

On teaching the English language in Puerto Rico

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Volume: 31 | No: 29

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Issued : 07/24/2003

My views on language policy for Puerto Rico are well-known. I favor the primacy of Spanish in governmental and educational affairs. I do not take this view as pre-emptive action against statehood. To put it another way, I do not take it for political reasons but rather for cultural, linguistic, and pedagogical reasons. I take it because it stems from reality, a cultural reality which politics tends to obscure, falsify, and confuse. We are a Spanish-speaking people. This is the simple, unvarnished reality.

On the other hand, I favor that Puerto Ricans should be fluent in the English language. But it is a misguided policy to pretend that we have the resources and the wherewithal to turn the Puerto Rican people into a bilingual people. If this did not happen during the first half of the last century, when our population was one-third what it is today and when educational policy was directed by the U.S. toward that end, it is not going to happen any time in the future.

We must reset our sights, refocus our goals in order to make progress in bilingualism in Puerto Rico. Our goal should be to provide as many Puerto Ricans as possible with quality instruction in the English language. Our goal should be to make as many Puerto Ricans bilingual as possible. This goal is attainable.

What keeps us from it? A politicized, spurious application of the maxim that foreign languages are best learned in childhood as part of the curriculum of our public schools.

It is correct that the earlier a child is exposed to another language, the better his chances to become bilingual. But the quality of that exposure, either by immersion in a dominant culture where the language is spoken or through proficient instructors when the dominant culture is another, is determinant in the acquisition of the appropriate language skills.

Census figures have shown for decades that a massive, centralized system for the instruction of English in Puerto Rico does not work. Consistent figures going back to the '50s indicating that 60% of Puerto Ricans speak no English at all, 20% speak some English, and only 20% can speak both languages are a scathing indictment of the educational language policies, capabilities, and procedures in our public schools.

Yet no one listens. Why? Because language instruction policy in our educational system is the product of inertia and political timidity, including, I hasten to say, my own. When our school system was expanded to include all of our population in school age and the language of instruction was changed from English to Spanish, a well-intentioned decision was made to teach English as a second language from grades one to 12. At that time, we did not take into account that with bureaucratization in a massive, centralized system, the quality of our English teachers would deteriorate, as it did. Now, it is common to find English classes

given by teachers who lack basic skills in the English language. The proficient teacher of English in the public educational system is the exception, not the rule.

Some will ask, well, why don't we upgrade the English teachers for grades one–12? We simply don't have the resources or the administrative capabilities. This has been the experience of teaching the English language in our public schools for the past half-century.

In order to achieve quality instruction in English, we need to revise the curriculum and instead of teaching it from one-12, we should concentrate our resources on teaching it from grades nine-12. With the same amount of money that we now use to teach English deficiently from one-12, we can train or contract proficient English teachers for grades nine-12 and provide them with adequate equipment and materials so they can accomplish their mission.

At that point in time, students will be more aware of the importance of learning English. This is fundamental in acquiring language skills. Learning a second language requires personal effort beyond the effort one puts in merely to pass a class. This amount of effort requires interest, meaning a reason for making the effort. These motivational factors are not readily apparent in grade school. A skilled teacher or the proper school or family environment can make up for their absence, but a massive centralized educational system cannot.

In high school, the students' interests are more fully developed, and students begin to realize that knowledge of the English language is important to pursue most of their interests. By then they have had a greater opportunity to broaden their horizons, to know that as American citizens, their options are not limited to this island, and that in order to cope or succeed in that vast land of opportunity composed of the 50 states, knowledge of English is essential.

If the concentration of English-teaching resources in grades nine-12 makes sense in order to produce more bilingual public school students, why don't we do it? To answer this question I will leave aside the usual problems to be encountered from resistance from organized labor and focus on educational language policy. If a policy has proved itself a failure, why don't we try something else that might achieve our objective of producing more bilingual Puerto Ricans?

And here comes the old incubus, the evil spirit that pursues us all in Puerto Rico and gets the better of us at the time of rational decision making. This evil spirit called "political status," which dominates our politics, hovers over our educational language policy, steadfastly dooming it to failure.

If you stop teaching English in first grade, many will say:

- You are separating Puerto Rico from the United States.
- You are promoting independence.
- You are anti-American.

- You are an ungrateful wretch.
- You are the devil himself.

And so any attempt at change will be demonized by the stuttering *Don Eleuterio*¹ of this world, many of them incapable of uttering two coherent sentences in the English language or of differentiating between Wordsworth and Woolworth, victims of the system they so patriotically defend.

At some point, we have to reach a higher level of maturity in our politics so that we can make headway in fields such as education and economic development. In today's competitive world, this is imperative. Assuming a governor and a secretary of Education decide to spend the political capital necessary to change the policy of massive bilingualism by teaching English from one-12, which has clearly been a failure in Puerto Rico, to pursue the more realistic goal of producing more bilingual Puerto Ricans by concentrating resources in effective teaching from nine-12, there is no guarantee that they will succeed. Their efforts will be met by fierce ideological resistance from many of the pro-statehood teachers who will deem such an effort a threat to their possibilities for advancement within the system, which run parallel to the fortunes of the statehood movement in Puerto Rico against whom a change in educational language policy would be deemed to be directed.

Limiting our ability to teach English effectively is an ironic example of the many different ways that the status problem stands in the way of our island's progress.

Many Puerto Ricans who love our people wish the status issue would go away so we could concentrate on solving the problems of our economy, of drugs, crime, unemployment, and so on. They don't realize this problem is so embedded in our culture, in our institutions of government, that it limits our ability to govern and to bring Puerto Rico to higher levels of quality of life and civilization. This is why we must face up to this problem of status and resolve it once and for all. For an explanation on how we can do that, I refer to the past six columns I wrote for CARIBBEAN BUSINESS.