

A semilingual society



BY RAFAEL HERNÁNDEZ COLÓN

An ideologically driven linguistic policy has set in at our Department of Education. The goal is to gradually establish English as the language of instruction in our public schools. By making English the language in which math, sciences and other subjects are taught, our pro-statehood government intends to turn out future generations of bilingual Puerto Ricans from our public schools.

One can dismiss this initiative, as the Teacher's Association has done, by pointing out that it is doomed to fail catastrophically because Education lacks the human resources with which to undertake such an effort. The vast majority of our schoolteachers aren't fluent in English and can't conduct their classes in English. Forcing thousands of teachers who prefer to teach in Spanish into training to conduct their classes in English is an improbable venture.

This is enough to lay this matter to rest as a bad joke being played on the children of our public schools, but we should delve deeper into this question from a pedagogical point of view to perceive the harmful effects such a policy would have.

Our public schools must turn out graduates proficient in English. The issue is how to accomplish this. Changing the language of instruction from Spanish to English in all subject matters isn't the way to go about it. Not merely because we are ill equipped for such an undertaking, but also because it is wrong. We are not an English-speaking people. Our vernacular is Spanish. Our means of communication is the Spanish language. Spanish is essential to our thinking, understanding and communicating.

Public education must equip us with the broadest possible vocabulary in our own language and the grammatical skills and literature necessary to become proficient in it. To do that, all subjects must be taught in Spanish. Teaching them in English won't make us bilingual because we will not be proficient in either language. It will make us semilinguals: a linguistically handicapped people. Our students will learn biological terms in English, for example, but they won't know them in Spanish. So they will become proficient in Spanglish: in other words, semilingual, incapable of proficiency in either language.

The mastery of the Spanish language of our high school graduates is bad enough without teaching all subjects in English. This is the core issue we must address in linguistic policy. It is of critical importance as we prepare our youth to face the challenges of the knowledge economy.

Our linguistic limitations become quite clear when we participate in international conferences with participants from Spain or Latin America. Time and again I have observed Puerto Ricans, whom I know have a deeper knowledge of the subject at hand than other participants, not being able to communicate their message as effectively as others with lesser knowledge of the subject but with more knowledge of their own language.

I have had the same experience with our limitations in communication when the conference is held in English and the other participants come from English-speaking countries. On occasion, I have encountered Puerto Ricans in both types of conferences who communicate just as well as their Spanish- or English-speaking counterparts, but this is the exception, not the rule.

Bilingualism must be promoted from our proficiency in Spanish, not from its impoverishment.

Semilingualism is a malady that affects people in situations where different cultures converge. The result is collective impoverishment of the capacity to express themselves, dearth of vocabulary, lack of precision in thinking and linguistic incoherence. Linguistic policy must guard against this. Bilingualism must be promoted from our proficiency in Spanish, not from its impoverishment.

To do so in the public schools, we must apply efficiently the resources we have available to improve the learning of Spanish and to teach English effectively. Teaching English effectively requires interesting students in learning it. The goal of converting the Puerto Rican people into a bilingual people as the statehood dogma would have it is unrealistic. There are no bilingual peoples in the world that have become such by enforced bilingualism.

The goal must be providing the opportunities to turn out as many bilingual students from our public schools as possible. Becoming bilingual is the result of the educational opportunities afforded and the individual's effort to acquire the language; it can't be forced upon our students or future generations as a whole for ideological reasons.

Perceiving the importance of acquiring the English language requires a certain maturity. We teach it now as a subject from first grade on. I would place special emphasis on the teaching of English that occurs from ninth through 12th grade in the following ways: First, make students aware of the educational enhancement that comes

from learning English and the higher range of opportunities and levels of income that come with learning it. Secondly, provide adequate teachers who not only are proficient in this language, but who also have a breadth of knowledge of the richness of English literature and can awaken enthusiasm for learning the language. Although forcing teachers to learn English so they can teach all subjects in this language is a nonstarter, we do have the budgetary resources for and the real possibility of recruiting or preparing effective English teachers for high school.

Such an effort can't be undertaken successfully if it is ideologically driven—that is, if the motivation behind it is the quest of becoming the 51st state of the Union. This not only divides teachers, parents and students, but it also politicizes the issue, blurring pedagogical realities. It can be a tactical move in a particular campaign or a talking point in arguing for statehood with members of Congress, but it lacks the consensus or the educational principles necessary for it to accomplish its purpose: turning out more bilingual graduates from our public schools.

Public policy driven by ideology rather than pragmatic realities has already harmed Puerto Rico substantially: witness the demise of jobs and investment coming from the implementation of the federal minimum wage and the loss of Section 936. Now our statehooders are ready to push even further on linguistic policy. If they should win re-election and the plebiscite, one must be ready to expect the phasing in of federal taxes or some other sort of cultural or constitutional assimilation.

Such a divisive focus will not move Puerto Rico forward in the coming years. On the contrary, it will lead us into further stagnation.

Language policy is an area where consensus can be built, for we are all in favor of turning out the largest possible number of bilingual students from our schools. But it must not be approached from a status-partisan point of view. Neither should the structural and curriculum changes in our educational system necessary to usher in the critical learning abilities required by the knowledge economies be approached with a political-partisan focus.

Pragmatic consensus in the present is the better way to build a better future for all Puerto Ricans. ■

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