

# **NEW ROUTES TO FOSTERING BILINGUALISM: DEVELOPING LANGUAGE AWARENESS AMONG THE PUERTO RICAN PEOPLE**

Dr. Alicia Pousada  
University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras

[Published in: Fiet, L., Pousada, A., and Haiman, A. (eds.). (1996). *Rethinking English in Puerto Rico*. Rio Piedras, PR: University of Puerto Rico, 21-27. Condensed version appeared in 1997 in *PRTESOL-Gram 24 (2)*, 1, 3.]

## **ABSTRACT**

Bilingualism is a highly controversial topic in Puerto Rico. The conflict between English as a global language and Spanish as the national vernacular result in overt popular support for bilingualism and covert popular resistance to English acquisition. Due to the intimate relationship between the language issue and the struggles around the island's political status, the very notion of language planning or "legislating" language use is repugnant to many Puerto Ricans. Recent work in developing Language Awareness may provide a solution. The present paper explores the insights of this new field and its possible implications for Puerto Rico.

## **Introduction**

Bilingualism continues to be controversial in Puerto Rico where the conflicting demands of English as global language and Spanish as national vernacular result in overt popular support for bilingualism and covert popular resistance to English acquisition. Language planning could help overcome this impasse (see Pousada 1989, 1996); however, due to the links between the language issue and the struggles around political status, the idea of "legislating" language is repugnant to many Puerto Ricans. Recent work dedicated to the development of Language Awareness may pave the way to a solution. The present paper explores the insights of this relatively new field and its possible implications for Puerto Rico.

## **What is Language Awareness?**

Language Awareness refers to explicit knowledge about and sensitivity to language issues. Promoters of Language Awareness believe that there are societal benefits to developing conscious understanding of how language is structured, used, and acquired, as well as learning about attitudes and their effect upon interpersonal interaction, work relations, professional activities, community life, and family socialization practices.

In recent years, there has been a boom in Language Awareness research, particularly in Western Europe. In the United States, some initial consciousness-raising has occurred in terms of public recognition of the linguistic underpinnings of such ills as racism, sexism, and ageism and the linguistic and semantic manipulation present in commercial messages. However, Language Awareness as an organized field of inquiry and action is still in its infancy.

To better understand this field, a bit of history is in order.

### **Development of the Field of Language Awareness**

In 1984, E.W. Hawkins published a book titled *Awareness of Language: An Introduction*, in which he held that in order to learn about the world, human beings have to distinguish, order, induce, and generalize, all of which are capacities developed through the use and awareness (at some level) of language. As speakers mature, they develop insights into the structures and functions of language, the value of language in their personal lives, and the role of language in their society and culture. When they go on to learn foreign languages, this knowledge provides points of reference or comparison that help to modify initial ethnocentric impressions or attitudes, which Hawkins termed "linguistic parochialism" (1987:17).

Hawkins firmly believed that a native language awareness curriculum would serve as a bridge to foreign language learning. He felt that if sufficient native language awareness were developed, then foreign language acquisition would progress more efficiently, a hypothesis confirmed by some preliminary studies (Williams 1991), but not others (Green and Hecht 1993).

Hawkins' ideas caught the eyes of many scholars, particularly in Great Britain, and numerous programmatic statements appeared calling for the explicit study of language (cf. Donmall 1991). In October of 1991, a European Symposium on Language Awareness was held in London, and the seeds were sown for the founding of the Association for Language Awareness in 1992. The official organ of the Association is a journal titled *Language Awareness* edited by discourse analyst John Sinclair of the University of Birmingham in England. Since its creation, the journal has included articles on such topics as: awareness of politeness in business writing, modes of folk linguistic awareness, consciousness in language acquisition, the notion of general language education, and the relationship between language awareness and social tolerance.

Some researchers (McLaren 1989, Fairclough 1992, Morgan 1995-6) stress that Language Awareness must go beyond mere knowledge of correct linguistic forms and goals to include consciousness of how language and social power are related. This is referred to as Critical Language Awareness. A teacher attempting to develop Critical Language Awareness needs to be explicit about when, where, and how specific language practices are used to position people socially. This clearly has great application to post-colonial or neo-colonial societies in which issues of language choice are mediated through power relations.

Other researchers (cf. Green and Hecht 1993) limit the task of developing Language Awareness to teaching students about:

- (1) the structures and functions of the languages at their disposal;
- (2) the value of these languages in their personal lives;
- (3) the role of language in general in human society; and
- (4) the new perspectives on human communication they can achieve from comparing languages.

Even within this more conservative perspective, there is much that could benefit the Puerto Rican public and defuse the debate about bilingualism.

### **Application of Language Awareness in Puerto Rico**

Puerto Ricans have long suffered from a sense of "linguistic insecurity" due to a perception that their Caribbean Spanish is not as "correct" or "elegant" as the Spanish of other Hispanic groups. They are often criticized by outsiders for incorporating English loanwords or calques into their Spanish (cf. De Granda 1972). To make things worse, many are convinced that their English is also sub-standard and conclude that they are somehow deficient or else they would have learned it well by now.

In addition, there is a great belief in the existence of a single correct way of speaking that is unchanging and immutable, and the norm against which it is measured is that of written, literary discourse. Newspaper columnists constantly bemoan the "degradation" of the language and the "linguistic impoverishment" and "transculturation" which Puerto Rican Spanish is supposedly undergoing (Seda Bonilla 1987, Rua 1987).

Particular blame is placed upon the English language for the deterioration of the vernacular. A popular item in El Nuevo Dia newspaper is called "*Digalo asi*" ("Say it like this") in which commonly used but non-standard phrases or terms are firmly corrected as if they were moral lapses, and the reader is cautioned to be on guard against English influence. In recent years an extended public service campaign titled "*Hablar bien es pensar bien*" (To speak well is to think well) was carried out on television. Well-known Puerto Rican figures cited common errors due to English influence and implored the public to use standard Spanish equivalents--e.g. "*Di 'marron', no 'brown'*" (Say 'marron', not 'brown'). During the 1996 electoral campaigns, a University of Puerto Rico professor appeared regularly on television to chastise candidates, reporters, and citizens alike for the incorrect usage of terms like: *correr para gobernador* ( a literal translation of "run for governor" in place of the standard *postularse para gobernador*) and *ignorar* ( when used to mean "ignore" as in English instead of "to lack knowledge about" as in standard Spanish).

Despite all the concern about "correctness" of language, there is actually little Language Awareness promoted in the island's schools. Countless hours are spent drilling grammar and rules for accentuation, but little time is dedicated to developing a sense of the beauty and utility of the vernacular or of any other languages. Linguistic concepts of diversity and language change are foreign to many teachers, even those purporting to specialize in Language Arts instruction.

It is vital for Puerto Rican educators to develop a broader vision of the future communicative needs of their students. According to John H.A.L. de Jong of the Dutch National Institute for Educational Measurement (1992), the 21st century will demand of all world citizens the ability to "partake in effective communication" at three different levels--the micro, meso, and macro levels.

At the micro level, this means full command of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in the native language of the area, with particular emphasis on reading and writing since native language literacy is a means of ensuring cultural identity and self-awareness.

At the meso level, individuals need to have near-native receptive command in the oral and written modes (i.e. near-native listening and reading skills) and productive functional command (i.e. functional ability in speaking and writing) of at least one language spoken in the area. This could be the language of the country (if they are immigrants), a second national language, or a neighboring language. This enhances regional unity and cooperation.

At the macro level, all speakers need to have a receptive functional command (i.e. functional ability in listening and reading) and minimal productive command (i.e. minimal speaking and writing) of at least one major world language, preferably English, given its present role in international scientific and cultural communication. This not only permits international communication, but also makes speakers more tolerant of other cultures and thus contributes to what is known as "peace education."

To visualize de Jong's levels, we can imagine a set of concentric circles in which the micro level is the center, spreading out to the meso level, and reaching maximum diffusion at the macro level. Just as a pebble thrown into a pond creates circular waves which eventually spread across the entire pond, so too the vernacular Language Awareness developed at the micro level spreads out to the other languages learned at the meso and macro levels.

In applying this model to Puerto Rico, we see that at the micro level, Puerto Ricans need to have a full command of the native language, Spanish, in both oral and written forms. Along with structural control of the vernacular comes sensitization towards other dialects of Spanish and an appreciation of Puerto Rican Spanish as one of many equally valid and valuable varieties. Vernacular development would begin at the pre-school level and continue throughout the child's school career, up to and including the university.

At the meso level, Puerto Ricans should acquire another Caribbean language, namely French, English, or a Creole. This would do much to establish an Antillean consciousness and identity. In terms of English, schools should not rely solely on U.S. models of language structure and usage, and attention should be paid to the various forms of Caribbean English that exist on the neighboring islands. Learning Portuguese would help forge connections with the large population of South America which speaks that language.

Finally, at the macro level, Puerto Ricans should continue learning English for its international advantages, and extend themselves to other world languages like Chinese, Russian, Arabic, Japanese, etc., as particular economic or cultural needs arise. Given the growing diversification of world markets, knowledge of these languages could

represent the "edge" needed to clinch business deals and place young Puerto Ricans in favorable positions for future employment world-wide.

Key to all this language learning is the notion of choice. The long history of resistance to English in Puerto Rico is clear evidence of the need to permit the Puerto Rican people to select the languages they are interested in learning. Mandating English has bred frustration and recalcitrance. A broader Language Awareness goal would be to create consciousness of the micro, meso, and macro needs of the country and then allow students to opt for those languages which best fill their needs and interests at the different levels of education.

Since many people have a strong vested interest (either economic or political) in maintaining English as a Second Language classes in Puerto Rico, the idea of letting students choose whether or not they wish to take English may be threatening to some. However, there is also strong consensus that the present system is less than optimal and that some change is in order. Were students to have freedom of choice, the most likely outcome would be some initial attrition in English classes, as students explored other language possibilities. Nevertheless, most parents would probably insist on their children taking English for pragmatic purposes.

The precise timetable for language learning would have to be established. One possible scenario would be intensive vernacular preparation during the first four years of school (grades K-3), the establishment of the second language during the next five years (grades 4-8), and the development of the third language during the final four (grades 9-12). Another might be vernacular training in grades K-6, second language instruction in grades 7-12, and third language education at the post-secondary level. However, many other distributions are possible and should be considered. In any case, Language Awareness training would be provided throughout the student's academic career, supporting and extending the knowledge acquired of the specific languages.

How far Puerto Rican schools could go in implementing such a plan would of course depend on the resources available ( i.e., teachers, materials, etc.). Foreign language 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). However, prior to such dramatic changes, it would be necessary to prepare the ground by developing Language Awareness in the general public. A foundation in Language Awareness would then foster the implementation of multilingualism as a national policy.

#### *Working Language Awareness into the Puerto Rican School Curriculum*

According to John L.M. Trim of Cambridge University:

language awareness should play a part in the linguistic education of the schoolchild. Indeed, the steady and purposeful development of knowledge and understanding of language in its many aspects should be a constant aim of education at all stages and levels, involving not only those curricular subjects specifically concerned with

communication, e.g. mother tongue teaching and foreign language teaching, but also other areas of the curriculum. (1992: 9)

How exactly do we go about incorporating Language Awareness concepts into the standard curriculum in Puerto Rico? In the early grades, songs, poetry, and games can be used to sensitize students to language. In the upper elementary grades, they can be guided to observe their own native language and to acquire familiarity with a second language. At the secondary level, they can elevate their language awareness to explicit and systematic knowledge of their first two languages and thus facilitate the acquisition of a third.

The kinds of linguistic themes and competencies that could be incorporated into a Language Awareness curriculum in Puerto Rican schools include the following:

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
8. coping strategies for dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary,
9. fundamentals of language learning
10. techniques of translation
11. recognition and avoidance of grammatical errors
12. regularities of pronunciation and orthography
13. understanding of text types and textual cohesion
14. basic notions of sentence cohesion
15. rhetorical resources and their functions
16. analysis of speech intentions
17. exposure to metalinguistics (i.e. grammatical categories and technical terms)

In essence, what we as educators at all levels of the educational system need to do is to develop among Puerto Rican young people a love of language. We need to make language compelling so they are desirous of learning more, rather than making it seem so daunting and difficult as to be unattainable. We need to leave explicit grammar and accentuation drills for high school and let younger students develop their own sense of word functions and forms. We also need to integrate Language Awareness into the rest of the curriculum and make it a matter of concern for all teachers. Finally, we need to build multilingual awareness and expectations to make knowing more than one language seem natural and commonplace. If we systematically address these needs early on, there will be far less resistance to the learning of English or other languages in Puerto Rico. Students will be more secure in their own cultural and linguistic identity, more tolerant of other cultures, and more willing to interact with individuals of other groups.

Needless to say, if Puerto Rican teachers are to carry out such a task, they must themselves pass through the process of consciousness-raising so they can impart Language Awareness in a sensitive and meaningful manner. In other words, Language Awareness preparation must be incorporated into pre-service and in-service training.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, I would like to refer back to Hawkins' own words regarding the goal of Language Awareness training. He said:

"We are seeking to light fires of curiosity about the central human characteristic of language which will blaze throughout our pupils' lives. While combating linguistic complacency, we are seeking to arm our pupils against fear of the unknown which breeds prejudice and antagonism. Above all, we want to make our pupils' contacts with language, both their own and that of their neighbours, richer, more interesting, simply more fun." (Hawkins 1987: 5-6)

Once we accomplish this, then fears about bilingualism will dissipate, and our students can get on with their lives without hangups about their linguistic capacities and resources. They can join the ranks of the millions world-wide who matter-of-factly consider themselves multilingual and use this ability to their personal and national advantage.

## REFERENCES

- De Granda, German. (1972). *Transculturación e interferencia lingüística en Puerto Rico contemporáneo, 1898-1968*. Rio Piedras, PR: Editorial Edil.
- De Jong, John H.A. L. (1992). Assessment of language proficiency in the perspective of the 21st century, *AILA Review*, 9, 39-54.
- Donmall, Gillian (ed.). (1985). *Language awareness*. CILT.
- Fairclough, N. (ed.). (1992). *Critical language awareness*. London and New York: Longman.
- Green, Peter S. and Karlheinz Hecht. (1993). Language awareness of German pupils. *Language Awareness*, 2 (3), 125-142.
- Hawkins, E. W. (1987). *Awareness of language: An introduction* (revised edition). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education*. New York: Longman.
- Morgan, David. (1995-96). Promoting and assessing critical language awareness. *TESOL Journal (Winter)*, 10-14.
- Pousada, Alicia. (1989). La planificación lingüística en Puerto Rico. *Plerus*, 19(1), 105-116. (Journal of School of Planning, UPR, Rio Piedras, PR. dated 1985.)
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1996). Puerto Rico: On the horns of a language planning dilemma, *TESOL Quarterly*, 30(3), 499-510.
- Rua, Pedro Juan. (1987). Idioma en Puerto Rico: Hechos y retos. *Diálogo* (Nov/Dec), 32-34.
- Seda Bonilla, Eduardo. (1987). El bilingüismo. *El Reportero* (Oct. 15), 21.
- Singleton, David. (1992). Second language instruction: The when and how. *AILA Review*, 9, 46-54.
- Trim, John L. M. (1992). Language teaching in the perspective of the predictable requirements of the twenty-first century. *AILA Review*, 9, 7-20.
- Williams, G.A. (1991). Language awareness: The first step towards foreign language learning. *Francophonie*, 4, 508.



