TO BE OR NOT TO BE BILINGUAL IN PUERTO RICO: THAT IS THE ISSUE*

C. William Schweers, Jr. and Jorge A. Vélez

Any of the many variables affecting second language acquisition can potentially lead to circumstances that make the ESL teaching-learning process far less effective than it ideally could be. One of the greatest challenges to the TESOL professional is to be sensitive to this wide range of factors in order to identify problem areas and strategies for dealing with them. Although our attention is usually drawn to our students, our techniques, and our classrooms, major obstacles to effectiveness are sometimes found beyond the immediate and the obvious. This is the case in Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rico is an island (nation, associated free state, colony?) of many ambiguities. Conquered and colonized by Spain in the early 16th century, the island remained under Madrid's control until the Spanish American War in 1898. As a prize of war, Puerto Rico became an unincorporated territory of the United States at that time. U.S. citizenship was granted to all Puerto Ricans in 1917 although this did not include the right for residents to participate in political decision making in the United States. Since 1952, Puerto Rico has been a semiautonomous commonwealth under continued U.S. sovereignty.

One of the most persistent ambiguities is the island's future political status. Will it opt for statehood or independence, or continue as is or with greater autonomy? Where does its cultural identity lie-with Spain, the Caribbean, Latin America, North America, or something uniquely Puerto Rican? What is the most appropriate linguistic status for Puerto Rico: official monolingualism (Spanish) or official bilingualism (Spanish and

English)? So much indecision about such fundamental issues as political, cultural, and linguistic identity send out mixed and confusing signals to the youth of Puerto Rico as they mature and struggle to define themselves. With respect to the learning of English, it's a case of being damned if you do (you're betraying your Hispanic heritage and giving in to the forces of Americanization from the North) and damned if you don't (you're severely limiting your potential for socioeconomic mobility).

On April 5, 1991, the governor of Puerto Rico signed legislation making Spanish the sole official language of government on the island. Since 1902, Spanish and English had shared equal status for the transaction of government business in Puerto Rico. A number of the most frequent and salient arguments in favor of and against official Spanish monolingualism will be reviewed to illustrate the deeply emotional and conflicting attitudes that hamper, if not actually paralyze, the ESL teaching-learning process for many English learners in Puerto Rico.

To contextualize this discussion, it should be noted that although only 20% of the Puerto Rican population is reported to be functionally bilingual, a March 1992 poll (Staff 1992:34) revealed that 83% of the respondents preferred official status for both Spanish and English. This indicates not only that there is general disagreement with the 1991 initiative to give Spanish sole official status but also that bilingualism is a goal reached by only a few on the island in spite of a high level of acceptance for the concept of a bilingual society.

The Roots of Indecision

Only by exploring the origins and evolution of Puerto Rico's language controversy can we ever hope to understand the mixed signals concerning the learning of English to which islanders are constantly exposed. There is little doubt that English enjoys great prestige among Puerto Ricans, but it is no less true that there has been a persistent resistance to the spread and use of English on the island through the course of this century. Why is this so?

The learning of English by Puerto Ricans has been justified since 1899 by a series of beliefs that have at one time or another guided language policies and helped form learner attitudes. In the

eyes of the newly arrived U.S. colonial administmtors, only through the learning of English could the population acquire and comprehend the democratic values of the United States. The teaching of English was seen as a way of Americanizing Puerto Ricans for the purpose of securing their loyalty. Both the U.S. administrators and their pro-U.S. sympathizers on the island promoted the belief that knowledge of English would give Puerto Ricans access to the world's best education, and to the most sophisticated knowledge in the sciences, medicine, and technology. By learning English, islanders could study at U.S. Universities, obtain advanced degrees, and then return to Puerto Rico to participate in the design and implementation of solutions to their homeland's pitiful socioeconomic condition. Implicit in this philosophical stance was the inferiority ascribed to Puerto Rico's Hispanic heritage viz-a-viz the powerful and dynamic U.S. culture.

The establishment of an English-speaking colonial government and the arrival of American companies, investors, and entrepreneurs conferred prestige and legitimacy to the English language in the eyes of most Puerto Ricans. The learning of English was seen to go hand-in-hand with the ideal of upward social mobility. As the island passed from the period of direct U.S. rule into the era of greater political autonomy and economic transformation, the emerging middle class continued to view English as a sine qua non for professional advancement and financial security. Puerto Rico's socioeconomic and political elite has always realized that for them to affirm and maintain influence with both Americans and their own compatriots, they had to become bilingual. In all probability, these beliefs are as widespread today as they were 50 years ago.

The pro-English philosophy mentioned above has had its effects on Puerto Rican life. In 1902, English was declared an official language of equal status to Spanish; soon after, English was imposed on the public school system not only as a required subject, but also as the preferred medium of instruction. Indeed, it was through the school system that administrators hoped to Americanize the population. While things have changed significantly in these matters, the presence of English continues to be strongly felt on the island in the domains of business, technology, science, medicine, and finance. Additionally, the dynamics and evolution of the Puerto Rican-U.S. relationship have resulted in an even greater and more

intense presence of English. For example, U.S. popular culture exerts its influence through movies, music, cable TV, large chain stores and mass consumer items. A thriving tourist industry caters mostly to English-speaking visitors. Finally, there is the phenomenon of the returning migrant who is usually quite Americanized and frequently English-dominant. This, together with the large number of islanders who have either visited or studied in the United Sates, is indicative of the force of the language contact situation between English and Spanish in Puerto Rico.

To all of this, one must add the prestige enjoyed by English due to its status as the universal lingua franca. Thus, Puerto Ricans see English as the language of real political power, the language of the most powerful and influential country in the world, the country whose citizenship they possess, and as the language that allows them to communicate with the world at large.

As we have seen, the Puerto Rican scenario has provided English with prestige and practical advantages which should have contributed significantly to the development of positive attitudes toward the learning of English. But this is only half of the picture. The fact is that many Puerto Ricans resist learning English precisely because of the beliefs and advantages that support its prestige on the island.

The unilateral imposition of English on Puerto Ricans continues to disturb many islanders, especially intellectuals, who are sensitive to Puerto Rico's subordination to the United States. They see the old policy of linguistic imperialism (see Phillipson 1992) as an offense to Puerto Rican dignity and as a clear expression of U.S. arrogance and belief in its own racial and cultural superiority. The residue of the old policy can be seen in the fact that English is still a required school subject from first grade through the second year of college. Moreover, the U.S. District Court in San Juan conducts its business exclusively in English. This, of course, is inconsistent with the island's sociolinguistic reality: Spanish is, indeed, the language of everyday discourse. Thus, the continuation of English in these contexts is an unpleasant reminder to many of Puerto Rico's continued colonial status.

A second major source of resentment against English stems from its being associated with attempts to minimize islander identification with Spanish. It is assumed by many that the study

and use of English is causing the deterioration of Puerto Rican Spanish and eroding the people's sense of their Hispanic cultural identity. Thus, English and Spanish are metaphorically paired off as irreconcilable adversaries and Puerto Ricans are challenged to defend their heritage and vernacular. From the perspective of Puerto Ricans who view the issue in this light, the learning and use of English and an official policy of bilingualism represent a genuine threat to the survival of Puerto Rican culture.

The uncertainty regarding the island's future political status is yet another factor producing mixed signals about the role of English. Put simply, if one shows any serious commitment toward the teaching and dissemination of English, then one is frequently labeled pro-U.S. and is presumed to sympathize with statehood ideology. Independence supporters naturally identify themselves exclusively with Spanish (although most are, in fact, bilingual), and Commonwealthers favor Spanish while grudgingly paying lip service to the importance of learning English. In this manner, the two languages further complicate the highly charged atmosphere of status politics and are themselves perceived by many through the same distorting lens.

Through the years, these negative feelings about English have motivated specific acts aimed at either perpetuating Spanish or reducing the presence of English. In 1949, after many years of defiance by teachers, parents, and intellectuals, Spanish was finally established as the medium of instruction in the public school system. The Puerto Rican Supreme Court determined in 1965 that Spanish would be the sole language of the island's legal system, and in 1991, Spanish was proclaimed Puerto Rico's only official language. In each case, English was stripped of a function it once was allowed to perform and a strong message was sent to islanders.

Mixed signals and the English Classroom

Perhaps one of the most revealing studies of how this complex of conflicting attitudes translates into classroom behavior is Rosa M. Torruellas' (1990) doctoral dissertation *Learning English in Three Private Schools in Puerto Rico: Issues of Class, Identity and Ideology.* Because of a deficient public school system, most middle and upper class families in Puerto Rico send their children to private

or parochial schools. Although it has generally been assumed that private education ensures proficiency in English while a public education does not, Torruellas found significant variation in level of mastery of English depending on how elite a clientele the particular private school caters to. Even more interestingly, she found that in spite of the fact that students in all types of private schools (middle-class to elite) express the firm belief that a command of English is necessary to attain the kinds and levels of professional employment they aspire to, only students in the elite schools engage in in-class and out-of-class behaviors which are conducive to their actually becoming competent in oral and written English. On the other hand, students in middle-class private schools seem to observe a tacit pact not to use English in English class, a practice antithetical to any attempt to implement a communicative methodology.

Torruellas found and described a student counterculture of resistance in the English class challenging the dominant educational paradigm of participation and respect toward teachers that typifies students' behavior in other subject areas. What she found was a classroom atmosphere of apathy at best or outright hostile resistance at worst, either of which ultimately subverts the language learning process in these schools. In the words of one teacher, "Cada año es más difícil ser maestra de inglés; hay una resistencia tremenda al lenguaje." (235)

Students question teachers as to why they have to learn English if in the United States, people don't learn Spanish. Statements can be heard such as, "Yo soy puertorriqueña y mi idioma es el español. Si dejamos de hablar español aquí no sería lo mismo." (230). English and Spanish are seen as being in opposition to each other and mutually exclusive. Resistance to using English is particularly marked among young males. Torruellas cites the following examples:

> A student is reading and asks Mr. García: "nephew." Milton spontaneously translates into Spanish, "sobrino, sobrina." He then looks at his male peers and complains about remembering the meaning of the word: "No se me olvida esa mierda."

> Pepe says "thank you" to the teacher for clarifying a question for him during a quiz. He then immediately looks at his male peers and laughs as if he had been making a joke. His peers also laugh. (236)

When students attempt to use English to communicate in class, they are met with *relajo,* or ridiculing and teasing, by their peers. Faced with this, teachers either engage in a tense tug-of-war by insisting on using English while students insist on responding in Spanish or they simply capitulate and use Spanish to teach English.

At one point Torruellas concludes, "It is clear that conflicting discourses about language in the larger society are finding expression and affecting practices in these private schools" (231). This is the point we wish to make also, only generalizing it to the whole educational system. Many contradictory messages about the role, status, and relevance of English in Puerto Rican society in general and in the various social classes in particular lead to equally contradictory responses to learning English (see Tollelson 1991).

Unraveling the Knot

The issues we have highlighted which have such an important and direct effect on the English classroom in Puerto Rico are all variables lying outside the realm in which the English teacher can exercise any direct control. Yet if we accept the premise that the majority of Puerto Rican students fundamentally want and have a need to learn English, what can the English teacher do given these circumstances?

In dealing with adolescent students, one approach would be to create an open dialogue about these issues through which students can identify and analyze their attitudes head on. If it is impossible to do this in English, it can be done in Spanish. Students should sort out what it is they really feel and believe about learning English. Do they in fact hold beliefs which are antithetical to the learning of the English language? Realistically, what role will a knowledge of English play in their adult lives? On the basis of this analysis, students can decide what behaviors are most faithful to their beliefs and fruitful for their needs.

Many students have false notions about the harmful effects of bilingualism or the ways in which the presence of English in Puerto Rico is having a negative effect on Spanish. The English teacher can ensure that students have access to factual information about language contact so they can make more informed judgments about these issues.

Another approach to developing a willingness to communicate in English could be to afford young students very positive and enjoyable experiences through communication in English before they reach an age when external attitudes begin to exercise an influence on their behavior. The successful program Torruellas described approached English as an intgegrated whole and set up many in-class and out-of-class opportunities for natural communicative use of the language. An important part of this is a program to develop a taste for extensive reading in English from an early age. Currently, the Department of Education in Puerto Rico is implementing an educational reform. The English Program has proposed using the whole language philosophy and a communicative methodology. Among other aspects, this would include an integrated approach to the development and practice of language skills based on the use of authentic materials and communicative tasks. If such a program is actually enacted in deed and not simply in name, this could lead to students' naturally developing early communicative competence and a positive attitude toward reading and communicating in English.

Whole language implies language across the curriculum. The use of English while studying other subject areas would be an ideal way to foster bilingualism among Puerto Rican students. It is a technique used in some private schools. However, the use of Spanish throughout the curriculum was an important victory for the supporters of Puerto Rican autonomy and it has been the rule since the late 1940s. For this reason, it is highly unlikely this approach would garner general support in Puerto Rico. This does not mean, however, that content from other courses could not be brought to the English class. Science, social sciences, and mathematics activities, content, or themes could be incorporated into tasks in the English class.

A final recommendation is that English and Spanish be treated as complementary modes of communication-not segregated,

competing areas of knowledge-when they are presented and dealt with in education contexts. This orientation could be fostered by greater collaboration between English and Spanish programs to develop generic competencies in written and oral communication. We would suggest, for example, that conceptual and procedural commonalities in such communicative activities as how to approach the reading and analysis of a text, how to draft one's own written text, or how to be effective in oral communication could first be dealt with in Spanish and then reinforced in the context of the English language. Also, by using a comparative approach, students could develop a richer understanding of the nature of language as a system. On the other hand, the teaching of Spanish as a first language could benefit from insights coming from second and foreign language teaching theory and methodology. Such cooperation in the academic sphere would set an excellent example of the mutual value of both languages. Bi or multilingualism should be treated as a norm, not a special case.

The messages students receive from the out-of-school environment can be extremely powerful in molding their attitudes and behaviors. As these messages are so mixed in Puerto Rico, learners frequently contradict themselves with respect to what they say they want and what they actually do. Yet in spite of this, open and frank discussion of the place of English in students' lives, early success and pleasant experiences in using English communicatively, and the fostering of bilingualism as a natural condition in which complementary languages serve specific and distinct learner needs may combine to ameliorate students' attitudes and practices when it comes to learning English in the schools of Puerto Rico.

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