

Hunger for memory: the education of Richard Rodríguez

by Richard Rodríguez (Edited and translated version from English)

Part I: Bilingual education

(1) Today, supporters of bilingual education suggest that students like me lose a lot by not being taught in their family's language. What they do not seem to recognize is that, as a socially disadvantaged child, I consider Spanish to be a private language. What I needed to learn in school was that I had the right, and the obligation, to speak the public language of the gringos.

(2) Without a doubt, I would have liked to hear my teachers address me in Spanish when I entered the room. I would have felt a lot less fearful. I would have trusted them more and responded easily. But I would have delayed, how long would I have delayed ?, in learning the language of public society. I would have avoided learning the great lesson of school, that I have a public identity.

(3) Fortunately, my teachers weren't sentimental about their responsibility. What they understood was that I needed to speak the public language. But I couldn't believe that the English language was mine to use it. Did she suspect that once I had learned the public language, my pleasant family life would change?

(4) Three months, five, half a year passed. Without smiling, always alert, my teachers noticed my silence. They began to relate my behavior to the difficult progress my older brothers had. Until one Saturday morning three nuns came to the house to speak with our parents. All stiff, they sat on the blue sofa in the living room. I heard a voice softly asking "Do your children speak only Spanish at home, Mrs. Rodríguez?" They tactfully continued, "Could you and your husband encourage your children to practice their English when they are at home?" Of course, my parents replied. What would they not do for the welfare of their children? How could they question the authority of the church that these women presented? At one point, they agreed to give up language that accentuated our family's intimacy. The moment after the visitors left, the change was observed. "Now talk to us in English" my father and mother told us in unison

(5) At first, it seemed like a game. Weeks later, one day at school, I raised my hand to volunteer an answer, and I spoke openly with a strong voice. And I didn't think it was exceptional when the whole class understood. That day, I moved away from the disadvantaged child that I had been days before. The belief, the reassuring assurance that it belonged to the public space, had finally captured me. Finally, at age seven, I came to believe that I really was what I had technically been from my birth: an American citizen.

(6) But the feeling of closeness at home had diminished. We remained a very loving family, but with a great change. According to the children we learned more and more English, we shared less and less words with our parents. The prayers needed to be said slowly when any of us addressed our mother or father. (Often they did not understand us.) The young voice, frustrated, ended up saying 'It does not matter', the subject was closed. Dinners were loud only with the sound of knives and forks hitting plates. My mother smiled sweetly between her comments; my father at the other end of the table chewed and chewed his food while staring over the heads of his children.

(7) My mother and father, for their part, responded differently, as their children spoke less to them. She fidgeted, seemed annoyed and anxious at the paucity of words exchanged in the house. She was the one who asked me about my day when I came home from school. I was smiling with my talk. She joined in on the conversations that she casually overheard, but her meddling often stopped her children from talking. On the contrary, my father seemed resigned to the new tranquility. Although his English improved, he somehow fell silent. My mom became the public voice of the family. In official business, it was her, not my father, who we would usually hear talking on the phone or in stores, speaking to strangers. Her children grew up so used to their father's silence that years later they usually spoke of their shyness. But my father was not shy, I realized, when I saw him speaking Spanish with his relatives. In Spanish he was fast and effusive, especially when speaking with other men, his voice was sparkling and radiant, the sounds full of life. In Spanish, he expressed ideas and feelings that he rarely revealed in English. With firm sounds in Spanish, he conveyed confidence and authority. English would never have allowed it.

(8) Today I hear bilingual educators say that children lose 'individuality' to some degree as they assimilate into public society. (Bilingual education was popularized in the 1970s, that decade when middle-class ethnic groups began to resist the assimilation process of American amalgam.) But they simply disdain the value and necessity of assimilation. They don't seem to realize that there are two ways for a person to individualize. Bilingualists insist that a student should be reminded of her difference from others in society, her heritage. But they equate separation with individuality. The fact is that only in private with those closest to you separation from the crowd is a prerequisite for individuality. In public, on the contrary, total individuality is achieved, paradoxically, by those who manage to see themselves as members of the crowd.

(9) So it happened to me. Only when I was able to consider myself an American, and no longer as a foreigner in the society of the gringos, was I able to seek the rights and opportunities necessary for a complete public individuality. The social and political advantages that I enjoy are the result of the day I came to believe that my name was indeed Rich-heard Roadree-guess. Those middle class ethnic groups that despise assimilation and seem full of a decadent "poor me", obsessed with the weight of public life. They have dangerously romanticized public separation and have given little thought to the dilemma of the socially disadvantaged.

(10) The problems of my childhood do not prove the need for a bilingual education. My story, on the contrary, reveals an essential myth of childhood: the inevitable pain. Here I rehearse the changes in my private life after my Americanization, and this is finally to emphasize public profit. Loss implies gain.

INSTRUCTIONS

ESSAY FORMAT 4 to 5 pages

Step 1

Preliminary questions. What is a biography? What is an autobiography?

Richard Rodriguez's text is an example of a "linguistic autobiography." In his essay, Rodriguez relates childhood experiences that have to do with the use of Spanish and English at home and at school. After, uses his experience as a basis for arguing that bilingual education is not desirable and that it is better than children experience total immersion in English.

In this composition, you will also write a Linguistic autobiography. That is, you are going to choose some experiences of your life that have to do with the language that you consider remarkable or interesting in some way way. You are going to describe those experiences in great details, and you are going to use your experiences as a basis to

about something, that is, you are going to propose and defend a thesis inspired by your own experiences. By last, you are going to try to connect some of your experiences with those of Richard Rodriguez.

Step 2

Brainstorming. Think about the experiences you have had with Spanish and English. Some examples:

* How did you learn English? And the Spanish? What early memories do you have of the two languages?

• Have you ever been told: "You're in the United States, do you speak English!?" How old were you and How did you feel?

• At some point, has someone criticized the Spanish you speak?

- Do you have Latino / Hispanic relatives or acquaintances who do not speak Spanish? Why didn't they learn it? what do you feel about it?

Step 3

The organization. Once you have the ideas you want to describe, you have to think about how you are going to organize. Here is an outline that can help you:

I. Introductory paragraph: This is just written at the end, when you are done.

II. First idea / experience, how your thesis supports and the relationship with Rodriguez's text.

III. Second idea / experience, how your thesis / relationship with Rodriguez's text supports it.

IV. Third idea / experience, how your thesis / relationship with Rodriguez supports.

V. Conclusion. What do your experiences bring to the conversation about bilingualism in the United States? to Rodriguez's ideas?

You don't have to connect all your experiences with Rodriguez's, but at least one experience.