

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

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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

