

FOMENTING BILINGUALISM THROUGH LANGUAGE AWARENESS¹

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The project of making Puerto Ricans "bilingual" has been in progress for more than a century (Pousada, 1999). Nevertheless, the collective learning of English has lagged, and individual success has varied considerably depending on the social circumstances and motivation of the learner. Various researchers (Giroux, 1983; Resnick, 1993; Medina, 1994) have pointed out how language imposition may prompt an ethnic group to develop an unconscious and universalized imperative against learning that language. In short, Puerto Ricans have resisted learning English as a means of retaining their native language and culture, which they consider to be endangered by the political and economic dominance of the United States.

According to Resnick's (1993) analysis of the "motivated failure" of Puerto Ricans to learn English, Puerto Rican society has correctly surmised that language spread may result in language shift and terminate in language loss, a well-documented pattern world-wide. Puerto Ricans have slowed the spread of English by limiting its usage in the home, "where natural rather than academic bilingualism could have developed" (p. 269). However, the growing presence of cable TV on the island (often mentioned by competent bilinguals as a major factor in their English acquisition) may weaken the success of that strategy in the future (Flores-Caraballo, 1991).

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Puerto Rico is distinct from other countries such as Singapore, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and India where English has been successfully implanted. Those countries are linguistically very heterogeneous and have acquired a local variety of English for diplomatic, commercial, and technological communication among diverse populations. For them, English is an ethnically neutral language that does not threaten their nationality and is utilized primarily as a *lingua franca* for pragmatic purposes. In contrast, in Puerto Rico, because of its historical domination by the United States, planning for improving English learning is often viewed with suspicion as an attempt to unseat Spanish which is the native language of almost all residents on the island, and problems in Spanish proficiency are often attributed to the pernicious influence of English (Pousada 1996).

How, then, do we English teachers deal with this situation? First of all, we need to school ourselves thoroughly regarding the complex history and current status of the language debate on the island, so we are not preaching in an information vacuum. We can bring our students into the process by sharing and discussing with them newspaper articles, letters to the editor, and even cartoons dealing with the learning or employment of English in Puerto Rico.

Second, we must address the negative motivation and ambivalence of our students with respect to the English language. This means that we have to fully recognize the ideological and attitudinal baggage which burdens English and discuss it openly with our students. If we engage them in critical analysis of their

own feelings and probe for the source of these attitudes, we can help them get past the negativity and create a basis for positive learning experiences.

Third, as competent English speakers, we must serve as models of successful bilingual and bicultural identity formation. This means honing our own sociolinguistic skills in English through extensive reading, movie viewing, music listening, and traveling, so that our communicative competence is beyond reproach. It also means actively applying those skills in the classroom, despite student pressure to not stray out of their “comfort zone.” Furthermore, it entails sharing with students our experiences of the personal benefits derived from knowing English, as well as the sometimes negative reactions of other Puerto Ricans (including fellow classmates) to English and ways of gracefully coping with such reactions.

Last of all, and perhaps most important, is how we deal with Spanish. Spanish has powerful symbolic value for Puerto Ricans since it embodies both national identity and connection to the rest of the Hispanic world. We must remind our students that Spanish is not subservient to English, since both are rich, mature, standardized languages of wider communication through which modern scientific and technological knowledge and world-class literature are expressed (Strauch, 1992). As language teachers, we should celebrate Spanish while we add English to our students’ repertoire. If they feel proud and secure about their native vernacular, then English will not be seen as a menace to their personal or cultural identity. We should also seek out ways to collaborate with

our counterparts in the Spanish department in order to develop generic competencies in written and oral communication.

All of the above call for the inclusion of language awareness in the curriculum (Trim 1992). As I wrote in *PRTESOLGram* back in 1997, songs, poetry, and games can be used to sensitize students to all languages in the early elementary grades. In the upper elementary grades, they can observe their own native language and become familiar with a second language. At the secondary level, they can move up to a more explicit and systematic knowledge of their first two languages and thus facilitate the acquisition of a third in high school or college.

A language awareness curriculum that would benefit both English and Spanish teaching could include activities that help students understand the nature of human language and its many functions in daily life, appreciate the different ways of speaking that exist both locally and world-wide, comprehend the differences between standard and non-standard forms, make meaningful comparisons between the structures of Spanish and English, and recognize (without mocking) the ways in which one language may influence another.

Students can be asked to bring in examples of English used in Spanish advertisements or identify Spanish loanwords like *canyon*, *sierra*, *lasso*, and *mesa* in English texts. They can be required to keep track of their vocabulary growth in both languages and come up with strategies for dealing with new words. They can read the same story or poem in the two languages on facing pages and learn about the difficulties and subtleties of translation first-hand.

Reading articles from *The San Juan Star* in both English and Spanish is another way to go. Students can also be taught to correct their own production in each language and note possible cross-linguistic influences (e.g. doing error analysis of “Voy a *aplicar para* el campamento de verano.” or “I *have* 10 years.) They can watch a TV program in English on cable and compare it to the dubbed Spanish version on local TV, or they can do the same with a DVD of a popular movie. Another very productive technique utilized with success at the UPR is bilingual chatting with native English speakers in the United States who are learning Spanish (Pousada, 2006).

No matter which technique is used, it is absolutely vital that students not be swamped with grammatical categories and technical terms too early in the game. Explicit grammar instruction is best left for high school. We want to cultivate a love of language and an intuitive sense of the patterning of forms and functions. Students should leave both their Spanish and English classes excited and desirous of learning more, not bored or frightened. As Hawkins (1987: 5) put it, “We are seeking to light fires of curiosity about the central human characteristic of language which will blaze throughout our pupils' lives.” If we are able to accomplish this, then their anxiety about bilingualism will vanish, and they will be able to apply their abilities in both English and Spanish to further their own personal goals and those of their island.

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