropriate use. In the United States, these students were members of one speech community, and in Puerto Rico, they are attempting to become members of another speech community The linguistic code and norms of the two often conflict, and this conflict can cause a great deal of anguish for the students.

Return migrant students who were born on the Island and then moved to the United States have already survived the painful process of adjusting to the confusing demands of a new school system and society. Some received English as a second language (ESL) or bilingual education assistance; however, most tend to prefer English and may have underdeveloped or fossilized language skills in academic Spanish. Those born and raised in the United States are invariably English dominant or possibly monolingual. While exposed to Spanish in their homes and communities (if they lived in urban centers), these students generally have not participated in bilingual programs. Unless their parents made a special effort to maintain Spanish in the home, few have had the opportunity to acquire literate skills in Spanish.

To use Cummins' (1984) terminology, return migrant students may possess basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) but do not usually possess cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP). And there lies a central problem for the schools in Puerto Rico. BICS are acquired quickly within 1-3 years with little or no formal schooling; CALP may take as long as 5-7 years to develop and

generally takes place in school settings.

Non-standard Varieties of Return Migrant Students

To complicate the issue even further, most return migrant students utilize non-standard language varieties which are frowned upon in the schools, both in the United States and in Puerto Rico. Let us examine some of these varieties in the following paragraphs.

The English spoken by most return migrant students is heavily influenced by the vernacular of United States African-Americans, and working-class whites. Typical structural features include: (a) deletion of final /t/ /d/, (b) pronunciation of voiced th as d, (c) deletion and hypercorrect insertion of /s/ on verbs and nouns, (d) use of invariant be for continuous action, (e) deletion of be as main verb, (f) variable subject/verb agreement, (g) use of resumptive pronouns, (h) multiple negation, and (i) non-standard lexical choices.

The Spanish of these students, on the other hand, is typically that of the working class of Puerto Rico, and it may sound like the speech of a generation or two back. (This is typical of immigrant communities, where the original forms are preserved long after the speech community of origin has changed its ways of speaking.) The most striking structural features include: (a) variable deletion, aspiration, or nasalization of syllable-final /s/ and /n/ in nouns and verbs, (b) alternation of /r/ and /l/ in consonant clusters and after vowels, (c) velarization of /r/ in initial position, (d) redundant marking of subject pronouns, and (e) number agreement of haber and hacer in impersonal constructions.

These features should not surprise anyone in Puerto Rico, since they are common in the speech of many island-born students. However, they may present problems in the acquisition of standard, written Spanish.

In addition, the Spanish of return migrant students is characterized by features more closely associated with their reality as learners in a new speech community. These include: (a) invariant use of tú in addressing speakers, (b) incomplete mastery of the subjunctive, (c) limited academic vocabulary, (d) immature syntactic structure, (e) partial mastery of the non-verbal communication system (Nine- Curt 1976), and (f) extensive use of English loanwords or code-switches

into English.

This last characteristic merits further discussion. *Loanwords* are what people usually think of when they refer to "Spanglish". They consist primarily of nouns (although it is also possible to borrow verbs or adjectives) from one language which have been completely or partially integrated into the phonology and morphology of another language. Loanwords are common features of many languages in the world. In fact, the English language owes much of its huge vocabulary to the importation of foreign words.

Code-switching, on the other hand, is more complicated. It represents the juxtaposition of elements from one language to another within the same stretch of discourse. Unlike loanwords, code-switches preserve the structural integrity of the two languages, with switches occurring in places where they do not disturb the syntactic flow. Code-switching is extremely common in Puerto Rican communities in the United States and is accepted there by many speakers as a normal means of communication, although teachers there (as well as in Puerto Rico) may voice opinions to the contrary. Traditionally, code-switching was viewed as evidence of imperfect learning, but recent work indicates that the most frequent and prolific code-switchers are indeed those individuals who possess the greatest skills in both languages (Poplack 1980; Zentella, 1981). Some educational program planners like Jacobson (1990) even advocate the deliberate use of code-switching in instruction.

Code-switches can be divided into several types. These are: (a) single noun switches, (b) tag switches, (c) intra-sentential code-switches, and (d) sentential code-switches. Children typically begin with tag and single noun switches and develop proficiency in the more complex types as they grow older and gain more experience with the communicative norms of their community and the structural elements of the two codes. Adults who are nearly monolingual and wish to demonstrate ethnic solidarity or show off growing proficiency in their second language utilize all four types and excel particularly in intra-sentential switches. Thus, switching can be a diagnostic of increasing proficiency rather than a sign of deficiency as many teachers have been taught to think.

Attitudes

While language is far from being the only problem facing these youths in their adjustment to the Island (Ramos Perea, 1972), it is clearly an important factor. It is through language that we understand, are understood, and establish social networks. Knowing the language of a place is indispensable in the process of coping and adjusting to that place. Unfortunately, teachers are often unaware of the complex nature of the task involved in learning to be linguistically and communicatively competent in a new speech community. They may inadvertently pass judgment on students, have unrealistic expectations of their progress, or outrightly reject them as not being "real" Puerto Ricans. Kavetsky (1978) found that Puerto Rican teachers had stereotyped returned migrants as low-achieving, trouble-making, aggressive, undisciplined, disrespectful, lacking identity, and not knowing either English or Spanish. One would hope that 15 years later these attitudes would have changed, but my sources among the University of Puerto Rico return migrant population tell me that these accusations are still altogether too common.

The students are very sensitive to such treatment. Since they also come to the situation with their own attitudes toward the Spanish language, matters can quickly deteriorate. Return migrant students often complain that they were treated like "spics" in the United States and then arrived in Puerto Rico only to find themselves categorized as "gringos". They feel, as Carrasquillo and Carrasquillo (1979) state, "unwelcomed in two worlds".

Since they were usually not consulted before being forced to leave the United States, the return migrant students are often resentful. They compare the school facilities to those they enjoyed in the United States and often conclude that the Puerto Rican schools are inferior, old-fashioned, or at best limited in offerings. They see their Island-born peers (or "regulares", as they term them) as "hicky" and unsophisticated. They hate wearing uniforms. Spanish class is often a torture for them, matched only by English class where they are often bored because they are more fluent in English than their teachers, or frustrated because their teachers insist on standard English forms which are not part of their verbal repertoire. They report having to

prepare more for class, feeling ill at ease, and having difficulty paying attention (Curran, 1984).

The picture is not all that grim, however. As Academic Counselor for the English Department in Humanities at the University of Puerto Rico in Rio Piedras, I have the opportunity to speak with return migrant students every semester. (Many of them become English majors precisely because they feel more comfortable with English). They report that often an individual teacher would go out of his or her way to make them feel at home and to help them figure out the Puerto Rican system. Usually this was an English teacher, but many times, an understanding Spanish teacher or content area teacher would take the time to give special tutoring or treat them with compassion. Teachers with migratory experience themselves are frequently signaled by students as being particularly open and approachable.

What Can the Schools Do?

Obviously, we cannot require that every teacher in the system have personal experience in the migratory process in order to deal successfully with return migrant students. Nor can we rely on bilingual schools here in Puerto Rico to take care of the problem, given that for the most part, they are now defunct. However, there are understandings that can be incorporated into educational plans and reforms to improve the overall situation for these young people in our schools, via workshops, in-service training, and curricular modification.

Perhaps the most important lesson is the understanding that before arriving in Puerto Rico, these children had already developed the linguistic and communicative competence necessary for survival in their particular speech communities in the United States. What is needed now is not to deplore and deny what they bring with them, but rather to add to it and build upon it. This means providing classes or tutoring sessions for Native Speakers of English in which bidialectalism becomes a goal, rather than outright rejection of non-standard features. It means preserving the English proficiency of these students which is a valuable resource for them and for the Island. It also means celebrating the linguistic heterogeneity created by the

presence of return migrant students in the class, rather than imposing total conformity. By the same token, such an outlook requires the provision of classes or tutoring in Spanish as a second language so that return migrants can develop or resuscitate Spanish skills in a low pressure environment without fear of being laughed at by their Island-raised peers.

Judgments regarding "lack of language" or "lack of cultural identity" are not productive and only serve to inflame conflicts. They have no place in our schools. The sensitive teacher accepts the student as an individual who (like all of us) possesses specific skills and deficiencies. The teacher's goal is to help the student gain access to the full continuum of bilingual abilities and also develop a sense of when it is appropriate to use specific features or varieties to accomplish particular communicative tasks. This means gently explaining the rules of the new cultural environment and how "to play the game" successfully. It means providing students with a sociolinguistic "wardrobe" whose "garments" can be put on and taken off as required.

Finally, the wall between "los de allá" and "los de aquí" has to be chipped away so that it does not continue to poison relationships within and without the school. This means developing a consciousness of "puertorriqueñidad" that goes beyond geographic frontiers and admits variable manifestations of cultural identity that may not necessarily be bound to a single language. It also means seeing the presence of return migrant students in our schools as an enriching experience for all involved.

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