

Teaching English in Puerto Rico without endangering Spanish²

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1.0 Introduction

In this paper, I explore key issues relevant to the language teaching controversy in Puerto Rico and suggest ways in which educators can build up children's language repertoires in both languages so that Spanish and English complement rather than conflict with each other.

2.0 The multilingual norm

Multilingualism is the global norm. According to Crystal (1997, p. 14), approximately two-thirds of the world's children are raised in multilingual environments. Learning additional languages can be accomplished without displacing the mother tongue (MT). A quick look at Finland, Switzerland, India, and Singapore reveals how multilingual populations can maintain their vernaculars along with another national or official language plus languages of wider use.

In Finland, Finnish and Swedish are both national languages (NL), and Saami (Laplandish) is a protected indigenous language. Finnish and Swedish are languages of instruction at all educational levels, and all Finnish citizens are expected to master both. All Finnish children also study at least one modern foreign language (usually English). Instruction in the first FL begins in grades 1-3 and continues for at least 7 years. Teaching of the second NL begins in grade 7, if the student has not voluntarily studied it earlier, and continues for at least 3 years (Finnish National Board of Education, 2005, p. 39).

In Switzerland, language policy is territorially-based: (1) French along the French border, (2) German along the German, and (3) Romansch and (4) Italian along the Italian. For most purposes, life in a particular region is carried out monolingually (Harlow, R. 2005). Approximately

64% of the Swiss speak German in standard or dialectal form, 19% speak French, 8% speak Italian, and less than 1% speak Romansch (Grin, 1998, p 1). The situation (relatively stable for centuries) has recently experienced pressure from English, and many Swiss now learn English as the first and perhaps only FL and neglect the acquisition of another NL. Nevertheless, Switzerland's language policy is notable for the peaceful coexistence that exists among linguistically diverse communities.

In contrast, India has 438 languages (Lewis, 2009). It was originally divided during British rule into 24 States and 8 Union Territories which cut across ethnic, religious, and social lines and caused great conflict. After modern reorganization, each state has at least one dominant linguistic group and several minority languages (Mallikarjun, 2004a). Hindi and English function as NLs. Children learn their local community language, and then do their studies in the official state language, with Hindi and English added as they progress through the grades. Being trilingual or quadrilingual is a normal state of affairs for an educated person in India (Mallikarjun, 2004b).

Singapore is a tiny, former British possession populated by ethnic groups from China, Malaysia, and India. It is a highly multilingual society with an important role in international trade and banking. There are four official languages: English, Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil. Other Chinese and Indian languages are also spoken. Since 1990, a gradual language shift toward increased use of Mandarin and English as home languages and decreased use of other languages has taken place (Lee Eu Fah, 2009, Singapore Census 2010). English is the language of instruction in all government schools, and the MT or "ethnic language" (Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil) is used for imparting moral education and as a "second language" at all levels. Most Singaporeans are bilingual in English and one of the other three official languages. This situation was arrived at after considerable government language planning.

We have seen briefly how four highly multilingual societies function. Each has elements that we should consider in planning language policy in Puerto Rico. Now let us turn to the commonalities and differences between L1 and L2 acquisition.

3.0 Commonalities and differences between L1 and L2 acquisition

Both L1 and L2 acquisition are gradual and cumulative, are motivated by the need to communicate, require meaningful input, proceed at the learner's pace, and utilize strategies of over-generalization, regularization, and pattern identification.

However, in L1 acquisition, the infant has little knowledge of the world, limited mental capacity, a short memory, and no literate skills. Acquisition occurs unconsciously within the family with little teaching involved. Errors are tolerated and even encouraged. All phonological systems are accessible, and infants regularly produce a wide range of sounds and later settle upon those that are part of the local phonological repertoire.

In L2 acquisition, much depends on the learner's age. When L2 is acquired along with L1 in simultaneous acquisition or "bilingual first language acquisition" (Grosjean, 2010), the process is virtually identical to L1 acquisition, the main difference being access to two different grammars and lexicons. When L2 acquisition occurs in adolescence or adulthood, the learner is more experienced, knows how languages work, can abstract patterns, and has an extended memory. Acquisition often occurs in a school setting through direct instruction.

Ideally, all children would be exposed to two or more languages at home from infancy. Bilingual first language acquisition has many benefits. The child acquires two phonologies natively and does not have an "accent" in either language. Recent neuroradiological studies by Dr. Joy Hirsh at

Columbia University indicate that when children acquire both languages together in infancy, they are stored in the same place in the brain (Language Bulletin, 2012). Bilingual children regularly outperform monolingual children in interpretation of ambiguous stimuli, cognitive flexibility (or divergent thinking), and metalinguistic awareness (Bialystok, 2001).

In Puerto Rico, bilingual first language acquisition is generally only possible for children whose primary caretakers speak languages other than Spanish and return migrant children who grew up speaking Spanish and English in the U.S. For them, bilingual education makes the most sense, since they are equipped from the outset with skills that would be a pity to waste.

For the great majority of Puerto Rican children, learning English takes place in school. However, those who attend bilingual pre-schools have an advantage over those who do not. If the Department of Education is truly serious about creating a bilingual population, it should look carefully at the pre-schools where linguistic skills are established. It should also consider cable TV and closed-caption DVDs as learning tools, since the present generation is heavily influenced by the English heard via these audiovisual media.

Let us now consider establishing literacy in L1 before teaching literacy in L2.

4.0 Establishing literacy in L1 before teaching literacy in L2

UNESCO's 1953 guidelines state: "Mother tongue instruction is essential for initial instruction and literacy and should be extended to as late a stage in education as possible." (UNESCO, 1953, p. 68) Its 2003 Education Position Paper declares that:

Studies have shown that, in many cases, instruction in the mother tongue is beneficial to language competencies in the first language,

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achievement in other subject areas, and second language learning. (UNESCO, 2003a, p. 15)

The UNESCO bulletin *Education Today* additionally asserts that:

Years of research have shown that children who begin their education in their mother tongue make a better start, and continue to perform better, than those for whom school starts with a new language. The same applies to adults seeking to become literate. (UNESCO, 2003b, p. 1)

On the other hand, we also know that L2 instruction should be initiated as early as material, social, and educational conditions permit so as to favor the likelihood of a positive, enjoyable, and non-threatening learning experience (Singleton 1992). Thus the issue becomes one of balancing L1 and L2 development.

Because of serious economic limitations, public schools in Puerto Rico are often characterized by deficient infrastructure, lack of well-trained and consistent staffing, and lack of teaching materials. Given this reality, it makes sense to devote resources to providing a higher quality education in Spanish. A good foundation in Spanish develops the content knowledge and language awareness needed to make input in English meaningful. In addition, since the concept of "literacy" is only acquired once and then generalized to other languages, developing strong literacy skills in Spanish helps to jumpstart the process of acquiring literacy skills in English. The similarity in alphabets, physical orientation of text, and overall literacy conventions further insure a transfer of literacy skills from Spanish to English.

This leads us to a consideration of the role of language arts in the curriculum.

5.0 Language arts as foundation of curriculum

Language Arts (LA) include oral communication, phonics and fluency, vocabulary, grammar and written conventions, reading

comprehension, and writing. LA must be given curricular priority because they are the basis for all other learning. The entire process of pre-university education is a linguistic process in which students acquire the vocabulary and concepts which permit abstract thinking, academic discourse, and analysis. Without language, the content associated with other school subjects cannot be imparted.

Of particular importance (and often ignored in LA curricula) are certain sociolinguistic issues I presented back in 1996 in a paper titled "New routes to fostering bilingualism: Developing language awareness among the Puerto Rican people," namely:

1. perception of language as a system of human communication
2. recognition of linguistic resources and their functions in different communities
3. awareness of the role of context in communication
4. appreciation of language variation both locally and world-wide
5. notions of standard language and norms and the limitations of these
6. language comparison and contrastive analysis as a learning aid
7. the history and contemporary significance of Spanish, English, and other languages

(Pousada, 1996, p. 25)

It should be noted that these language awareness skills must be developed in both Spanish and English if we are to take seriously the task of creating bilingual citizens in Puerto Rico.

Let us now consider the relative status of Spanish and English world-wide.

6.0 Two world languages in Puerto Rico

A *world language* is spoken internationally, has many L1 and L2 language speakers, is broadly distributed geographically, and is heavily represented in international organizations. By all

these criteria, Spanish is a world class language with about 358 million L1 users, another 95 million L2 users (Lewis, 2009), and an extensive presence globally. It is the official language in twenty countries and spoken elsewhere as L2 or L3. It is also one of the six official languages of the United Nations.

I would like to state here clearly my firm conviction that Spanish in Puerto Rico has nothing to fear from English, provided that the people of Puerto Rico continue to teach it to their children at home and make sure their schools approach Spanish as the dynamic and ever-changing treasure that it is instead of preserving it as a museum piece, which is the surest way to turn children away from a language. Arguments against bilingual education based upon the notion of “threat” are groundless. We do not need to go into “red alert” simply because we are teaching English. However, bilingual education programs need to be well-thought out, properly staffed with highly competent teachers, and stocked with appropriate, culturally relevant materials and modern technology. I leave it to the reader to decide whether the current bilingual project in Puerto Rico meets these criteria.

And this leads us inexorably to the question of politics.

7.0 The politicization of bilingualism in Puerto Rico

While all political parties in Puerto Rico acknowledge the importance of learning English and support Spanish maintenance, there are differences in public policy. Promoting English in the schools simultaneously with a status plebiscite lent support to the incumbent administration’s goal of making PR the 51st state, and one may be forgiven for thinking that the hastily organized

project was inspired more by ideology than pedagogy. This perception is confirmed by a post-election salutation by Mauro E. Mujica, Chairman of U.S. English, voice of the English-only movement, in an article subtitled “English is the next step to statehood”:

Historically, when the United States has considered admitting a state with a large non-English speaking population, such territories first had to concede to language-related conditions. In Puerto Rico, more than 2.7 million residents, or 80 percent of the population, are considered limited English proficient. Seventy-one percent of households are considered linguistically isolated [my emphasis], meaning no one aged 14 and older speaks English very well. With a clear non-English speaking majority, Puerto Rico should expect to be no different when it comes to language requirements prior to statehood consideration.

In order to ensure that Puerto Rico would work seamlessly with the other 50 states, the territory should prepare to function as an English-speaking state. Without English proficiency, a resident of the United States is not only unable to participate fully in the democratic process, but they are also less likely to achieve the social and economic success for which our nation is known. The United States cannot, and should not, accept a state in which a majority of citizens are unable to speak the common language in this country: English.”

(U.S. English to Puerto Rico, 2012)

Now that the electoral tables have turned again, it remains to be seen what the new governor

will do in terms of school language policy. Will the baby be tossed out with the bathwater? Will it be "borrón y cuenta nueva"? and back to the drawing board?

8.0 Concrete solutions to the impasse

I offer the following recommendations in order to depoliticize the language debate in Puerto Rico and base policies on the inherently positive aspects of knowing more than one language rather than on the vicissitudes of partisan politics.

- Treat both Spanish and English as living, breathing organisms that must be nourished and allowed to develop naturally
- Avoid placing the two languages in competition by assigning prestigious functions to one and not the other.
- Foment positive attitudes toward both languages so that children feel pride in each.
- Teach children to read and write in Spanish first, since it has greater symbol-to-sound correspondence. Later, when written English is introduced, they will already have the notion of "sounding out words" and can begin to process the inconsistencies of English spelling.
- Focus on play, art, and physical movement in the early grade English classes so the children begin to savor the sound of the language and view it as fun.
- Build oral English skills first and then add written skills.
- Help children become aware of language structure and function in both Spanish and English, so they can see the commonalities and differences in their two languages. This will open them to later acquisition of additional languages.
- Encourage older children to acquire disciplined language study habits, to use

dictionaries independently, and to be aware of their own learning styles and limitations.

- Expand the literature presented in the public schools to include the creative prose and poetry of the Anglophone Caribbean, so that Puerto Rican children can understand that English is not the sole property of the U.S.
- Utilize teaching materials created here in Puerto Rico, so that children can learn both English and Spanish in culturally relevant ways.

9.0 Conclusion

I hope that I have given the reader food for thought and that some of these ideas become part of the educational policies of the Puerto Rican educational system that teachers are charged with implementing.

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Thirty teachers from the Department of Education from the Ponce School District attended the professional development session: "The 3R's in Teaching: Reflecting, Re-examining, and Re-invigorating yourself." The session was presented by Prof. Edward Torres, 2012 Southern Chapter President and 2013 PRTESOL Vice-president.

