DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 053 608 FL 002 464

AUTHOR	Fisher, John C.
TITLE	Bilingualism in Puerto Rico: A History of Frustration.
INSTITUTION	New York State English Council.
PUB DATE	Apr 71
NOTE	6p.; Special Anthology Issue and Monograph 14
JOURNAL CIT	English Record; v21 n4 p19-24 Apr 1971
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	Bilingual Education, Bilingualism, Cultural Differences, *English (Second Language), *Language Instruction, *Language Teachers, Minority Groups, Political Issues, Public Education, *Puerto Ricans, Spanish Speaking, *Teacher Education, Teacher Qualifications
IDENTIFIERS	New York City, Puerto Rico

ABSTRACT

The implementation of English language instruction presents problems for Puerto Ricans both in Puerto Rico and in the United States, as seen in New York City. In Puerto Rico, the role of English in the schools has always been a political issue with widespread implications. Both there and in the States, the greatest problem in English instruction is the lack of well trained, qualified teachers. To alleviate this problem, the Puerto Rican Department of Public Instruction is granting aid to 425 men and women to improve the teaching of English. Several universities in the States are instituting graduate and undergraduate programs designed to prepare teachers of English as a second language. (VM)

From: The English Record; vol. 21, no. 4, April, 1971.

BILINGUALISM IN PUERTO RICO: A HISTORY OF FRUSTRATION

John C. Fisher

The Treaty of Paris, which concluded the Spanish-American War, saw the United States, for the first time, with territorial lands which were culturally different and geographically distant. Congress's Foraker Act of 1900, which replaced Puerto Rico's military occupation with a civil legislature partly provided by Presidential appointment, allowed limited Puerto Rican participation in its own government. In 1917, a new Organic Act, the Jones Act, increased island participation in its own affairs, offered U. S. citizenship to those Puerto Rican inhabitants who wished to have it, and gave a bill of rights to the island. It was not until 1947, however, that the people of Puerto Rico elected their own governor who was now given the power to appoint all executive heads of departments, including a Commissioner of Public Instruction.

The history of English teaching and bilingualism in that fifty-year period, and since, has been in large measure the history of public education itself. And it has been a history of frustration. There seems to be little doubt that until 1947 each Commissioner of Education was appointed to the island primarily because of his stand on the role of English in the schools. At the time of his appointment each Commissioner seeems to have felt that English should be the medium of instruction for at least a majority of the school years. Many soon gave in, however, to the difficulties of teaching in a language foreign to the native Spanish of the students. Before and since 1947, the teaching of English has been an important issue in Island politics and "the most controversial subject of the curriculum." [1]

When M. G. Brumbaugh was appointed Commissioner of Education in Puerto Rico by President McKinley in 1900, it was already policy to teach in English whenever possible. Brumbaugh found, however, that with few English speaking teachers available it was best to teach in Spanish through the first eight grades, and in English in the secondary schools. As realistic as this system was, it was not sanctioned by a U. S. government that seemed committed to assimilating Puerto Rico into its North American culture. By 1903 political pressures called for English to be the medium of instruction in all grades and President Theodore Roosevelt's new appointee, Roland Falkner, complied. For the next fourteen years the use of English made steady but controversial progress. Many students in the elementary grades found understanding to be difficult or impossible, and learned neither Spanish nor English well. Although the situation was hardly the decisive factor in the Puerto Rican politics of the time, it undoubtedly contributed to the popularity of the pro-independence Unionista party, which went undefeated from 1904 to 1924.

[1] Juan José Osuna, A History of Education in Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras: University of Puerto Rico, 1948, p. 415.

Dr. John C. Fisher, Executive Secretary of the New York State English Council from 1968 to 1970, is Professor of English and Coordinator of Linguistic Studies at the State University of New York College at Oswego. During the fall of 1970 he was Visiting Professor of Linguistics at Inter American University, San German, Puerto Rico. Dr. Fisher has published articles and books in the field of English as a second language and remedial English.

In 1917 Spanish was reinstated as the medium of instruction for the first four grades, since this was the terminating grade for most students. In the early 1930's, however, Commissioner José Padin fostered a study which bore out his suspicion that instruction in English was detrimental to learning. He noted that Puerto Ricans "were paying an enormous price in the acquisition of . . . knowledge . . . for the doubtful advantage of enabling our students to practice English through their Geography and History lessons." [2] By 1934 all subjects, except English, were taught in Spanish in the first eight grades.

In 1934, with the appointment of President Franklin Roosevelt of Blanton S. Winship to the governorship of Puerto Rico, Americanization was reaffirmed and English again became the language of instruction in all grades. Two years later Padin resigned. In a letter to José Gallardo, his new Commissioner, Roosevelt, perhaps without intending to, summarized the Puerto Rican English language problem, past, present and future:

> Puerto Rico came under the American flag 38 years ago. Nearly 20 years ago Congress extended American citizenship to Puerto Ricans. It is regrettable that today hundreds of thousands of Puerto Ricans have little and often virtually no knowledge of the English language. . . . It is an indispensable part of the American policy that the coming generation of American citizens in Puerto Rico grow up with complete facility in the English tongue. It is the language of our Nation. . . .
>
> Puerto Rico is a densely populated Island. Many of its sons and daughters will desire to seek economic opportunity on the mainland. . . . They will be greatly handicapped if they have not mastered English . . . . Clearly there is no desire or purpose to diminish the enjoyment or the usefulness of the rich Spanish cultural legacy of the people of Puerto Rico. What is necessary, however, is that the American citizens of Puerto Rico should profit from their unique geographical situation . . . by becoming bilingual. But bilingualism will be achieved . . . only if the teaching of English . . . is entered into at once with vigor, purposefulness, and devotion, and with the understanding that English is the official language of our country."[3]

Gallardo, in spite of strong opposition by popular political leaders of the island to making English the official language of the schools, attempted for several years to implement Roosevelt's attitude. But in 1941 the experience of several years caused him, like others before him, to restrict English as the medium of instruction to the secondary schools. Roosevelt had not told him how to achieve his goal, and school officials lacked the money, the expertise, and even the inclination, to enter into bilingualism with "vigor, purposefulness, and devotion."

The political dimension of the English language continues to this day. In 1948, soon after the governor was able to choose his own Commissioner of Education, Spanish became the medium of instruction in all grades, with English taught for one period a day. With double sessions—and only three total hours of instruction—in many of the schools, the period has often been only thirty minutes long. The resulting change in the English proficiency of the population is striking. As one goes about the citites and towns of Puerto Rico today, one notes that those people who were graduated from the secondary schools before the 1950's are among the best speakers of English. Their proficiency level is hardly native, and those who went on to study in the States note that they had minor difficulties "for three or four months";

---

[2] José Padin, "English in Puerto Rico," Puerto Rico School Review, San Juan, 1935, p. 8.

[3] April 8, 1937, as quoted in Osuna, pp. 876-7.

but among the sixty or seventy Puerto Rican business and professional men of this writer's acquaintance, the comprehension proficiency seems to average out at about ninety percent, with production at about eighty percent. They are generally agreed that studying secondary school subjects in English did not prove to be a detriment.

Those people who have been graduated within recent years are obviously much less proficient in English. In at least one university in Puerto Rico, seventy-five percent of the entering freshmen are unable to carry on a simple conversation in English, in spite of the fact that the texts being used throughout the elementary grades dictate an oral approach. That same university, until the present time, has taught more than fifty percent of its classes in English. Because this now causes an undue hardship on students, it will soon begin a three-track curriculum. Upon entrance a student may choose a program which will be offered only in English, only in Spanish, or in a combination of both. It is expected that only the English Department will offer all courses in English, and that most other departments will offer their courses in Spanish.

The question of whether or not it is necessary for Puerto Ricans to learn English is no less pertinent—and aggravating—today than it was in Roosevelt's day, and it is without doubt a part of the greater question of the future status of Puerto Rico. By common consent of Congress and the people of the island, the present Commonwealth could become either an independent nation or the fifty-first state. It may also retain its present political status. Supporters of the Commonwealth claim that there is harmony between the valuable qualities of the U. S. with its social and economic progress, and Puerto Rico with its agrarian and ethnic traditions. Puerto Ricans, too, accept the principles of democracy. Spanish is the language of instruction in the schools, they say, but there is a period of English instruction each day. There are English language radio and television stations, and one English language newspaper. These are offered as evidence of Puerto Rico's bilingualism. The evidence, however, can be compared with the reverse situation in New York City, which offers Spanish-language mass communication to the Spanish-speaking community. One can hardly think of New York City as bilingual. Both Spanish and English are spoken there, but the overwhelming majority of people speak only one language with ease.

Statehood, according to the United States-Puerto Rican Commission on the Status of Puerto Rico, "would necessarily involve a cultural and language accommodation to the rest of the federated States of the Union. . . . This does not require the surrender of the Spanish language nor the abandonment of a rich cultural heritage."[4] The suggestion is obvious. In order for Congress to allow statehood, the people of Puerto Rico would have to achieve a higher degree of bilingualism than presently exists. In his supplemental views, Senator Henry M. Jackson noted that "The unity of our Federal-State structure requires a common tongue. . . . Surely, at a time when we are trying to eliminate ghettos of all kinds, we should not establish within our Federal-State system a 'language ghetto.' . . . The continuance of Spanish as a second language would not be inconsistent with this requirement."[5]

Some independence advocates claim that their agrarian and ethnic traditions can flourish only if they are freed from the influence of the United States. But the movement is not the most popular one in Puerto Rico. It has claimed no more than ten percent of the voters in recent years. In 1967, when

[4] United States-Puerto Rico Commission on the Status of Puerto Rico, Status of Puerto Rico, 1966. p. 15.

[5] Status of Puerto Rico, p. 22.

a revitalized pro-independence element in the Department of Public Instruction attempted further to restrict the teaching of English to two periods a week, the opposition was heard throughout the island. An overwhelming majority of people in Puerto Rico seem satisfied with Commonwealth status, and the present Governor, Luis Ferre, and his party tend to view statehood as inevitable. Although the Governor won his election in 1968 with less than a simple majority, he has nevertheless been able since then to work quietly and efficiently to bring the dream of his statehood party to fruition.

The Puerto Rican people are indeed homogenous. They share a common religion and a common Hispanic language and heritage, and because of their insular situation they are likely to retain their culture even better than mainland subcultures like the Pennsylvania Dutch. The fact remains, however, that the Puerto Rican society is rapidly undergoing a change from agrarian to U. S.-oriented urban. Puerto Rico remains politically and economically linked, as it has for over seventy years, with the United States.

The frustration of the seventy-year-old bilingual movement now rises as a spectre, not only on the island, but also in the urban areas of the Atlantic Seaboard where Puerto Ricans gather to make new lives. The first eight months of 1970 saw the heaviest emigration of Puerto Ricans to the U. S. since 1950. More than 90,000 left home in that period.[6] In the past ten years the number of islanders in the States has more than doubled. Over a million reside in New York City alone, which now has a total Spanish-speaking population estimated at nearly two million—22% of the city's residents. As a result, Manuel A. Casiano Jr., director of the New York City office of the Commonwealth Migration Division claimed last fall that housing, employment, and educational opportunities for New York City's Puerto Ricans have dwindled. A product himself of the city schools, Casiano noted that an unprepared educational system has contributed to the deplorable situation: "When I was a youngster, maybe we had 5 Spanish-speaking children in a class of 40. . . . Today, in many city schools, the situation is reversed. . . . In a situation like that it's almost impossible to help the Spanish-speaking children get by." He sees a broad bilingual system as the only solution.[7]

In the same month Casiano spoke, November 1970, New York City made another substantial move in its constant attempt to overcome the monumental language problem. It began bilingual programs in 113 schools. Both Spanish and English are being taught to native children and to children of Puerto Rican origin. The effectiveness of the program was questioned, however, before it began. At a November 23 Senate committee hearing, Antonia Pantoja, founder of Aspira, a nationwide Puerto Rican community organization, claimed that the mainland's two million Puerto Ricans were "the poorest silent minority" in the nation, "incapable of participating in American society and facing total alienation from it." Severely criticizing the federal government and the nation's schools, she suggested that the only solution may be to create an educational system that would especially tend to the needs of Puerto Rican children who "do not speak English." She noted that 50% of Puerto Rican children in the States do not finish school, and called the bilingual programs "pitiful." "To people who have failed in teaching English the federal government is giving several millions so they can now fail in teaching two languages, Spanish and English." She warned the committee that "Puerto Rican youth is becoming more militant as a result of its feeling of desperation."[8] There is some indication, then, that government may still be unable to deal with the problem.

If bilingualism fails in New York City and if it continues to fail in Puerto Rico, the immediate cause may be what it likely has been since 1898.

[6] San Juan Star, October 25, 1970, p. 15.
[7] San Juan Star, November 6, 1970, p. 3.
[8] San Juan Star, November 24, 1970, p. 3.

As in Brumbaugh's day, qualified English teachers are at a premium. Most teachers in Puerto Rico and in the States—*including teachers of English*—are not prepared to teach a language. Daniel Portelles, director of bilingual programs in Brooklyn's District 14 pointed to this problem in San Juan during a recent Department of Public Instruction-supported conference on educating Puerto Rican children who live on the mainland. He stated that many of the island's children arrive in New York with "a poor understanding of the Spanish language and practically no knowledge whatsoever of English. . . . Many of the children are illiterate in both languages." He noted that 75% of Puerto Rican teachers who apply for positions in New York City fail to pass the qualifying examinations."[9] The cause of this may be that in some districts of the island most elementary school teachers have only a provisional certificate. They teach without even a normal school degree. And their pay scale is so low they have little opportunity to take course work toward a bachelor's degree.

It seems imperative that Puerto Rican teachers have some training on the mainland, if only to acquire a standard English pronunciation. One recently retired Puerto Rican district supervisor of English, of this writer's acquaintance, estimates that over ninety percent of those responsible for teaching English have too little acquaintance with the language. Many cannot read the teacher's guide in their English textbooks. Their only experience has been the thirty to fifty minutes a day in the elementary and secondary schools. These teachers have never engaged in a conversation with a native speaker of English. Elementary school teachers, after all, do not major in English in college; and most secondary school teachers who do, never leave the island.

In spite of generally good texts, written especially for Puerto Rico with the consultation of the late Charles Fries, little English is being taught. In an unofficial test conducted in one school district several years ago, third graders were examined at the end of the year to determine the extent of their reading ability. The third grade English text is designed to teach beginning reading. The results showed that approximately fifty percent of the children could not read a single word of English, and twenty-five percent recognized only several words. Only the remaining twenty-five percent read at grade level. The following year, after the teachers had been encouraged to use the materials provided for them, and had been visited periodically, seventy-five percent of the third graders read English at their grade level. Much of the language problem, then, seems to be perpetuated by teachers who still lack the "vigor, purposefulness, and devotion," mentioned by Roosevelt.

The situation in the States is hardly better. Most teachers of Spanish-speaking students are not qualified to treat the problem. Although New York City now certifies elementary and secondary school teachers in English as a Second Language, relatively few qualify. There are signs, however, that the problem is at least—and at last—being attended to, in both Puerto Rico and the United States. The Puerto Rican Department of Public Instruction, under the direction of Commissioner Ramón Mellado, is granting aid to 425 men and women to improve the teaching of English. Many of them who have lived in the States, and who are bilingual, are being prepared to teach English in the elementary grades, where the need is presently the greatest. These young people teach in the schools while they are enrolled in undergraduate linguistics programs that will provide them with degrees in teaching English as a second language.

Universities that train teachers are also beginning to recognize the need for undergraduate and graduate programs that will prepare their students

[9] San Juan Star, October 21, 1970, p. 6.

to teach English in Spanish-speaking areas. The State University of New York, while it has lagged behind Columbia and New York University, promises now to move forward in both graduate and undergraduate study. The units at Albany and Cortland are preparing teachers of English as a second language in graduate programs. Cortland, with its emphasis on sociolinguistics, is especially suited to train people for the urban areas. These two graduate programs are supplemented by undergraduate programs in linguistics offered by Stony Brook, the University at Buffalo, Binghamton, and Oswego. While most programs offer only limited work in applied linguistics, Oswego's is designed so that the student who wishes to teach English as a second language may do much of his work in that area.

The future, then, may be less bleak than the past. Better days may come with better teachers in the classrooms. This writer is reminded of his high school teacher's solution for the world's problems: "Take a little Latin!" The answer to our social problems is not, unfortunately, "Take a lot of English." Prejudice and poverty will have their way. Perhaps, however, with more difficulty, if language is no barrier to a person's making his way in the world.

A story is going around Puerto Rico and New York about the New York City college senior, Mike, who was mugged near the campus last fall by three young Puerto Ricans. Mike gave up all he had—a nickel. Questioning his muggers, he found that they needed money to help a friend. So he took them to the dormitory where he was able to collect $10 for them. In conversation with José, the one who had held the gun, Mike found that the young Puerto Rican had dropped out of school and hoping to get into the Marines had failed the English test. Mike offered to coach José and subsequently met his whole family in their South Bronx tenement. It was there that he readied José for the examination. By spring José will be in the Marines, and Mike will be back at his demonstrations for peace.

The story is true.
