Strategies for Teaching English Effectively in Puerto Rico

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RESUMEN

Luego de 13 años de estudiar inglés, muchos estudiantes buenos e inteligentes no pueden formular una oración sencilla, clara y correcta. ¿Por qué? Muchos observadores se han enfocado en ofrecer explicaciones históricas, políticas y culturales. No obstante, también existen razones pedagógicas. Enseñar una lengua no es sólo seguir los capítulos de un libro. Este trabajo examina otras estrategias efectivas. La distinción lingüística entre el lenguaje productivo y el receptivo demuestra que la comunicación efectiva es posible —incluso en un nivel alto— sin tener que dominar cada elemento sintáctico. ¿Cuáles son las condiciones necesarias para aprender una lengua? ¿Qué elementos son indispensables? ¿Qué condiciones aceleran el aprendizaje de los estudiantes? Hoy día, el inglés es una herramienta útil para todos. Identifique los elementos claves, provea la información necesaria y cree las condiciones favorables, y los estudiantes recibirán lo que necesitan y aprenderán a comunicarse de forma sencilla, clara y correcta.

Descriptores: enseñanza del inglés, adquisición del lenguaje, inglés de Puerto Rico

ABSTRACT

After up to 13 years of English instruction, many of the best and brightest students cannot form a simple, clear and correct utterance. Why? Most observers have focused on historical, political, cultural and sociological explanations. There are pedagogical reasons, as well. This paper examines effective strategies for language learning, which might not be in widespread use in Puerto Rico. The linguistic distinction between productive and receptive language illustrates that effective communication is possible —on a high level of mastery— without using every syntactical feature. What are the necessary conditions for learning a language? How can we best provide those conditions? What conditions accelerate student learning? Which linguistic features are

indispensable, which are unnecessary? In today's world, English is a useful tool for everyone if we systematically identify the key elements, provide the needed input, create the appropriate conditions, students will more easily learn to communicate simply, clearly and correctly.

Introduction

After 13 years of instruction in English, some students write like this:

- I have 26 year
- The plastic bag to take 100 year in to break.
- For that reasons is important for know about this things.
- I don't recive any document form you. I'm worry because if send document, I not prepare for the class. If please foward other time.
- Aspartame have 3 ingredient. One are methanol. When eat aspartame in your body methanol converted formaldehyde. This liquid in other place them use to preserve died body.
- Is obvious Obama not a superheroes but he realize all interesting in to resolve the problem more affect all the citizens in USA. The politicians try resolve the crisis economics but the citizens help the differents manners for protect the problem environment and others persons to resolve your economic.

There are many inventive and imaginative teachers, administrators and academics in Puerto Rico, who are teaching English well. Puerto Ricans are creative and entrepreneurial by nature, and are always seeking ways to improve. This paper does not look at all of the many successful techniques being used in Puerto Rico, but focuses on major trends in effective second language strategies. The purpose of this paper is to look at a situation, recognize where there might be problems, and explore possible solutions.

The students quoted above are among the best and the brightest. They are wonderful young people who are/or were students at the University of Puerto Rico, Recinto de Río Piedras, and who are on their way to excellent careers and fulfilling lives. Two of these students are entering law school, one is planning to be a doctor, another is planning to be a social worker, another is planning to be a pharmacist, and another is an elementary teacher. Of the students quoted above, two

studied in private schools in the Metropolitan area, and one comes from a town in the interior. Every one of them has expressed a desire to learn and improve their English, and they were all hard workers. Indeed, we can wonder if these talented and ambitious young people have achieved this level of proficiency, what might be the level of mastery for other less interested or less fortunate students.

Many students are in an English class for 10 to 13 years, but cannot formulate a simple, clear and correct utterance, in English. How is it possible that after 13 years the basics have not been learned? Even the least talented student, after 13 years of piano lessons, is able to play a few simple songs. This paper explores some factors that might account for this situation, and suggests instructional strategies and pedagogic practices that can help resolve the predicament.

There are complex factors, cultural, political, historical and sociological which account for this situation, and have been analyzed, widely, by knowledgeable and insightful observers. In 1996, Pousada noted, "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" (Pousada 1996:21). There may have been a time when many people resisted English, and some still do. But, time passes, generations change, the economy grows, computers are more common, and Neoyoricans return to Puerto Rico. With the expansion of the internet and global economy, today, more than 10 or 20 years ago, English is an important tool, in some fields a prerequisite, for doing research and obtaining information. As one student observed, "Now I see that English is just a language."

Many students do learn English in school, and some learn it well. But, there are a significant number who do not, and so the question remains: why in 2009, after 10 to 13 years of instruction *in anything*, why have so many not learned the basics? (Pousada 1996, 1997; Peña Ramírez, 1996; Torres González, 2002; De Jesús, 2008; Zentella, 1997).

Blame the student

When asked why students are not learning English more effectively, sadly, many teachers blame the student. The "blame the victim" argument takes two distinct forms. The most common form is that some teachers say that students, now-a-days, are not what they used to be. They are unruly, disruptive, distracted, poor, and malnourished, they enter school with severe social and emotional problems, families in crisis, addiction, alco-

holism and abuse.[1] These are horrible conditions, but teaching children who come to school unprepared and plagued with social, emotional and family problems is not unique to Puerto Rico and it did not begin yesterday (Riis, 1890).[2] These are horrible conditions, but they do not pertain to all of the students who have not learned English well in Puerto Rico. They either did not pertain or did not impede the academic progress of the students quoted above —all of whom are successful juniors and graduating seniors, at the flagship campus, of the University regarded by many as the best in Puerto Rico, known with distinction throughout the western hemisphere, and the world.

There is another permutation of the "blame the student" argument, alluded to above: Puerto Rico has a long colonial history of forced English. Consequently, there is profound opposition to learning English, a deep-seated rejection, perhaps unconscious, but nevertheless a powerful resistance to it. This argument also blames the student, although the point is usually stated with pride. Couched in the context of politics and history, taking into account the complex nuance of the colonial dilemma, still this argument blames the student because it also asserts that it is *because* of the *student* that s/he does not learn. It attributes the failure to learn English to the young person, who is not a victim, but a product of history and political status.

An interesting example, in contrast to Puerto Rico, is the Kingdom of the Netherlands. For years Dutch was the official language, in school and in business, of all six islands in the Caribbean: Aruba, The Leeward Islands, of Curacao and Bonaire, and the Windward Islands of St. Maarten, Saba and St Eustatius. In 2008, Dutch, English and Papiamentu became the three official languages of the Netherlands Antilles, except for Aruba, where Dutch and Papiamentu are the only two official languages. The Netherlands Antilles, as part of the Kingdom, has a relationship to Holland, not completely unlike Puerto Rico's relationship to the United States. English unlike Dutch is considered a world language, and a useful tool for education, business, government and research. Nevertheless, in contrast to Puerto Rico, the average people of the Netherlands Antilles are multilingual, not bilingual. The people typically speak, read and write at three languages —Papiamentu, the vernacular, Dutch and English, the official languages used in school and government— as well as also frequently speaking Spanish, due to proximity and commerce, and often speaking French, important for commerce and tourism. Average citizens, not necessarily college educated or professionals are comfortably multi-

lingual. And, Dutch and English, both colonial languages, one might say, are learned in school. Why is bilingualism in Puerto Rico so difficult and multilingualism in the Kingdom of the Netherlands a virtual given? Undoubtedly there are many factors that explain this difference, but we must ask, what role does pedagogy play, and what instructional strategies and practices for language acquisition might contribute to this complex picture?

There is another interesting aspect to the argument that in Puerto Rico, a resistance to learning English is a consequence of the history and political status. It has been noticed that many of those who favor the independence or separation of Puerto Rico from the United States are themselves accomplished or fluent speakers of English (Barreto, 2001:26). Further, let it not be forgotten that Don Pedro Albizu Campos, himself, read, wrote and spoke English. A Black man, son of a single mother from a poor barrio in Ponce, he studied at the University of Vermont and later obtained a law degree from Harvard University —not easily done without a command of English. Not long ago the daughter of an admired Puerto Rican patriot was asked her opinion on bilingual education and teaching English in the public schools. Without hesitation, she answered that everyone should learn English, because it is useful to know, and she added that her children all were bilingual. She made sure their Spanish was perfect and their English was good.[3]

While undoubtedly, there is some resistance and resentment to the US presence in Puerto Rico and its political role, some of those most ardently in favor of defending the nation of Puerto Rico against such incursions are competent or fluent speakers of English. Perhaps they relate to English as a language, and a tool, not as a political system or a marker for their identity.

While it is true that Puerto Rico was invaded in Guánica, in 1898, and the US tried forcibly to impose English on the nation and in the schools for about 50 years —with resistance from Puerto Rican educators and leaders (Negrón de Montilla, 1971; De Jesús, 2008), but, when Munoz Marin became Governor, that strategy was abandoned by the United States. Linguistically, a victory was won. Spanish again became the language of instruction in the public schools, and English instruction became ESL —English as a Second Language— only one subject out of many. (Barreto, 2001; Walsh 1991; Torres González, 2002; Negrón de Montilla, 1971; De Jesús, 2008; Zentella, 1997).

The argument of this paper is not to blame the student for not being capable or blame the student for not wishing to learn. This paper will look at the educational system, and see what pedagogical and instructional elements might contribute to this situation, and what possible remedies might ameliorate or resolve the problem. This paper does not focus on linguistic research, or investigations that try to prove exactly how first or second language is acquired, and what are the precise elements and steps. Instead, it will discuss the key elements in the pedagogy of language instruction, which in practice, make language learning easier and more effective.

Rather than starting with English in Puerto Rico, it might be instructive to look generally at the conditions under which language can best be learned. We can then determine if these conditions pertain, and what are effective instructional strategies and pedagogic practices that might make learning English more successful in Puerto Rico.

What are we teaching?

Before discussing how to teach, we ought to clarify what we are teaching. The contention of this paper is that we are not teaching *English;* we are teaching *students* to communicate in English. The distinction is important. At the end of the class, students will not be linguists. They will not be experts in English, in its totality, in every aspect —its grammar, syntax, semantics, diction, all of its vocabulary and all of its conditions and elements of use. Students in elementary, junior high, high school and at the University are not taking Basic English classes in order to become linguists, grammarians or translators. What they need to do is to learn to communicate in English: simply, clearly and correctly. This requires exposure, practice and a great deal of knowledge, but not every element of English is required. Some teachers spend time and energy teaching and drilling students on constructions that will rarely, if ever, be used, and which, more importantly, can be replaced, by simpler, more versatile constructions, that students can master more easily and use more often. For example: *I would have fixed the roof, but I couldn't because of the hurricane*, can be replaced in most situations with the simpler construction 1) *I was going to fix the roof, but there was a hurricane*, or an even simpler sentence, which is entirely correct and acceptable 2) *I didn't fix the roof because of the hurricane*. Similarly, the sentence: The *students have had many assignments* can be replaced, without losing meaning, by *the students had many assignments*.

More importantly, these simpler sentences, grammatically less advanced, can be taught at an earlier stage in the language program. Consequently, students can practice the constructions for a longer period of time, use them more often, in more situations, and in the listener, even a native speaker, will not consider it inferior or simplistic to use them. It is always better to speak simple, clear and correct sentences, than to use complicated syntax, improperly, and not be understood. The purpose of language instruction is to enable students to speak comfortably and correctly at an earlier point in their course of study in English.

Teaching a language is not following the Chapters in a book

Unfortunately, many people who teach English are not familiar with principles of language acquisition or second language strategies. Consequently, there is a temptation to simply follow the book and use it as though it were a curriculum. Using a book as though it were a curriculum is not unique to teaching ESL or English in Puerto Rico. In many North American schools and districts, when asked what approach is used for elementary reading instruction, the answer often is "Open Court", or the name of a basal reading series.

In Puerto Rico, and elsewhere, sometimes a person is assigned to teach English simply because s/he knows English. This may work out in some cases, but the analogy would be that everyone with a driver's license is qualified to give driving lessons. At the university level, and in many private schools, instructors are sometimes graduate students, teaching ESL as a part-time job. Since their main focus is their own work, again, there is the temptation to simply follow the chapters of a book. In other instances, professors and teachers may be experts in English Literature, not language acquisition, but find themselves teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) for a variety of organizational or department reasons. They, too, may follow the chapters of the book, "explain" the grammar or constructions (frequently in Spanish), have the students read the examples, assign the exercises and call it a syllabus. Sometimes the book includes quizzes and exams. ESL publishers, increasingly, promote their series on the grounds that it is so user-friendly that *anyone* can teach ESL by following the teacher's manual. Just follow the guide and the job is done. Or is it? Teaching English to speakers of other languages may have more in common with emergent reading than with English Literature. Would a kindergarten teacher with no preparation in early childhood education be considered appro-

priate for the job? If someone taught math or auto mechanics simply by following the chapters of a book, would those be effective programs? Teachers without preparation, who use the book mechanically, may be a factor contributing to the current level of language knowledge. The book is a tool and a resource, not a program of study.

How Books are Organized

A second factor impacting student learning relates to the English or ESL book, itself. Some books may follow what the authors consider to be a systematic organization of grammatical sequences and constructions. One example might be teaching verb tenses in the "logical" order of present, past, and future.

Rod Ellis, renowned professor and author on language acquisition, observed, in the introduction to his 1984 book, that because a grammatical sequence may seem logical to the teacher, and even "self-evident" to the teacher (for example that present tense ought to go before past or future) the teacher's organization may not be logical, helpful or even relevant to the learner, since the information may not be presented to the learner in the order s/he needs it. The learner is likely to be focused on understanding utterances and communication, not on structure and syntax. Indeed, s/he might not even know the grammatical terminology.

> Unless we know for certain that the teacher's scheme of things really does match the learner's way of going about things, we cannot be sure that the teaching content will contribute directly to language learning (Ellis, 1985:1).

Other ESL series develop a story line —the young lady moves to Los Angeles from Mexico, goes to school, meets friends and encounters a variety of situations. But, then the grammatical and syntactic material embedded in these stories is often random and haphazard, sometimes confusing, and there is rarely any progression or system in the material. This type of book may require the student to study rules or grammar, memorize them, and then forget them, after the test. Other programs, often for adult learners, present "useful" dialogs or scenarios: "A visit to the doctor" or "A trip to the Supermarket", which students memorize, under the notion that the embedded phrases and vocabulary will be remembered when the situation arises. But, alas, the situation never arises in exactly that scenario. Thus, each of these organizational designs has the defect Ellis mentions above —unless it

matches the students' way of internalizing information there is no reason to assume that it will enhance learning. Thus, mechanically following the chapters of a book has the double potential for being irrelevant to the learner's frame of reference, or random, haphazard and confusing, or both.

What Conditions do Students Need in order to learn a Language?

The pedagogic conditions for language learning are easy to describe, but require thought and planning to implement. First, the student needs comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981) which means that s/he must be able to understand what is being said —perhaps not fully, but sufficiently. Second, the student needs an environment that provides ample opportunity to practice, under conditions that are safe, not threatening. Finally, the student needs to begin to think in the new language —in this case, English.

Immersion

The ideal setting for finding these conditions is an immersion environment, one reason why so many of the English speakers in Puerto Rico have lived in the US or in another English speaking country. An immersion environment is also created in the Dual language education model, which is not the focus of this paper.[4]

When Dual language programs are not available, and relocation is not practical, good pedagogy can simulate an immersion environment in any classroom, and provide the three key elements: comprehensible input, ample practice, and thinking in the target language.

Comprehensible Input

In an interview at the University of California, in 2004, Professor Fred Genesee, from McGill University said the most useful thing educators can understand about second language acquisition is that students "learn a language when there is meaningful and on-going use of language about something important." In other words, conversation and discussion on interesting topics, not necessarily readings like "Maria's first day at school". The term "comprehensible input" was developed by Stephen Krashen, in the late 1970s, as part of his input theory, and his strategy for natural language acquisition. In one book he explains,

that language acquisition, first or second, occurs when comprehension of real messages occurs, and when the acquirer is not 'on the defensive'... Language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill. It does not occur overnight, however. Real language acquisition develops slowly, and speaking skills emerge significantly later than listening skills, even when conditions are perfect. The best methods are therefore those that supply 'comprehensible input' in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the second language, but allow students to produce when they are 'ready', recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production (Krashen, 1981:6-7).

A distinction is being made, here, between productive language, for speaking and writing, and receptive language, for understanding —listening— and reading. While these four elements develop concurrently, the first stage of language learning, called by Krashen the silent stage, may last from months to years, and is predominantly a listening stage. It is that foundation building stage where the student is listening, processing, making sense of what s/he hears, and beginning to identify linguistic patterns.

A goal is to learn basic, productive language —a few simple and versatile sentences— which the student can use in a variety of settings, for speaking and for writing —productive language. Students will hear and understand more complicated structures —listening and reading, receptive language— and over time, these receptive skills will be internalized as productive speech and writing. In this way, the learner is constantly expanding their language ability, from receptive language to productive —from listening and understanding, to speaking and writing.

We do know the biological basis for language, is the human brain's amazing ability to identify and respond to patterns, such as those that are embedded in language. Learning language is a natural process which distinguishes humans from animals, and is done by the brain as an innate response to stimuli. This sensitivity is so superb that the brain will identify patterns and respond to them, whether they come in as speech, through sound, or as touch, through the hand, as in the case of deaf children learning to sign (Petitto, 2000).

In the language learning environment, for students who are not deaf, the initial time is spent listening carefully, noticing patterns, and discov-

ering meaning. After an appropriate amount of time —for each learner is different— the person begins to speak, perhaps haltingly, in one or two word utterances, making many mistakes, but nevertheless moving out of the silent stage and into a beginner's level of elementary speech. During the initial silent stage, continuing into the elementary stage, and on throughout the language learning process, listening is always critical. At a later state, the emphasis might shift from listening to reading or to writing, but these skills continue to develop concurrently.

Translation

Many instructors, in their natural desire to be helpful, and to "explain" material in ESL books, find themselves translating and speaking Spanish —essentially talking to their students *about* English, and not *using it*. The information pertaining to brain activity and noticing patterns from Dr. Petitto mentioned above —she is now at the University of Toronto— indicates that the only way to teach a language is to teach *in* the language —to use it.

Translation destroys language learning. It limits input, hinders success, and undermines the language acquisition process. Translation obliterates the cognitive benefit of learning a second or third language, the *cognitive stretch* (De Jesús, 2008a). Students will never learn to speak or write a language if they do not think in it, and translation obviates the need for thinking in the target language.

Instead, students stay within their own language, and rely on it to translate mentally when they read or hear. They learn about the target language, but never learn it. When they need to speak or write, they mentally translate, and mechanically substitute words and phrases, from their mother tongue, without ever developing a sense of syntax, semantics or word order in the new language. Translation, assumes that there is a one-to-one correspondence between words and sentences in one language and the other. The utterances become unintelligible nonsequitors —a patchwork of words without meaning. The students develop no sense of the structure or the integrity of the target language. They are piecing together mismatched words, using grammar rules sometimes misremembered and often misapplied. Consequently, we get such sentences in as "It's a long time that I didn't see you" —completely meaningless in English (unless you are a speaker of Spanish)— or worse, we get the sentences in English that were illustrated at the beginning of this article.

As a consequence of translation —the practice modeled by teachers, and internalized by students— the necessary conditions for language acquisition in the classroom are never established. There is never an environment in which students have to try to comprehend, and learn to think in the target language, which is the only way to understand and learn.

There are many words and phrases that native speakers of a language do not know. And they learn them without translation into another language. The young child is listening to a song that mentions a horse and a cart. S/he asks Mami, "What is a cart?" Is Mami going to say "un carrito"? No. She is going to say, "do you remember the little red wagon that the horse in the zoo was pulling? Well, that is called a cart.' In natural language, we paraphrase and explain words and expressions using other words in the same language.

As a general rule it is safe to say the more you translate the less you learn. Another little example illustrates the point: Abuela, who lived in the US for 25 years but never learned a word of English —and we all have an Abuela or Tía like this in the family— is usually in a situation where either she is able to speak Spanish (at the Bodega), or someone is with her who is able to translate (at the doctor). This is like some ESL classrooms, where much of the conversation is in Spanish, or is translated. For Abuela, the translator is often one of the children —and, for a variety of reasons, the children do learn the new language quickly. It is a simple equation: if you are translating you are not thinking in the language or using it. Without using the language, you cannot learn it.

Students typically report that most of their previous teachers and professors spent time either explaining in Spanish or translating the difficult words and unclear phrases. This rampant practice of translation is completely anathema to learning a language. Translation totally undermines the language learning process, and destroys the cognitive impact of learning a language. At a more advanced stage, under particular circumstances, the use of translation may be helpful, but at the earlier stage it is safe to say, the more you translate, the less you learn.

Thinking in English

The first overarching goal for a student in learning a language is to begin to think in the target language. This is Petitto's point that the brain begins to identify patterns which soon become associated with meaning. This can only occur in an immersion environment, or where

immersion is simulated by having no translation, and where input is comprehensible.

It is sometimes assumed that you cannot think in a language, which is considered a higher order skill, unless you know the language well. Absolutely not true. You think, from the beginning, up to the level of your ability. In the example of the young child asking about the cart, is the child thinking about the wagon and the horse in the mother tongue or another language? When a baby of 2 or 3 is learning to speak, is s/he thinking in the mother tongue?

The natural question will be asked, if you don't know a language, how can you understand, and if you don't understand it, how can you learn it? No, this is not a syllogism. Return to the concept of comprehensible input. The learner does not understand everything that s/he hears, but understands some, and understands enough to capture meaning, As s/he progresses, s/he develops awareness, draws inferences and understands more.

Learning a language is a cognitive process: the more the student understands, the more language is being learned. It is a constructive process: students learn by constructing their own meaning, not by memorizing or mechanically applying rules learned by rote. Learning a language has to make sense. If it does not make sense, it is not language, thought or meaning. Vocabulary can be memorized, but semantics and syntax cannot be learned by rote. Students have to comprehend in order to internalize language concepts, remember them and use them.

The Affective Factors: Fear and Anxiety

The environmental factors, referred to by Krashen as "low anxiety situations" in the quotation, above, are also sometimes called affective filters. People cannot learn under conditions of fear, embarrassment or intimidation. Certainly these are not characteristics of our teachers and instructors in Puerto Rico. But, sometimes, without it being intended, students feel embarrassed, feel afraid of being called on, or intimidated because of their own insecurities. A conscious and specific effort must be made to set up a classroom environment that is low anxiety, to assure students that they can feel safe, and that they can relax —relax enough to volunteer to speak, to be willing to try, and be relaxed enough to sometimes make mistakes, without being devastated. The environment must be friendly, non-threatening, but also one that is serious, and business-like. It is best to ask for volunteers, not

to call on students, like a hawk striking out of the blue, when students may not yet be ready to speak.

The obvious point has to be made, repeatedly: everyone makes mistakes, especially, with a language, no one knows it perfectly —even the instructor makes mistakes. If you make a mistake, the chances are that five people in the room are thinking the same thing. But, more than words, the instructor cannot expose attitudes that are undermining or negative, or body language that is impatient and judgmental. Acknowledge all the positives, even the small ones. Correct, errors, but pass lightly over the negatives. Never be sarcastic, never tease, and never become personal. Congratulate students on their good answers, and their efforts. Recognize an intelligent observation, or a good try, even when it is not the comment you are looking for. Especially with adolescents and young adults, egos are fragile, self-confidence is often lacking, and vulnerability is everywhere. It is amazing how quickly the class tone softens, and the students allow themselves to calm down, when they are not afraid of failure, or worse, afraid of looking foolish.

Rule 27

The National Training Laboratories, in Bethel, Maine (U.S.) did research that showed an average, educated adult needed to be exposed to a new word, or idea 27 times, before s/he was able to recognize it, internalize it, remember it, and finally use it. If this is true —and let us assume for the moment that it is— then the average, student, will need more time, more exposure to a new word or new concept than the average educated adult. Will they need 30 times, 40 times or 50 times? It depends on the student, their experience, their prior knowledge, their level of anxiety or fear (of the lack thereof) and of course, their innate ability.

The point is not the exact number of times that students need to hear a word or concept before they can internalize and use it, but rather the general point that exposure to the same word or idea must occur a lot. It is rare in a classroom that sufficient practice is actually given, and enough time is taken for students to synthesize new material. It is also rare in a classroom that the instructor patiently responds, repeats or reviews, again and again, as many times as necessary —without showing impatience or making inadvertent comments that might unnerve or embarrass some students. "We did this last week. Don't you remember?" Obviously, the student does not remember or s/he would not be asking the question or making the mistake again.

It takes time, a lot of time, and we don't know how much time for each individual, because everyone is different. Teachers, professors, be patient: review, repeat, re-teach as many times as is necessary. That is the nature of the language learning process. As a young child, some begin speaking at one year, others at two or three —Einstein, they say, did not speak until he was five. Learning a language is a process, a natural process. It is what it is; it takes as long as it takes. The safer the environment and more encouraging, the more interesting the topics and discussions, the more students become immersed in conversation, the more they think in the language, the more practice they get, and the more they will learn. Instead of drill and kill boredom, grammar exercises, explanations in Spanish and translation, interesting class-work will make the learning and deeper, and the better will be quality of language development.

Conclusion

Perhaps we are hampered by disorganized books, which are confusing, contradictory and inappropriately used. Perhaps we translate, and therefore rob our students of the opportunity to think in a new language, draw inferences and make sense. Perhaps we fail to provide our students with the very conditions that will assure their success: abundant listening opportunities; comprehensible input about meaningful topics; ample time to practice, learn and review; an environment without fear or anxiety; and most importantly, the chance to make sense of a new language, discover meaning, nuance and style, and learn about diversity and the world. There are pedagogical practices, and instructional strategies that can make English language learning in Puerto Rico more effective.

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NOTES

1   At the recent PR TESOL conference, November 21, 2009 at the Hotel Meliá, this question was posed by the author as part of her presentation. All but one of the 6 respondants, each of them K-12 teachers, expressed a variation of the "blame the student" argument. The exception was a teacher from a bilingual school. She felt that students, from all backgrounds, were learning English effectively. This example, while anecdotal, illustrates the possibility that many issues that account for inadequate progress in English may be pedagogical and instructional, not just cultural, political or social problems.

2   Jacob A. Riis, the Danish immigrant, who came to the US in his 20s, wrote in English, about the abject conditions of the poor, first published in 1890, How the Other Half Lives. Of particular interest is the chapter, "The Problem of the Children", p. 135-140 (Penguin Classics).

3   Private interview with CZC.

4   For further information, see De Jesús (2008) and The Center for Applied Linguistics, at www.cal.org, www.ncbe.org or www.ncela.gwu.edu.