Effective Language Policy for Culturally Responsive Writing Strategies and Practices in Puerto Rican Secondary Schools

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Abstract

  This paper examines bilingual and multilingual language practices and policies geared to the development of EFL students' written language skills in the Puerto Rican public school system at the secondary level. In second and foreign-language learning contexts, writing can be considered one of the more complex skills to develop, particularly at the high school level. This paper explores the linguistic aspects and complexities that impact writing proficiency, and how these aspects intersect with bilingual and multilingual language practices and policies in an L2/ FL learning context. Additionally, the paper addresses relevant language policies and strategies that can be implemented to support EFL students' writing proficiency in an EFL context, such as the one in secondary Puerto Rican schools. Findings suggest that focusing on language-as-resource, a bottom-up approach to language policy, and considering the local context contribute to more effective language policies and strategies for enhancing EFL students' written language skills. This investigation encourages policymakers and researchers to include classroom practitioners, such as high school teachers, students, parents, and other community members, to contribute to discussions that lead to changes in language policy at the classroom level. Ultimately, this study encourages more inclusive and culturally responsive practices and policies to be enacted in the secondary EFL classrooms of Puerto Rico.

Keywords: language policy, multilingual practices, foreign language writing, writing strategies, EFL

1. **Introduction**

The teaching of English in Puerto Rico has long been a colonial, politicized affair.
Language policy in Puerto Rico has gone hand in hand with the use of English as a second
language and sustaining the presence of both Spanish and English as the official languages on the
island, even though English is not widely used by Puerto Ricans in their daily lives. The way
language policy has been implemented for English as an academic subject is, for the most part, if
not entirely, dictated by federal regulations from the United States Department of Education.
Puerto Rico's English curriculum, which is developed by the Puerto Rico Department of
Education, follows the Common Core State Standards, which are modeled after those used by
many states in the continental United States. Over time, language policies have shifted,
standards have been realigned, curriculums have been overhauled, and governors have presented
and espoused plans to make Puerto Rican schools bilingual, yet most of these changes have been
phased out or had little to no effect in improving the proficiency of most public school students.
Researchers have noted that Puerto Rico doesn't have "a cohesive language education policy
with regard to bilingualism" (Pousada, 2017, p. 229). Most of these bilingual policies have been
put in place with little oversight, no evaluation as to their effectiveness, or proposals that get
tossed away after a different administration takes office (Pousada, 2018). This somewhat chaotic
atmosphere of language policy has characterized the island throughout the past century.

Puerto Rican students in public schools have a Spanish linguistic background and most
come from lower-income families. In a 2015 national survey, 62% of the students in public
schools were reported to be under the national poverty level, with households having a median
income of $18,493 (NCES, 2015). In that same survey, 82.9% reported speaking English "less

than well" when asked about the language spoken at home (NCES, 2015). The materials available in public schools are usually outdated, limited in availability, or not relevant to the needs or interests of Puerto Rican students.

It has also been observed that public school students demonstrate a "significant language gap" regarding English when compared to those in private schools (Morales Lugo, 2019, p.140). Other researchers such as Pousada (2000) and Carroll (2016) have also observed that private school students perform better than those educated in public schools, mostly due to the unequal access to opportunities for public school students to develop their English outside the classroom. Language policies in the public school system have not kept up with the academic and career demands that public school students need to meet when they graduate, for instance, English fluency. Given this contrast in educational opportunities between socio-economic classes, there is a great task that public school administrators and language policymakers must face to bridge these gaps and facilitate access to the acquisition of English for all students, especially those enrolled in public schools. With limited opportunities to practice English outside the classroom and a lack of resources in many aspects of public school education, the Department of Education of Puerto Rico (DEPR) faces significant obstacles in reaching its outlined standards and expectations for students at each grade level.

1.1. Language Policy in Puerto Rico

English has historically been used as a colonial and political power to Americanize Puerto Ricans (Pousada, 2018). Therefore, English language education in Puerto Rico has sometimes been seen as a problem to solve, rather than an opportunity or a resource. Carroll (2016) has thoroughly documented how the public educational system of Puerto Rico and its language

policies have led to decades of English being demonized, politicized to support, or reject partisan agendas, and seen as the focus of a multitude of political tensions and turmoil.

Other researchers have also discussed how language policy in Puerto Rico has traditionally focused on promoting English from a monolingual perspective at the expense of other languages, and how this policy does not reflect the linguistic realities of the island (Pousada, 2018). There have been efforts to promote bilingualism and develop the potential of Puerto Rican students' language abilities, yet these efforts have always been to promote English and no other languages. This shows how monolingual perspectives remain dominant in Puerto Rico's educational system, and that they essentially hinder the development of students' multilingual abilities.

A local newspaper in 2013 featured a full front page cover showing the words "No somos bilingües" (which translates to *We are not bilingual*) to criticize the failure of bilingualism in Puerto Rico, pointing out the inability of most of the population to speak English. This failure was mostly attributed to a lack of coherent language policies at the macro level and the influence of partisan politics and nepotistic practices in the Puerto Rican educational system (Vázquez, 2013). It is difficult for institutions to develop effective programs when teachers seem to be at the mercy of ever-changing language policies due to political influence (Pousada, 2018). Therefore, the development of bilingualism in Puerto Rico is limited by a lack of clear, consistent policies that recognize the importance of bilingualism and multilingualism as valuable resources.

A careful examination of how language policy is enacted in the teaching of English in Puerto Rico will show what researcher James Collins calls an "isolation effect" (2015, p. 1200). In the United States, we see this via monolingual policies, such as the No Child Left Behind

(NCLB) legislation, that fail to appreciate the multilingual skills of students by categorizing them as simply English language learners, while ignoring their diverse social, economic, and linguistic backgrounds. We witness this similar effect in the language policy for teaching English in Puerto Rico since it is often an isolated class in the curriculum that barely, if ever, interacts or is at all associated with any other classes in the student's curriculum. Researchers have noted how both English and Spanish are usually considered opposites rather than complements of each other (Pousada, 2018). Even though the learning activities in Spanish and English classes are quite similar, there is often no coordinated effort to use them together or attempt to create any level of collaboration between them. Such efforts would be up to the local teachers or school principals.

Further evidence of how the language policy in Puerto Rico appears to be disconnected from the needs of local stakeholders is how the current curricular framework for the teaching of English works. While emphasizing the importance of learning in a relevant and contextualized environment, the framework also acknowledges that English is not part of Puerto Rican students' daily lives (Maldonado-Valentín, 2016). Researchers have argued that teaching English in Puerto Rico may be contradictory to the curricular framework because the classroom context does not resemble the students' environment outside the classroom (Maldonado-Valentín, 2016). The teaching of English in Puerto Rico has always been viewed as if it were a second language belonging to an English as a Second Language (ESL) component. Despite numerous justifications that label the teaching of English as if it were a second language or ESL, our context allows for neither continuous language input nor communication opportunities outside of the classroom. The vernacular of Puerto Rico is decidedly Spanish and practicing English outside of the classroom context is limited, especially for students living in rural areas where English is

rarely used. This results in English class being taught as if it were a Spanish class in English rather than as a class where students develop their language skills and use the language in different forms. Additionally, policymakers expect teachers to address the incredibly wide range of proficiencies in English within the same classroom by implementing differentiated instruction as a catch-all solution for such a complex situation. Examples from my pedagogical practice will be used to further explore these last two aspects.

1.2. My Pedagogical Perspective

As a public school teacher, I am required to follow an English curriculum that primarily focuses on teaching English as a Second Language as if the context in which I am teaching is were one in which English is spoken outside the classroom, with a strong focus on teaching literature (or at the very least reading short stories and novels) and writing. The English curriculum in Puerto Rico prioritizes functional aspects of language, such as text comprehension and analysis, descriptive, and persuasive writing, while giving little emphasis to form, such as the proper use of verbs, varied sentence structures, and expanding vocabulary. This presents a challenge to me as a teacher, for when I evaluate student learning using performance tasks based on this curriculum, I am more focused on assigning and grading mostly long writing assignments, explaining these complex functional aspects of language, and navigating between languages. At times, I find myself translating all concepts to Spanish to simplify matters of comprehension for my students or to present them in Spanish from the get-go, rather than focusing on teaching more vocabulary in English, how to form phrases and sentences in English, how to better communicate in English, and perhaps even delivering all instructions in English.

What I find troubling about this situation is that this current multilingual scenario in the classroom arises often in an unplanned fashion, unintentionally, and without thoughtful consideration. As a teacher, I find myself struggling day in and day out to adapt the current curriculum in whichever way I find most logical instead of having one that works for our local context. Policymakers responsible for devising the English curriculum of Puerto Rico do not seem to have a comprehensive plan nor an intentional approach to promoting bilingual or multilingual education. As teachers, we are often told to use English as the medium of instruction, but we are also asked to follow a curriculum that I must heavily modify to meet the requirements of the Department of Education. It is clear to me that this leads to challenges in creating effective and fair learning opportunities for all students who want to become proficient in English.

In my eight years of teaching, I have observed many students struggling to write at the expected grade level and relying on translators or having others complete their work for them. While not all students engage in this behavior, it is a true challenge that I face in the classroom every day. I feel that the use of these technologies is useful to a certain extent, but it does feel that it limits students from developing their language skills, as they have started to depend on this to communicate. Overdependence on these tools can hinder students' language development and skills. While this paper will not aim to analyze the effect of these technologies on teaching English or writing skills, it is important to consider creating strategies that allow students to learn a language without simply depending on these tools.

It is widely known that the process of writing is a difficult task that requires a greater deal of thought, analysis, and language skills. As a college graduate with a degree in Teaching English

and a lifelong English learner, I know how daunting it can be to remain focused on a written task for even a brief period; I can only imagine how much more difficult it is for my students. Many of them have a limited vocabulary as well as little knowledge of English sentence structure, which makes writing even more challenging for them.

1.3. Purpose and Research Questions

Carrying out research conducted in settings where a broad range of students engage in bilingual and multilingual writing practices within the school and outside of it may shed some light on how to create a language policy that responds to the realities and needs of our learners in our Puerto Rican secondary schools. Understanding how students learn languages in these bilingual and multilingual spaces may help to greatly ameliorate these language planning policies. By adopting a poststructuralist perspective of language learning, I will explore how teaching our students to write and further enrich their language skills in this process is shaped by social, cultural, and political factors and how these factors can be taken into account when drafting a coherent language policy. The following research questions will be addressed and examined:

1. Based on current research, what multilingual writing strategies and practices can be implemented to promote English in a way that results in language gains in the context of secondary Puerto Rican public schools?

2. Can the multilingual literacy policies and strategies we implement be culturally responsive and inclusive?

3. How can relevant policies and strategies be implemented to support EFL students' writing proficiency?

2. **Review of Current Studies and Theoretical Framework**

This section will be divided into three main areas: bilingual and multilingual language policy, second and foreign language writing theories and research, and second and foreign language writing strategies. First, I will examine the existing language policies behind bilingual and multilingual education. This analysis will provide insights into how language policies may influence writing practices within an EFL classroom setting.

Following this, I will explore the theories and research related to second and foreign language writing. By reviewing the existing literature, I will also be able to identify gaps or limitations in previous foreign language writing research and what further research is needed in this field of study. Lastly, I will explore second and foreign writing strategies that support writing proficiency in more than one language. Understanding these strategies will be relevant to this study as it will inform the recommendations for stakeholders and policymakers from the perspective of a classroom teacher aimed at improving writing skills in my specific context. I hope that this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge and addresses the specific needs and context of bilingual and multilingual writing education in Puerto Rico and contexts like it.

2.1. Bilingual and Multilingual Language Policy

Given the complex process that is involved in language learning, having a clear language policy that reflects the needs and values of the communities it is created for is a tremendously important task. Richard Ruiz (1988) explored how knowing attitudes toward language influences language planning and policy. He identifies three main orientations: language-as-problem, language-as-right, and language-as-resource. The first of the orientations to language is when it is seen as a problem to be solved (as the name implies) and the lack of knowledge in a particular language is an impediment that has to be overcome. The second, language-as-right, seeks to see language as something to be recognized and protected but Ruiz explains how this approach might be problematic when it comes to the enforcement of laws and requirements to uphold the rights of those who lack sufficient access or face discrimination. Ruiz proposes then viewing "language as a resource to be managed, developed, and conserved" (p. 17). Ruiz emphasizes the value of seeing language as a mode of cooperating, empowering communities, and a way to embrace cultural diversity. For Ruiz, a language-as-resource orientation would value all the languages a person knows and uses and views them as beneficial for the individual, the community around them, and society at large.

Researcher Christine M. Tardy has focused her work on second-language writing as well as the politics and policies of the English language. In a 2011 article, she delves into language policy at the university level and highlights the challenges of implementing multilingual strategies in classrooms with both monolingual and multilingual students. Tardy acknowledges that some teachers may be hesitant to embrace multilingual practices due to concerns and fears that such policies may detract from English learning and acquisition. She recognizes that many

teachers and students hold conflicting beliefs about language but emphasizes the need for open conversations to dispel any misconceptions or confusion surrounding language ideology. While teachers may have reservations about implementing multilingual practices due to these prevalent English-only ideologies, Tardy recognizes that even when teachers do want involvement in the policy-making process, institutional structural issues prevent them from participating. She explains how a bottom-up change approach focuses on local views and a top-down approach may not always attend to the needs and perspectives of the local educational communities. Additionally, she identifies three key components of language policy that must be considered: language practices, ideology, and management decisions. Addressing these key factors and engaging in conversations about the language ideology of the local communities with the inclusion of classroom practitioners can give way to meaningful and effective implementation of multilingual strategies.

Scholar Nancy H. Hornberger (2002) has published a great deal of research on multilingual education policy and practice. She has explored how the language policies globally have moved away from the "one language-one nation ideology" and have embraced ethnic and linguistic diversity in classroom settings where multiple languages are now valued and promoted (p. 28). Hornberger illustrates several countries where multilingual language policies have evolved, including South Africa and Bolivia. She criticizes the type of educational policies and practices that have in the past shown disregard for multiple languages and cultures, particularly those of minority groups. She emphasizes the urgent need for linguists, educators, and language planners to actively participate in creating multilingual language policies that respond to the needs of the local communities. She also advocates for a bottom-up approach, where those in the classroom

setting are involved in the decision-making efforts and the use of ecological approaches that meet the needs and aspirations of the local language communities.

James Collins, an expert in anthropology and linguistics, has focused his research on more social issues related to language, including its use, diversity, identity, and politics. His 2015 article summarizes several decades of research into the relationship between literacy, language diversity, and social inequality. Collins suggests that to fully comprehend how literacy is used and understood in society, it is essential to examine how language policy is implemented. He argues that how literacy is taught and valued within educational institutions reinforces societal inequalities. He uses the term "schooled forms of literacy" to refer to the specific types of literacy practices that are valued and taught within formal educational settings, which may not necessarily reflect the diverse ways in which literacy is used and valued in different contexts outside of the classroom (p.1207). Collins explains how language policy can create an isolation effect. In the United States, we see this via monolingual policies, such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, that undervalue and limit the multilingual skills of students by categorizing them as merely English language learners, while ignoring their diverse social, economic, and linguistic backgrounds. By examining language policy and schooled forms of literacy, Collins wants to show how social inequalities are repeated and perpetuated through educational policies and practices.

Puerto Rican researcher Katherine Morales Lugo (2019) writes that it is essential to consider the local context and identities when developing language policies and teaching approaches in colonial settings such as Puerto Rico. In her research on two ethnographic case studies in Puerto Rico, she highlighted the impact of educational background and social

circumstances shaping how high school students use different multilingual communication styles. She states that it is important to recognize the specific and unique circumstances of Puerto Rico because cultural and linguistic mixing is not universal and manifests itself in different ways depending on the context. She suggests that we must avoid "static depictions of languages," or the idea that languages are fixed and unchanging, and perhaps study carefully how language is used, perceived, and valued in the context of colonialism (p. 143). Therefore, Morales Lugo recommends understanding the local context and identities when creating and implementing language policies and teaching approaches in colonial settings like Puerto Rico.

2.2. Second and Foreign Language Writing Theories and Research

Researcher Icy Lee (2016), a second-language writing specialist, conducted a thorough literature review of EFL writing in schools, where she reveals similarities and differences in the needs and concerns of EFL learners and teachers/researchers across various cultural and educational contexts. Each context has its unique history, cultural values, and limitations, emphasizing the importance of fully contextualized and diverse EFL writing research. Lee notices a lack of research on EFL school writing mostly because the majority of the knowledge comes from teaching English as a first language and the many difficulties of doing research in schools. Within 15 years of research, the Journal of Second Language Writing only had a 6% rate of empirical studies focused on EFL school contexts (Lee, 2016, p. 114). Additionally, theoretical research on L2 is also limited. There is no clear articulation of theories or theoretical frameworks in research about learning to write in L2 (Curcic et al., 2012). Most L2 writing theories are based

on sociocultural factors, such as structural inequalities, and most studies did not engage in theory building after reporting their findings.

Lee (2016) recommends that to gain a comprehensive understanding of EFL writing in schools, researchers should consider both the individual components and the more general context. A research approach that examines the learner, student texts, classrooms, and teachers within the institutional, sociocultural, and sociopolitical contexts should guide future research. She states that writing is a social activity that must be connected to the sociocultural context. Factors such as class sizes and an examination-oriented culture influence EFL school writing. She concludes that future research should consider the interaction between cognitive, social, and sociocultural elements and recognize the significance of context and diversity as this will ultimately benefit the teaching and learning of writing in EFL schools.

Despite a significant gap in theories and empirical research on EFL writing, we can still discuss various theoretical frameworks and models that researchers employ. Researchers in EFL writing tend to borrow from bilingual research, such as reformulation and the role of noticing linguistic forms (Curcic et al., 2012). There is also research on process writing, cognitive factors related to writing, as well as other second language theories, such as the following: a focus on form, Cummins' interdependence hypothesis, Krashen's input hypothesis, error correction, and, finally, sociocultural theories such as Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, literacy traditions, constructivism, and other social and contextual theories where researchers base their theorizing (Curcic et al., 2012). The importance of explicit theories related to the teaching and learning of EFL writing should be encouraged but mainly by teachers themselves who should take on this task since they are continuously building activities and lessons based on their context

(Curcic et al., 2012). It is also emphasized that theoretical frameworks should be tangible, applicable, and communicated for practical use in practice or policy (Curcic et al., 2012).

Polio et al. (2016) discussed the current state of research on language development in writing. Some studies conducted within the dynamic system approach showed that within the acquisition of writing learners take different paths, do not progress linearly, and are subject to more variation than speaking. They also concluded that beginner learners show more variability than more advanced students so focusing on accuracy and error correction early on is not necessary. They highlighted the need for improved quantitative research through controlled writing tasks and valid measures, as well as the inclusion of qualitative data sources to complement text analyses. They concluded that we should be cautious in interpreting short-term changes and examining multiple features of writing. Lastly, they emphasized the need for conducting more longitudinal intervention studies targeting aspects such as language complexity and fluency instead of merely focusing on accuracy and error correction.

3. Second and Foreign Language Writing Strategies

Various researchers have contributed to the development of theories and pedagogies that promote a different perspective from the typical monolingual ideologies that have dominated research and scholarship related to language learning and policy in the past (Canagarajah, 2013; Horner, NeCamp, and Donahue, 2011) The translingual perspective has questioned the way we see language as fixed and, instead, has promoted the idea that multilingual writers should be valued for being able to use multiple languages and how integrating such a perspective can lead to more inclusive and practical approaches to language teaching and writing instruction (Horner,

NeCamp, and Donahue, 2011). The translanguaging perspective focuses more on the practical aspects of language use and the intentional incorporation of two or more languages to promote understanding and communication effectively (Canagarajah, 2013). Instead of thinking of languages as separate entities, translanguaging promotes that bilinguals and multilingual learners move between languages to express themselves effectively. It goes beyond codeswitching as it is not only merely mixing two languages, but it involves the pedagogical practice of using more than one language in an educational setting, making full use of the language knowledge of a student, and acknowledging the natural ways in which individuals navigate back and forth between languages (Canagarajah, 2013). Both theories recognize the limitations of English monolingualism and embrace alternative perspectives and approaches to language teaching that promote diversity and inclusiveness.

A specific study that might shed some light on how to adapt policies to meet the needs of learners is one conducted by Bruton, Marks, and Fernández (2010) on the writing preferences and needs of secondary school students learning English as a foreign language in Spain and Spanish as a foreign language in the United States, as well as their respective teachers. This study found that many foreign language students in secondary schools feel the need to write moderately formal FL texts; they do not necessarily find FL writing enjoyable. They mostly enjoyed writing informal and interactive text types. Personal writing was generally not seen as likable or necessary in the FL. The study also emphasized the importance of translation in L2 writing, a factor often overlooked in discussions of L2 writing, primarily due to the dominance of ESL classroom contexts in published research. In addition, it points out the discrepancy between teachers' views and those of their students and the potential contrast in students' views

on different FL skills. Lastly, researchers concluded that FL writing should be recognized as distinct from first and second-language writing, as it supplements and complements them within the school curriculum.

Rinnert and Kobayashi (2016) discuss how the viewpoint offered by the multicompetence theory should guide bilingual and multilingual research and approaches that improve multilingual writing skills. The multicompetence theory distinguishes bi/multilingual writers from monolingual writers and acknowledges the importance of social context in writing and writing empowerment. Bi/multilingual writers have started being recognized as valuable rather than deficient and their development as writers of multiple languages results in unique learning experiences, creative skills, and extensive knowledge that create a rich range of resources compared to what monolingual writers have at their disposal. Bi/multilingual writers use knowledge and concepts from multiple languages and so this demonstrates that languages are not static, abstract systems but more accurately they are dynamic systems. These researchers assert that this shift among theorists and researchers has been a way to defy the monolingual bias that exists in language learning, where languages are taught in isolation.

Current research in multilingual writing development highlights two practical applications: using multilingual writers' previous knowledge of multiple languages to enhance their learning and recognizing individual differences in their writing development (Rinnert & Kobayashi, 2016). Rinnert and Kobayashi (2016) recommend that educators take advantage of student's knowledge of first or multiple languages, recognize individual differences, and start from what the student knows. Flexible approaches can be incorporated into the classroom such as not insisting on the use of only the target language, promoting the use of the first and second

language outside the classroom, and generally encouraging students to make connections between their languages. Specific tasks can be designed to assess writers' existing knowledge, instruction, and experiences, providing insights into their writing background and perceptions. Finally, they advocate for adapting these approaches to writing activities based on the learning context, local setting, and specific needs of multilingual writers. Embracing the positive nature of multilingual knowledge can inform research and teaching practices to foster multilingual writing ability.

3.   **Methodology**

The current study conducts an archival investigation to analyze bilingual and multilingual language policies within the context of writing theories of English as a foreign language (EFL) writing theories in secondary schools around the world. I focus my research on finding rational, empirical theories to inform the decisions made by curriculum designers, stakeholders, and policymakers regarding multilingual literacy practices, policies, and strategies that could potentially be implemented in Puerto Rican secondary public schools.

This study analyzes the data collected from a variety of empirical studies and research studies published during the last 30 years to identify patterns and issues related to language policy and EFL writing theories in different educational contexts. To identify potential sources for inclusion in this paper, searches of academic journals, research papers, and empirical studies were conducted using a variety of relevant keywords, such as "language policy," "foreign language writing," "EFL," "multilingualism," among other terms. The gathering of data was carried out via search engines and academic databases such as EBSCOhost and JSTOR. Other

sources that were included in this investigation were also encountered throughout my graduate studies in Linguistics. These courses provided me with a more specialized understanding of this field of study and the theories that will be further explored. They allowed me to develop a theoretical foundation that particularly contributed to and inspired this study. All selected sources were subjected to a close reading, which involved identifying common themes and strategies that could apply to a foreign language teaching context such as the one in Puerto Rico.

4.   **Discussion**

This section includes a comprehensive discussion of the implications of this investigation as it pertains to the classroom as well as the implementation of language policy. I have set out to investigate how language policies and multilingual literacy practices can be used to promote culturally inclusive and responsive English language learning and teaching within the context of secondary Puerto Rican public schools, where I am currently teaching. I have also sought to uncover and explore pertinent research that could best address the selection of specific strategies and practices for our classrooms to obtain greater language gains in the writing proficiency of EFL students.

4.1. Language Policy

The glacial pace at which the policies of the English program of Puerto Rico's Department of Education have moved throughout the years reflects a lack of commitment to both a bilingual agenda and a coherent EFL or second language policy that aligns with the cultural context. A specific example is the current curricular maps that feature content and literature

suggestions brought forth by English-speaking countries, particularly the United States, without incorporating enough local or Hispanic sources. Even though numerous English language Latino and Puerto Rican literature books have been published, they remain conspicuously absent from schools. Students require plenty of resources and exposure to authentic English language materials, which are sorely lacking in our classrooms. The shortage of materials and the absence of proper English language laboratories where students can engage in listening, reading, speaking, and, as the primary focus of this essay, English writing, has profoundly impacted the effectiveness of any language program.

Additionally, the transition to a more oral approach to language teaching has been slow. Even though we are in an environment where students have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, there has been a deficiency in promoting conversational English classes, with a greater emphasis being placed on a content-based curriculum that prioritizes reading and writing. This approach tends to ignore the contextual realities of Puerto Rico, where English is not the main language spoken outside of school and instead adheres too strictly to standards designed for monolingual English contexts. Consequently, this decontextualized trend has left the English curriculum with a noteworthy deficiency in a key area: providing opportunities for oral and communicative practices. The absence of emphasis on listening and speaking practice in language instruction shows the disconnect between the current curriculum and the Puerto Rican context.

If the curriculum cannot address the real-life linguistic needs of students in Puerto Rico, then language instruction will not be effective nor culturally relevant and will only perpetuate continual gaps in language proficiency for public school students. This approach, directed by

administrative officials at the top levels of authority, does not acknowledge nor respect the unique linguistic and cultural context of Puerto Rico. This might also perpetuate social inequalities since public school students may well face limited access to higher education or job advancement opportunities in which having some degree of fluency in English is vital. Failing to provide students with quality education in the English language also restricts the number of resources our public school students have access to. For example, there is a huge wealth of educational content available on the internet in English that public school students will not have access to since they are not proficient in English. This potential inequality shows the need for a language policy that respects the linguistic and cultural background of our students.

A shift in language policy would be necessary for Puerto Rican teachers to adopt EFL writing theories that acknowledge the unique linguistic, cultural, and historical context of Puerto Rico. Such a shift is necessary because language policies and practices in Puerto Rico have often merely copied those of English language learners in the United States, whose experience is decidedly different from students learning English in Puerto Rico. The Edge textbook program currently in use in Puerto Rican schools, including the one I currently teach with, is a reading and language collection of books designed for ESL students in grades 9 through 12 ("Edge 2014 A: Student Edition"). While it offers engaging quality content by the National Geographic Society, it is primarily tailored to the Common Core State Standards prevalent in the United States, and thus may not fully resonate with the linguistic and cultural context of Puerto Rican schools ("Edge 2014 A: Student Edition"). While the textbook program does offer some options for literature or topics related to Latino or Hispanic heritage, there is almost no content that specifically relates to Puerto Rico. Consequently, this shift in policy needs to move towards

providing teachers with curricula and materials that are not only multicultural but that are also specifically tailored to the Puerto Rican context. These materials could include English novels by Puerto Rican writers, English anthologies that include stories set in Puerto Rico or about the history of Puerto Rico, and bilingual reader books where students can access two language versions of the same story.

Another shift that is required moves away from the reliance on a process approach to teaching writing that the current curriculum supports. The current English Curriculum Framework of the Puerto Rico Department of Education (2022) promotes this approach based on its popularity and because it improves the motivation and the quality of student writing. This approach requires a greater deal of time for drafting, revising, and editing, which can be impractical and time-consuming for the classroom setting and may neglect the focus on language form that is tested on standardized exams. Also, the intensive nature of providing detailed feedback to large classrooms is challenging for educators. A more balanced approach could include timed writing exercises where students must communicate their thoughts quickly and accurately without the use of dictionaries or excessive revision time. Another example could be structured peer review sessions. These methods could encourage students to pay more attention to language forms which is an important need in the writing skill set of Puerto Rican students.

Language policy should not be a top-down demand but rather a bottom-up collaborative effort enacted by both teachers and students. A successful language policy should reflect the needs and aspirations of both teachers and students, promoting an inclusive and culturally responsive language learning experience. Policymakers can provide teachers with opportunities and incentives for reflecting on their practices. Little investment has currently been made to

promote innovation, collaboration, and professional development programs. In cases where such investments are made, they are typically a top-down directive that is disconnected from the realities of the classroom. This means that teachers, such as myself, see these workshops and initiatives as neither relevant nor practical for addressing the specific challenges we face when teaching. There is a need for a more bottom-up approach to education, one that actively involves all teachers, not merely a handful of them or a selected few. If teachers' perspectives and experiences are central to the development of these programs and policies, then the investments will result in effectively meeting the linguistics needs of students and positive outcomes in English language education.

A bottom-up approach to language policy implementation consists of involving the local community, including teachers, students, parents, and community leaders, in shaping language policies. In the context of Puerto Rico, where a distinct cultural identity is deeply ingrained compared to that of the United States, this approach holds particular significance. We should avoid simply copying curriculums from the United States as Puerto Rican policymakers have done in the past and expect them to work effectively in our local context. Language policies need to originate internally rather than being imported. As much as I have tried to adapt an ESL content-based curriculum to our context, it has never felt like I have been truly teaching the language, particularly to students who have a lower proficiency level. We should focus on creating language policies that are designed to fit the needs of Puerto Rican language learners. Involving local communities in discussions about the role of English in education can result in community-driven policies. Educators and policymakers should meet together with parents and students and arrange workshops and forums to gather input and insights, ensuring that language

policies align with the local context. Language policies become more meaningful and effective if we allow the community to actively participate in decision-making.

The educational context of Puerto Rico, in which English is objectively a foreign language, while at the same time is more commonly thought of as belonging to a second language context by stakeholders, policymakers, and even other educators due to a prevalent colonial mentality, presents a uniquely challenging scenario. Acknowledging the colonial imposition of English on the island and how it shapes and impacts students' cultural identity and motivations is of utmost importance and may serve as a first step toward improving language education in Puerto Rico. Promoting English language proficiency within the unique context of secondary Puerto Rican public schools requires a thoughtful approach that considers both the linguistic background, the local culture, and the attitudes of the student population towards English. Viewing language as a resource is a fundamental strategy to empower students in their English language development journey. Rather than treating English as a problem, educators can emphasize the value of bilingualism or multilingualism and its resourcefulness.

These conversations involving identity, language, and history should also be complemented with greater efforts to promote the idea of being bilingual as a positive trait. Bilingualism can serve as a valuable tool for both personal and academic growth and acquiring English (alongside Spanish) should be promoted as an added asset, rather than an insurmountable goal. Learning English along with Spanish as Puerto Ricans' first language opens a wealth of opportunities for Puerto Rican students and a reimagined and restructured language policy in our schools could support the attainment of such opportunities.

4.2. Second and Foreign Language Writing Theories and Research

Current research offers limited answers as to which theories and research on foreign language and EFL writing we may base multilingual literacy practices and strategies for our classrooms. Teachers must then mainly draw upon theories of bilingual and second language research to develop an effective educational environment for learning to write English in a foreign language context.

While there is no singular, universally accepted theory of foreign language writing, this investigation demonstrates that writing is a complex, contextual, cultural, and social activity. As educators, we must then tailor writing strategies to the unique context of Puerto Rican classrooms. This perspective aligns with the principles of socio-cultural theory, which suggests that writing development is linked to the social and cultural context in which it occurs. By aligning writing tasks with students' sociocultural backgrounds, EFL writing becomes more engaging and meaningful. Furthermore, this investigation has highlighted the importance of accuracy, fluency, error correction, and language complexity as key elements in effective writing teaching. The need to balance fluency and accuracy is important so that students are provided opportunities to develop both aspects.

Given the bilingual context in Puerto Rico where Spanish and English are prevalent, gaining a deeper knowledge of EFL writing theories can help educators appreciate the value of multilingualism. Allowing students to brainstorm ideas in Spanish before writing in English validates their native language skills. Teachers may also encourage students to draw from their writing experiences in Spanish to enhance their English writing skills.

Another important aspect is to contextualize writing instruction so that students can incorporate culturally relevant topics into their writing assignments and connect their language learning to their own experiences. This could include writing assignments related to their experiences, such as traditional Puerto Rican celebrations.

EFL writing theories can provide educators with tangible, applicable, and practical uses so that English instruction is more meaningful, effective, and substantial. When EFL writing theories are applied in classrooms where English is a foreign language, such as in Puerto Rico, students will have a greater opportunity to experience positive learning outcomes. Students can feel more engaged and motivated when they see the relevance and real-world applicability of what they are learning. An example of how to apply these in writing instruction could be having students create English language travel guides, phrasebooks, social media posts, scripts for podcasts, or brochures. Students who are engaged in activities with real-world writing tasks can see the usefulness of what they are learning, thus generating greater interest among language learners. Following an established framework and strategies that align with the learning context makes the teaching and learning process more coherent and efficient. This approach allows teachers to design writing activities that align with learner's proficiency levels more accurately. The feedback provided to students would be fairer as well as more constructive and responsive to the backgrounds and experiences of the students. Using task-based learning may well help teachers construct activities for beginner learners who may write in shorter, simpler descriptive sentences, while advanced learners, in turn, may write more detailed paragraphs expressing their opinions.

Teachers may require professional development opportunities and ongoing support to become refamiliarized with EFL writing theories that are relevant to the Puerto Rican context. Opportunities could focus on workshops and seminars about strategies that incorporate Puerto Rican culture, history, and current issues into the English writing curriculum. For example, a seminar may focus on using local Puerto Rican literature to enhance writing skills or how to adapt instruction to our EFL context. Helping teachers become skilled at implementing EFL writing theories can help create more meaningful learning experiences for our students.

Longitudinal studies conducted in Puerto Rico could also be utilized to assess students' writing abilities and allow educators to gain insights into the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of different EFL writing strategies and curricular changes. For example, these studies could evaluate how to integrate Puerto Rican literature into English writing tasks and their impact on students' writing proficiency. Data from such studies may provide valuable information that would inform teacher training, curricular development, and educational policies that are more effective, responsive, and culturally relevant. Research such as this can empower policymakers, educators, parents, and other stakeholders to make informed decisions on which educational experiences effectively enhance the quality of language education in Puerto Rico. Greater emphasis which will incorporate current research in these areas to support language education can lead to significant improvements in writing proficiency by better preparing students for academic and real-world challenges.

4.3. Second and Foreign Language Writing Strategies

It is important to redefine and reimagine traditional writing strategies if we want to promote effective bilingual and multilingual practices in our classrooms. First, by recognizing that students' diverse linguistic backgrounds contribute to their overall language competence, teachers can encourage them to draw upon their existing language skills to enhance their English writing. This approach shifts the focus from examining the linguistic gaps of students in English to supporting their linguistic development, regardless of their current proficiency level. As educators, we can build upon the existing language proficiency that students bring to our classrooms and promote the enhancement of their linguistic abilities.

Incorporating some form of contextual, cultural, and social dimension into writing instruction is important. By recognizing the background of Puerto Rican students, teachers can design writing activities that resonate with their experiences. Introducing writing prompts that allow students to explore themes that impact them daily may provide them with a more effective connection to the material. In a school specialized in sports, such as the one in which I work, a writing assignment that integrates the local sports tradition is having them create a fitness program in English. This task allows them to express personal interests and their habits, and it aligns with the academic focus of my conversational English class. Students are likely to find assignments such as these more engaging since they can write about something that they are passionate about. By creating assignments that reflect both individual passions and the broader context of the school we teach in, educators can create a supportive environment for language learning.

Moreover, writing represents an inherently social and collaborative activity that encourages peer interaction and has the potential to enhance language development. Writing

informal and interactive texts can be a useful writing activity that encourages peer communication. Examples of these writing forms may include product reviews, social media posts or other forms of casual writing, writing informal emails, and commentary on videos or forums. These types of texts are designed to help writers express themselves in authentic and personal ways and encourage responses or interactions from others.

Effective writing instruction should seek to balance the focus between accuracy and fluency. In Puerto Rico, English teaching often lacks this balance, creating a wide disparity in students' fluency levels by the time they reach my classroom. Some may struggle with writing a simple sentence in English, while others can comfortably write full essays. This discrepancy shows that the writing strategies we implement must be adaptable and responsive. Recognizing and responding to these diverse levels of proficiency is important if we wish to provide effective writing development in our schools. By doing so, we can equip students with the skills needed to express themselves more effectively and bridge the gaps between the varying levels of English fluency.

Educators and policymakers in Puerto Rican public schools should attempt to move away from traditional monolingual approaches to language learning and teaching. They should intentionally facilitate language interaction between English and Spanish. Collaboration and integration between the use of Spanish and English can provide students with opportunities to transfer vocabulary skills and grammar knowledge from one language to another and can also lead to the use of translation as a language learning aid. Contrary to the misconception that translation hinders language learning, it can serve as an aid in secondary classrooms. Translation exercises could include rewriting short news articles into English, writing a traditional Puerto

Rican recipe in English, or providing subtitles for a short video clip. These activities and others could allow students to bridge the gap between languages, assist with comprehension, and ease the transfer of linguistic skills.

In sum, by recognizing the bilingual and multilingual skills of our students, introducing cultural relevance to the curriculum, embracing language interaction by forging meaningful connections between English and Spanish, and reconsidering the role of translation, we can transform English writing instruction in Puerto Rican public schools. These changes and suggestions seek to increase academic performance in students and English proficiency levels. At the same time, they carry the potential to promote more culturally appropriate language development and empower our students to be confident communicators in both Spanish and English.

5.   **Conclusions**

5.1. Overview

This investigation has provided insights into the complex topics of language policy and multilingual and EFL writing theories as well as practices that may improve the teaching of writing in secondary public schools in Puerto Rico. This paper has explored existing literature on language policy, EFL writing theories, and writing strategies that can be implemented in the classroom. Additionally, I have delved into the dynamic interplay between education, language, and culture. The close and complex relationship between language and identity within my

island's unique sociocultural landscape shows the need for comprehensive language policies that recognize the linguistic context present in Puerto Rico.

This investigation has shown how a coherent language policy for teaching English that responds to our context can be a practical tool for our educational empowerment and for fostering a bilingual or multilingual communicative environment in our schools. Furthermore, the integration of effective multilingual literacy practices by classroom teachers serves as a useful tool for language gain among students. The judicious use of writing and literacy strategies can transform classrooms into vibrant spaces where students navigate both English and Spanish with confidence, bridging the gap between both languages and fostering greater academic success.

5.2. Research Questions

The research questions that have guided this study will be presented here and followed by a response and analysis based on the data that has been gathered and the preceding discussion.

1. Based on current research, what multilingual writing strategies and practices can be implemented to promote English in a way that results in language gains in the context of secondary Puerto Rican public schools?

With the current curriculum heavily focused on teaching content typical of an ESL environment and forms of writing that are extensive, such as paragraphs and essays, Puerto Rican teachers in our FL context should feel open to modifying the length of writing tasks. More specifically, teachers could shorten writing tasks or focus them on real-world writing activities,

such as writing emails, reviews for a product or restaurant, resume writing, and even social media writing. Activities that prioritize error correction or focus on forms should be implemented to help students improve their accuracy in their writing skills. There should also be time for activities in which students can express themselves without worrying about mistakes and thus promote fluency in writing. Teachers should be allowed to be flexible with students depending on the context and the proficiency level of the students in their classrooms.

Having students work on collaborative writing projects encourages peer interaction and enhances language development. Group activities, such as peer editing or collaborative letter writing, could allow students to share ideas, receive feedback, and learn from one another. These activities could prepare students for effective communication in real-world situations.

Acknowledging the linguistic resources that students bring to the classroom with their Puerto Rican Spanish, a variety in which anglicisms and word borrowings from English are abundant, can make learning English more relevant and engaging. Some form of collaboration between English and Spanish teachers can help students visualize the integrated and transferable nature of language skills and can promote a more holistic understanding of language. Creating collaborative activities where certain tasks use a certain language or both may help students navigate between languages.

Integrating translation in the secondary classroom to promote writing instruction may also be an effective practice. Its integration should be carried out judiciously to help students understand more complex concepts and nuances effectively. Instead of discouraging translation, educators can integrate it thoughtfully to help, for instance, with the countless idiomatic expressions or with grammatical rules that cannot be easily explained using just English.

2. Can the multilingual literacy policies and strategies we implement be culturally responsive and inclusive?

Multilingual policies should be designed considering the local culture and linguistic connections to ensure they resonate with the communities they serve. Educators and policymakers could initiate conversations within their communities to understand the attitudinal challenges that teaching English in their particular schools might entail. Being aware of the complex nature of language imposition in the Puerto Rican school curriculum can help students and teachers find some common ground. This can create empathy, mutual respect, and a more optimistic attitude toward language learning among students and educators.

The range of literacy materials available for students in our public schools should be made more readily available and include a range of content that students can relate to and use to acquire language skills. This could include having more content from Puerto Rican or Hispanic authors across all proficiency levels in secondary schools. Plenty of texts in a wide variety of genres, written in both English and Spanish, should be accessible to support bilingual literacy and allow students to read in both languages. Other content areas that should be readily available are technological tools to access bilingual dictionaries, glossaries, videos, podcasts, and films. This approach ensures that students are exposed to content that is engaging and entertaining, thus developing a significant element for language gains to occur.

In countries such as Germany and Finland, students are required to learn a foreign language and students often learn a second foreign language, thus cultivating a multilingual mindset. Showing examples of these countries that have successfully embraced bilingualism and

multilingualism can be a powerful motivational strategy. It would allow students to see the tangible benefits of multilingualism, promote a growth mindset among students, and view learning languages, such as English, as an asset that opens many academic and professional opportunities. Furthermore, incorporating writing prompts that draw on local culture, traditions, or current events empowers students to express themselves authentically while developing their language skills. This approach promotes a connection between language and identity, motivating students to immerse themselves in the language-learning process.

3. How can relevant policies and strategies be implemented to support EFL students' writing proficiency?

Within the classroom, supervisors should focus on allowing teachers to adapt their approaches to address the unique needs of the student population. Rather than simply expecting teachers to follow a predetermined curriculum and penalizing them for not adhering to it, we should embrace greater teacher autonomy and their capacity to transform, create, and adapt writing assignments with culturally relevant topics. This flexibility requires giving teachers the necessary resources and time for planning, something that current educational policies must address. Current policies limit our creative scope and our potential to make meaningful changes within classrooms.

The challenges of English language instruction in Puerto Rican public schools are many and educators should be allowed to be flexible and creative. To further develop students' writing proficiencies, we should allow a space for teachers to collaborate and perform their investigations and research. The needs of students are many and vary from school to school so teachers should have the time to investigate which strategies best work for their context. New

opportunities should be initiated for educators to share their findings with their peers so we can further develop a framework that effectively integrates culturally and linguistically inclusive strategies that enhance students' language learning and writing proficiency.

In sum, educators and policymakers in Puerto Rican secondary classrooms should adopt multilingual literacy practices that align with the sociocultural context of Puerto Rico, where both Spanish and English hold significant importance. By challenging traditional monolingual approaches and embracing multilingualism in the educational setting, we can create classroom practices that fit the unique cultural and linguistic context of Puerto Rico. By integrating the practices described above we can hope to contribute to greater language gains, validate students' identities and backgrounds, and foster an inclusive environment.

5.3. **Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Further Research**

In an archival investigation, data availability is a common limitation. I was limited in the available publications related to EFL writing theories and policies. Time constraints may have also limited the amount of data identified and analyzed. The generalizability of my findings to other FL contexts is also a limitation since I described and focused on a particular group. These may not be universally applicable to all EFL teaching environments.

Further research in improving EFL students' writing proficiency in Puerto Rican secondary schools is vital. I strongly recommend that research be emphasized within Puerto Rican public schools. Little research has been published that can help us understand the needs of students in our unique context. Additionally, evaluating the current state of teacher training and other support systems for English teachers is also essential. Identifying disparities in access to training, support, and resources will help all teachers be better prepared to meet the needs of their

students, adapt to new challenges, improve English teaching instruction, and contribute to the academic growth of their students.

The road ahead will certainly present challenges, but the insights from this investigation hope to provide a springboard for developing further innovative policies and strategies that are both culturally responsive and inclusive for Puerto Rican learners. Policymakers and stakeholders can work collaboratively with educators and students who are in the classroom to help shape an educational landscape that nurtures the growth of bilingualism, enriches our Puerto Rican cultural heritage, and paves the way for a future in which the English language serves as a bridge to further our students' communication skills. Ultimately, the journey toward enhancing the language proficiency of our Puerto Rican communities is a collective endeavor.

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