

## No English, Gracias *Marilyn Buck*

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I teach English as a Second Language (ESL). As a poet and a writer, I recognize and believe in the power of the word, not only because language enables us as human beings to communicate with with one another and to participate in the life of one's community, but also because words beget actions and movement. There is no language that is not beautiful, not poetic, despite what detractors of particular languages say, with their sense of superiority, covering their ignorance, prejudice, or tin ear. However, there are people who resist learning the language of an historical enemy, of the conqueror and colonizer, because it was used like a whip across a population's back, an instrument of commands and orders, deculturation, and national humiliation.

Because English has been used as an important weapon in an occupying nation's arsenal of subjugation, I had to think long and hard about whether I should become an English teaching "aide" to students, most of whose home languages were already the result of colonial domination, the great majority in the ESL program at FCI Dublin being Spanish speakers. Most of these women are from Mexico or of Mexican heritage who have lived in the United States, some for nearly all their lives.

In my early teens I had picked up some Spanish here and there, but not enough to hold a conversation. Living in Texas, I should have studied it in high school, but in those days, French was the preferred language for those who hoped to go to an Eastern college or university. Later, in the 1970s while I was at the Federal Women's Prison at Alderson, I met Lolita Lebron, the Puerto Rican nationalist who, along with three other companeros had invaded the U.S., Congress in 1954 in order to bring the demand for Puerto Rico's independence before the world. In the course of many conversations about the colonial status of Puerto Rico, the war in Vietnam, and the question of national liberation and decolonization, Lolita began to teach me some Spanish. But, because the process of learning Spanish was slow and we enjoyed talking together, we always ended up conversing in English. If I remember correctly, her generation of students had been forced to learn English in the schools in Puerto Rico. Spanish had been prohibited as the language of learning for a number of decades after the colonization by the United States.

Only after I was imprisoned again in 1985 did I finally learn Spanish well enough to communicate. In that period, during the government's

battle against the cocaine cartels, there were times when nearly 75 percent of the women being held at Manhattan Correctional Center in New York were Spanish-speakers, most from Colombia. Few had enough English at their command to negotiate the difficult circumstances of being in a strange land in the worst possible situation. In prison a woman knows no one, has no person of confidence in her daily life to consult about what is going on around her and what might happen. Simple responses like “yes” or “no” can be compromising in complex situations, especially if one does not know what one is agreeing to, but is intimidated into giving some response!

I could not stand aside and be silent. For me, fairness is crucial to creating a world I wish to live in. As an anti-imperialist and anti-racist, I realized that I had to go beyond the ease of being in the predominantly English environment and enter the Spanish-speaking one. I had to overcome my own difficulties and embarrassment as a learner before I could support those isolated in a land familiar because of TV, but hostile. All foreign national women suffered culture shock and the shock of being in this distorted colony within America. All of us, U.S. residents included, were mourning our social death.

Besides getting a grammar book and a dictionary, I began to spend a lot of time with Latin American women. Nearly all were generous with their time and company, happy that someone wanted to learn Spanish in order to relate to their social context. Nevertheless I ran up against my own wall. Hanging like dark shadows over my actual learning process were feelings of inadequacy, even stupidity because I could not understand well or respond intelligibly – this is the kind of wall that other second language learners encounter within themselves. In the first months, even after I could comprehend some things, I had great trouble responding. What a blow, given my usual confidence in speaking! With a lot of encouragement, and frequent laughter at my unruly syntax and “gringo” pronunciation, I did slowly gain the ability and confidence to interpret, at least minimally, in critical situations: dialog with officers or other prisoners, letters from lawyers or the courts, rules and regulations.

As adults, most of us take for granted our competence, our ability to respond and interact effectively. My own problems in learning gave me insight into the vast leap that most of us must make to learn another language. Our brains must awaken to grasp vocabulary, syntax; our eyes must learn

to recognize words and their roots; our ears must learn to hear multitudes of sound, not only of the words, but speech rhythms and the intonations and accents of the speaker; and our mouths must learn unfamiliar ways of moving our lips, tongues, jaws, along with new ways of using our breath to articulate what we wish to say and to put words in the proper order. Not so easy, and certainly a mountain to climb compared to the ease of learning our home language.

Reflecting on my own adult language-learning experience, I considered teaching in the prison's English program more seriously. I had the skills to teach, and philosophically I wanted to contribute to my sisters' general learning and experience in the present and their ability to negotiate and change their worlds in the future. To know the language of the dominant political, economic and military power may be decisive in living in what we now refer to as a globalized world. It is even more important for one simply trying to live and survive in the United States.

After having taught several intermediate and advanced classes, I was asked to step into a pre-beginner class, as the teacher of that class was preparing to leave on a writ for a court hearing. In this pre-beginner class, basic prison survival skills are taught as a part of life skills, with little emphasis on grammar. Grammar comes later, after the students have some vocabulary to begin to understand what is going on around them and to navigate the prison world, much as a traveler in a foreign country might have to do.

All the students spoke Spanish as their home language; the majority were from Mexico. The first week I spent getting to know the women. I wanted to learn about them, as students and as personalities and to put them at ease. I asked them to say something about themselves, their lives, where they were from. I also paid attention to their level of learning and to their attitudes toward learning in general and English in particular. I quickly figured out who the most and least advanced students were. I was pleased that most of them were eager to learn English—in fact, some had waited for several years to get into the class. But almost all were too embarrassed to try to speak in English on their own. A few had not advanced beyond third or fourth grade and were seriously hampered by their weak reading abilities and learning skills, though still anxious to face the challenge. One had become discouraged, having made little progress after more than a year as a “pre-beginner”.

Then there were the two women who sat in the back of the classroom; Flor, who had been in the class a few months, and Delia, who had recently started. They and the other women in the class rarely engaged one another. Delia knew quite a bit of English and was in this class only until she could be tested and moved on. She would speak up briefly until Flor arrived, always late, and then fall silent, at least in English. But in Spanish she carried on, chatting animatedly with Flor in the back of the room. Flor told me later, in Spanish, that she and Delia had grown up together in a *caserio*—a housing project-in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Because they were Puerto Ricans, and technically citizens of the United States, Flor and Delia were obliged by law to study English, in order not to lose “good time”. Delia took an interest in improving her English literacy skills and was soon moved to a class at a higher level. Flor, showing few English skills, had to stay.

Flor continued sitting in the back row, now silent, doing her written class work without asking questions about the work, but readily allowing me to review what she’d done when I worked one-on-one with her. She would do her work quickly and quite well. It was clear that she understood more English than she would admit to, but she would never speak, except in Spanish.

In adult classes, a teacher must be able to encourage the most learning possible, without anyone embarrassing anyone, creating conflict, or hard feelings. And, as a prisoner teaching other prisoners, I was always careful about how I related to my students. We are equal as human beings, and even more equal as prisoners; I wanted to avoid any suggestion that as a “teacher,” I was trying to be “over” another prisoner, or “pulling rank,” either in school, or anywhere else. One of the most common responses in a situation where one prisoner says something that implies criticism of another about work, school, or anything is: *You’re not the police; you’re a number just like me so shut up.*

After several unsuccessful attempts to engage Flor in the class, I decided to take another tack. I realized that, because I had stepped into the middle of another teacher’s class, I had not given my “talk” about learning English with which I usually began. Now I gave it:

Most of you speak Spanish and you may not have ever have required English to make life more bearable and intelligible in this prison world,

since more than two-thirds of the population speak Spanish and even some in authority do. While some of you are anxious to learn English, others have no choice; you have to be in this class. I can understand why that might cause you to feel resentment or anger. Hopefully you'll decide you might as well learn this language. Why? To be able to participate in the world around you even though you are forced to be here. Yes, English is the language of the empire, the language of military occupation and economic domination. If I were not an U.S. resident, I might not like English. I might not care about Shakespeare or other English writers, but I would want to know what these English speakers are up to.

Through language you understand what is being said to you or about you. And you can read what is being written about you, your family, your community, or your land. You have the power to detect the lies and to respond and defend yourself. Your home language nourishes and reinforces your people's right to self-determination, independence and justice as part of the culture and richness of the society. But knowing the language of the colonizer enables you to know more than he does. You have an edge; you know what the English speaker says and likely thinks, but he doesn't know what you say or think. Knowledge is a tool and language is a tool. In this world the more tools we have to build with, the better.

My students smiled; they understood what I said since I'd said it in English and in Spanish. Then class began. Flor remained quiet but she looked at me with her piercing green eyes, with curiosity, I thought. At the end of class, she did not run out the door as was her custom but waited until I had finished speaking with another student. Then Flor and I stepped outside onto the short path that led to the locked doors that open for the ten-minute movement from one area to another in the prison compound.

*Miss, que sabe de colonialismo?* [What do you know about colonialism?] I told her that I support Puerto Rican independence and have *independentista companeros*. She smiled.

The next days were no different. Flor continued to arrive late and maintain her silence. At last I approached her to say that since I believed she could speak some English, I was curious to know whether she refused to speak English for a reason. She smiled and nodded. She told me – in Spanish, of course – that she was the only one in her family who was an

*independentista* in her heart. And she would not be forced to learn English or to speak it, even if she lost all her good time.

I argued that that was a terrible idea! What would her children say about that? She stayed on then, but eventually left ESL for a Spanish-language GED class. She didn't lose her good time; she found a loophole in the regulations. She knows that she will ultimately have to pass an exam proving that she can read and comprehend English. But for now, she does not have to study English.

Today in Puerto Rico, there is a great deal of distress about the state of the nation's language. In a manifesto, "United by Our Language," presented at the Center for Advanced studies in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean in April 2009, point 7 states: "That in spite of the resistance and strength that the Spanish language continues to have in Puerto Rico, there currently exists a profound, serious, preoccupation concerning the progressive deterioration of the vocabulary of Puerto Rican citizens, including basic linguistic skills in oral and written expression, as well as critical thinking" (Claridad, 2009).

The manifesto goes on to demand that the current policies be changed to "install a policy on Spanish-language learning that is compatible with the sociological and cultural reality of the Puerto Rican student body". Puerto Rico has resisted the imposition of a foreign language, English; but the mixing of it with Spanish, for many of the population, has impeded knowledge of either language adequately. The trampling on the language that unites this country with the rest of Latin America undermines the culture and identity of a proud nation. Citizens such as Flor recognize that, even without having graduated from high school.

We continue to talk nearly every day. I encourage Flor to work on her Spanish GED studies, then we talk about her country, her beloved green island, and her desire to participate in defending her proud nation.

## REFERENCES

Claridad – Editorial Staff (2009) "Unido por nuestra idioma", *Claridad*, San Juan (Puerto Rico), translated by Marilyn Buck – May 7.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As a teenager in Texas *Marilyn Buck* joined movements to end the war in Vietnam and fight oppression of black people in the U.S. Later she actively supported anti-imperialist struggles and the Black Liberation Movement; in 1973 convicted of purchasing handgun ammunition, she was given a ten year sentence. After four years in Federal prison in Alderson, West Virginia, she was granted a furlough and went underground. Recaptured eight years later she was convicted of several politically motivated conspiracies and acts—including the freeing of Assata Shakur, now in political exile in Cuba. Marilyn's sentences totaled eighty years. In Dublin-FCI in California she became deeply involved in many projects, including HIV/AIDS education. Buck has won PEN awards for poetry and nonfiction. Among her collections of poetry is *Rescue the Word*, (2002); in 2008, City Lights Books published Buck's translation of Cristina Peri Rossi's *State of Exile*, which was her Master's thesis. She expects to be released in March, 2010.