

LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND THE ENGLISH TEACHER

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Thinking back to when I grew up in Brooklyn, New York, I don't remember any major problems with my being bilingual in English and Spanish. I was born into a home where two languages were present from the very first day of my life. This is a fact that I have always been aware of but took somewhat for granted until reading Pinker's book, *The Language Instinct* (1995). I have now become acutely aware of the language environment I was immersed in at different stages of my childhood and must agree with him that "the effortlessness, the transparency, the automaticity [of speech] are illusions, masking a system of great richness and beauty" (21). That rich system through which we construct meaning does not exist in a vacuum, it is "deeply entrenched in culture" (Bruner, 1990).

My mother was 23 years old when she arrived from Puerto Rico to New York; a monolingual adult with absolutely no previous exposure to the English language. She met and married Dad within her first year in the country. My father had been living in New York since he was eight years old and was a high school graduate. His parents were Puerto Rican immigrants who were also Spanish dominant. My grandfather got by with survival English skills and my grandmother never acquired the language. On the other hand, Dad grew up bilingual; he spoke both languages with no discernible accent.

When I came into my parent's lives (firstborn child), my mother still did not know English so, in retrospect, I assume the first language I heard was Spanish. In addition, all the members of her family who lived nearby were also first generation immigrants

who naturally spoke Spanish among themselves and to me. Taking this linguistic setting a bit further, religion was a pivotal facet of my family's life, and even that environment was totally dominated by Spanish. During the first five years of my life the speech community I lived in, even though living in Brooklyn, New York, was Spanish dominant. I suppose that my first babbling and further utterances were in Spanish, my heritage culture. When I questioned my mother recently about my acquisition of English, she informed me that during the first two years of elementary schooling (kindergarten and first grade) I "picked-up" the language with no apparent problem. Interestingly, I learned to read and write in English before I learned these skills in Spanish; from that moment on English assumed a dominant role in my life. At the age of seven I instinctively knew that I had to speak Spanish to my mother and grandmother, yet was able to switch to English when addressing my father or my siblings. The appropriate use of either language in specific settings was instinctual and effortless.

One possible explanation for this ability to switch back and forth between two languages is the "principles-and-parameters approach to language theory" presented by Judith R. Strozer (1994). She asserts there is a universal schema for language and, depending on the speech community of a child, he/she will automatically set the parameters that will propitiate "native command of the particular variety of the language internalized" (96). The process is not limited to one language, for a child can learn to speak more than one language natively; it's a matter of setting the different parameters.

Because of my strong Puerto Rican heritage culture and my desire to be completely accepted in that particular speech community, I decided to study Spanish in high school with the goal to polish my reading skills and learn the writing skills. (I had learned how to read Spanish in the church Bible classes where we were obligated to read verses in the Castilian Spanish of 1580). It is now that I realize my decision was influenced by my desire to be an integral part of my heritage community since all of the cultural activities I valued (family/religious) took place within that community. Chomsky says that "Learning has to come from the inside; you have to want to learn. If you want to learn, you'll want to learn no matter how bad the methods are..." (cited in Strozer, 176). Strange as it may seem, for me living in Brooklyn was like

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living in two different countries at the same time; yet it was natural. I did not perceive any particular personal constraints or educational setbacks because of this bicultural/bilingual setting. A possible explanation for this painless and seemingly effortless dual culture/language development may be the hypothesis of language instinct. According to researchers, our brains are naturally equipped and wired to acquire a language or languages, a process which is "guaranteed for children up to the age of six" (Pinker, 293).

I learned how to speak, read, and write Spanish, yet never during my childhood did I even imagine that I would spend most of my adult life on the island of Puerto Rico where Spanish is the dominant language. However, that is precisely what happened. My parents were part of the reverse migration of the 60's and 70's. Puerto Ricans who had been in the States (primarily New York) for many years and either had a profession or had saved money wanted to return to their "isla del encanto." I had the option of staying in New York because I was self-supporting. My decision to come to Puerto Rico was solely based on curiosity and adventure. This adventure turned into a lifelong commitment because I met my husband and have been living on this beautiful island since then. (Incidentally, six years after this "reverse migration" my parents returned to the States!) This new lifestyle was facilitated not only because I fell in love, but also because of my bilingual/bicultural upbringing (even if my peers in Puerto Rico made reference to my so-called "Newyorican" Spanish accent). Importantly, I fit in culturally and was able to communicate. After thirty years of immersion, I believe that accent is almost imperceptible.

As it turned out, my initial decision to come to Puerto Rico was a beneficial one, not only in my personal life but also in my professional life. I was able to pursue both undergraduate and graduate studies in Puerto Rico, a carry-over dream from New York. I had always been attracted by the teaching profession and English was one of my favorite classes. I saw this as an opportunity to contribute in some way to the social and economic growth and development of the people of the island of Puerto Rico that I had learned to love deeply. However, I soon came face to face with the fact that learning English for many Puerto Ricans is more a political issue than an economical/practical one. How different it had been for me; learning two languages was a natural uncomplicated process.

Perhaps because of my naiveté I never questioned the use of power or the imposition of one (Anglophone host) over the other (Spanish cultural heritage). In my mind each language played a specific role; I had to know Spanish in order to be an integral part of my sociocultural community, and I had to know English to succeed in the Anglo community. It was simple for me; but for Puerto Ricans on the island, language takes on a dynamically political role.

It became evident that in order to understand the language issue in Puerto Rico, I had to know the history of the island, something that was not taught to me in New York. I learned that for four hundred years Puerto Rico had been a colony of Spain, hence the language and countless other sociocultural norms of behaviors. I also learned about the Taino and African heritage and how each group made significant and lasting contributions to the emerging culture. In 1898 Puerto Rico was ceded by Spain to the United States, and it is since that occupation of Puerto Rico that English has been viewed by many Puerto Ricans as a political, power wielding imposition in the quest to subjugate and promote loss of identity and total assimilation. Even though Spanish is the language of instruction since 1947 and English is taught as a second language in all public schools from grade 1-12, the great majority of Puerto Ricans (80%) are not bilingual (Resnick 1993). Loss of language is closely linked to loss of identity, an issue that is continuously being aired publicly by politicians and intellectuals who desire total independence from the U.S.

Over the years I have come to understand the importance of language and culture and have come to believe that heritage language maintenance should supersede the learning of any other language. Language maintenance in Puerto Rico will serve to preserve a culture that is rich not only because of the Spanish heritage, but also because of the Taino and African cultures that are so evident in Puerto Ricans. All three cultures account for the diversity in language, food, music, dances, and religious beliefs that are part of what it means to be Puerto Rican.

As an English teacher in Puerto Rico I must consider all the historical, political, and cultural issues that affect language acquisition. I should ask my students what motivates them to learn English and in what ways do they think English will benefit them. I will most certainly talk to them about the benefits of language

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maintenance (Spanish) and language acquisition (English). I want to know that I am teaching English as a second language to students who fully comprehend the practical reasons, not just because it is a required class. Practical reasons lead me to a communicative, nonprescriptive process approach to the spoken and written language and may even lead me to content-specific writing classes which do not necessarily clash with the process approach (Susser 1994). Practical reasons make me value the innateness of Spanish versus the acquisition of English with its implications of an accent and grammatical first language interference. Practical reasons should lead me to encourage learning English, but not at the cost of losing Spanish.

I agree with Pinker in that "language is so tightly woven into human experience that it is scarcely possible to imagine life without it" (17). I am grateful for the privileged childhood which allowed me to be immersed in two languages. This has been a key element in a life filled with rich cultural and social experiences. My desire as an English teacher is to first of all respect the heritage language of my students and then do what is in my power to facilitate the learning of a second language. However, I will not superimpose one (English) over the other (Spanish). My intention is to "build upon the background experiences of [my] students" who are already culturally and linguistically rich (Vázquez, Pease-Álvarez, & Shannon 1994).

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