Con Respeto, I Am Not Richard Rodriguez

by Norma Mota-Altan

When someone recently suggested that I could serve as an example for the value of English immersion, I was appalled. And when this colleague went on to say that I had much in common with Richard Rodriguez, I was stunned. I remembered my feelings of sadness and anger after reading Rodriguez’s book Hunger of Memory. Where was a person telling me I was like Richard Rodriguez? How could that be?

In Hunger of Memory, Richard Rodriguez implies that losing his first language, Spanish, and his culture ultimately facilitated his academic success. He states that academic success distanced him from a life he loved, even from his own memory of himself (48).

His story has, however, found a welcome niche in the hearts of many Americans who have used it to support a call for “English only” initiatives. They argue that if Richard Rodriguez achieved success without bilingual education, without maintaining his home language then, of course, no one really needs their home language.

To these people and to Mr. Rodriguez, I would like to say, “Stop! Stop taking one person’s experience and generalizing it to include everyone within that ethnic group?” I am a Latina, a child of immigrant parents. I did not lose my language or my culture, and I too have achieved academic success. After my experiences as an English language learner in school, I swore I would never be a teacher. I never wanted to be the teacher who put non-English speaking children in the back of the room with a stack of worksheets. And yet, when I heard about bilingual education and how it used the home language to continue students’ academic learning while they acquired English, I did become a teacher.

As a bilingual teacher for over 20 years, I have used my Spanish to help students achieve academic success and to feel proud of the language and the culture they bring to school.

But I remember the long, silent days when I would sit and watch other children laughing and playing during recess and lunch. I remember the teachers talking and talking while I sat mute at the back of the class. I remember being the only Spanish speaker in a world of English speakers where the language felt so alien — where I felt so alien. I remember crying when the teacher kept us after school because I didn’t understand what was happening. Most of all, I remember going home to my mother’s probing questions:

¿Qué hicistes hoy en la escuela? ¿Qué aprendistes? Explicame lo que es; lo que quiere decir.

(What did you do in school? What did you learn? Explain it to me; what it means.)

I was constantly analyzing and synthesizing what I would tell my mother. In the beginning, when my English skills were developing, I would share what I thought the teacher had said. Later, as my English skills grew, I struggled to organize my thoughts into something that I could translate into Spanish.

For two years I sat mute and wondered if I would ever have a voice again. At home, my family had nurtured me, loved me, and taught me that I could be anything I wanted to be. But when I went to school, I became invisible. Suddenly no one believed I could do anything or say anything of value. When I complained to my parents, my father told me that English would come and that I was fortunate to have the opportunity to study and learn. I remember how my parents sat us down and explained why they wanted us to speak Spanish at home.

Somos Mexicanos y si no aprenden a hablar el español, ¿cómo van a hablar con nosotros? ¿Cómo van a entender nuestros

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The E-Anthology:
A Catalyst for Professional Writing?

by Shirley Brown

As a former teacher (now retired) and one of the original developers of the National Writing Project E-Anthology: Summer Institute Writing and Conversations, I remain committed to a specific goal for NWP’s online writing conference, a goal that has not been fully realized. My goal is to have this cyberspace conversation serve as a gateway to writing about professional concerns. In 1997, while driving to an NWP Electronic Design Team retreat in Flagstaff, Arizona, I launched into what would be the first—but not last—description of my “great” idea for the E-Anthology.

In addition to having a forum for any and all kinds of writing, I described for the Design Team members in the car, “wouldn’t having an area called Hot Topics for controversial and critical educational topics be a good idea?” I just knew that other teachers were itching to have their views on educational policies heard, that they wanted to talk across writing project sites about the political nature of teaching, and that the next logical step for anything they posted about classroom issues would be an article in a professional journal. Quite a leap, I admit.

No one seemed to disagree, and Hot Topics went up on the E-Anthology site with an explanation
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cuentos, nuestras historias! El inglés lo van a aprender en este país pero el español es el idioma de su cultura. Es parte de quienes somos y deben de sentirse orgullosos de quien son. Deben de tratar de hablar bien el español. Además, cualquier persona que hable dos idiomas tendrá más oportunidades cuando trate de conseguir un trabajo.

(We are Mexicans and if you don't learn Spanish, how will you talk with us? How will you understand our stories, our histories? You will learn English in this country but Spanish is the language of your culture.

It is part of who you are, and you should feel proud of who you are. You should try to speak Spanish well. Besides, anyone who speaks two languages will have more opportunities when it comes to getting a job.)

And so, Spanish became the language of our home while English became the language of the world outside.

After my two silent years, I began to speak and to contribute in class. I was on the honor roll, but I still felt different. Teachers now pointed to me and proudly said, "Look, no one spoke Spanish to her, and she was able to learn perfect English. She doesn't even have an accent." What teachers didn't see, couldn't see, was the anger I held inside and the feeling that many times I had learned in spite of my teachers, not because of them.

One of the saddest things I have witnessed as a middle school teacher has been the break down in communication between the students I teach and their parents. Richard Rodriguez gives eloquent testimony of this when he states, "...Silence! Instead of the flood of intimate sounds that had once flowed smoothly between us, there was this silence... I kept so much, so often, to myself." (1985, 51). When children can no longer speak the language of their parents, how can children learn from their parents' "funds of knowledge" (Moll, 1994). As Moll states, children bring knowledge and experience from their lived lives, from what they have heard and seen with their parents. Each household assembles a knowledge base that will sustain its own subsistence. But without a common language, this base is eroded as Rodriguez states, "The family's quiet was partly due to the fact that, as we children learned more and more English, we shared fewer and fewer words with our parents....

disappeared in California, and students have lost their primary languages in elementary schools only to be urged to learn a second language when they get to high school. If this society truly cares about family values and the importance of the family unit, why do we continue to promote educational policies that erode the family structure and destroy parents' abilities to communicate with their children?

Richard Rodriguez accepted what his teachers told him and tried to be everything they wanted him to be. I also tried to do whatever teachers asked of me, but I questioned why they could respect what I already knew, what my parents and family had taught me. I was struggling to be successful while also retaining an important part of myself — my language and my culture. How had I come to this point? How was I able to function, and, ultimately, to succeed in such an alien world? What had happened in my home and in myself that had helped me to achieve academic success?

First and foremost, my parents talked to me. They explained things to me, asked me questions, and told me stories. My parents were constantly telling me about life in México, comparing and contrasting life there and in the United States. My uncles and aunts would tell jokes, teach me rhymes and tongue twisters, and my father would use musical lyrics to teach me Spanish vocabulary. I still remember listening to my father's favorite song, Única, while he explained the meaning of the words and told me about México's greatest composer, Agustín Lara. I never had children's books; but I had stories, real life stories, and I had music. These were the "funds of knowledge" that my parents gave me and that I took to school with me. When Rodriguez could no longer speak Spanish with his parents, he lost access to their "funds of knowledge."

Because of these "funds of knowledge," when I went to school, I had what Jim Cummins refers to as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). My parents had taught me to think, to reason, and to question — all in Spanish. And, during my "silent" period — the period during which language learners listen and understand but are not ready to produce the language, I had been taking what I already knew and building on it. My home language actually helped me to acquire English much more quickly.

Today Richard Rodriguez and I are both "successful" in that we can each navigate the intricacies of the English language and are respected by people within our fields. He is a published author while I continue to help my students find their voices as writers and to succeed in an English-speaking world. But, at what price have we each achieved our success? Rodriguez became what his teachers wanted by giving up his ability to communicate with his parents and his extended family. He gave up his family stories, his pride in himself and where he came from. It is poignant to note that in his second book, Days of Obligation, Rodriguez documents his efforts to recapture his language and his culture!

I also did what my teachers asked of me, but I held on to the essence of myself — my language and my culture. I believe the price that Richard Rodriguez has paid to be successful has been too great and too painful, and that, ultimately, "English only" policies exact too high a price from English language learners and their families. Our language is so intimately a part of who we are, how we think, and how we view the world that no one should be asked to give it up in order to achieve success. As human beings, we should all recoil from causing others such pain.

And, yes, it is time for Americans to look around and see that the citizens of the world — those

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who succeed in a world that has no boundaries—usually speak more than one language. Students today should not have to give up what Richard Rodriguez gave up in order to be successful or to be deemed Americans. And so, con respeto, I am glad I am not Richard Rodriguez.

**References**


**Norma Mota-Altman** is a co-director of the UCLA Writing Project and a member of the NWP English Language Learners Network Leadership Team.