English in a multilingual Spain

MELINDA REICHELT

A strong determination to improve levels of proficiency

IN RECENT years an increasing amount of literature has become available regarding the learning and use of English in a wide range of contexts, notably including continental Europe: cf. Berns 1995; Cenoz & Jessner 2000; Dushku 1998; Fonzari 1999; McCallen 1991; O'Reilly 1998; Petzold & Berns 2000; Phillipson & Skutnab-Kangas 1997; Schleppegrell 1991; and Van Essen 1997. However, little recent published work has explored the role of the language in Spain. The information provided here is based on on-site investigation, interviews with English teachers and other language specialists in Spain, and an examination of relevant curricular documents and other published sources. The aim of the article is to cover three areas in particular: the history of English in Spain; its current status in the nation's multilingual context; and the learning and teaching of the language nationwide.

Introduction

When Franco's rule ended in 1975, an increasing openness on Spain's part, together with interest in joining the European Community, led to an increased demand for the English language, in particular so as to use it in such areas as international relations, foreign investment, tourism, and banking. As a result, by 1980, demand for English instruction in schools had surpassed demand for French.

Two British Council profiles of ELT in Spain (1980, 1985) provide information on the status of the language in the 1980s. During this period, the number of English-medium schools and private language schools increased, as did English classes for adults in state-run language schools (*Escuelas Oficiales de Idiomas* 'Official Language Schools'). Private and state-run schools often offered courses in business or commercial English, and English-language correspondence courses were available via radio and television programs. In addition, many individuals received private tutoring in English.

In the 1980s, despite recognition of the need for English and enthusiasm for learning it, Spain suffered from an insufficient number of qualified English teachers and foreign-language teaching specialists, as well as a lack of long-term planning and coordinated curriculum development for English-language instruction in public schools (British Council [BC], 1980, 1985). Palacios Martinez (1994) contrasts the role of English in Spain with its role in other mainland European countries, especially Scandanavia, emphasizing that, in Spain, English has not been used as a medium of instruction, but has been taught very much as a *foreign* rather than a *second* language. Muñoz (2000) seconds this, noting that English in Spain is learned with reference to a community outside (rather than inside) national boundaries.

Older primary students received three periods per week of English, completing approximately 250 hours of instruction by the end of primary school. Teachers usually employed the grammar-translation approach. Due to lack of English-teaching expertise, teacher shortages,

MELINDA REICHELT is Associate Professor of English at the University of Toledo (Toledo, Ohio, USA), where she coordinates the ESL writing program and teaches courses in TESOL and linguistics. Her research and publications focus on second-language writing as well as the role of English and ELT in Europe. She has published her work in 'Journal of Second Language Writing', 'World Englishes', 'ELT Journal', 'International Journal of English Studies', 'Composition Studies', 'Issues in Writing', 'Modern Language Journal', 'Foreigh Language Annals', 'College ESL', 'WAC Journal', and 'International Education'.

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large classes of mixed ability, and few resources, students' linguistic achievements were in most cases quite low (BC, 1985).

During this time frame, students who entered vocational or technical training after grade eight received three periods of English instruction per week, which focused on language geared toward relevant industrial or service occupations. Students who entered the more academically rigorous *bachillerato* [baccalaureate] programmes studied 3–5 periods of English per week, totalling approximately 450 hours (BC, 1980 & 1985). Average exit levels were typically considerably below the Cambridge First Certificate level (BC, 1985).

In the 1980s, tertiary students undertaking technical studies were required to take 2–3 hours per week of English for two years, which they often perceived as less useful than their core courses – resulting in relatively low levels of achievement. At university, instruction for students specializing in English suffered because of a lack of instructors, over-crowded classes, and limited availability of equipment. English was rarely used as a medium of instruction, and students rarely achieved high levels of linguistic proficiency (BC, 1980, 1985).

Current status

At the present time, interest in English-language learning in Spain is very strong, and students are beginning their studies at younger and younger ages. Spaniards have a variety of reasons for wanting to learn English, including for work, travel, studying abroad, and establishing contact with non-Spanish speakers. Despite this intense interest, however, only 18% of Spaniards speak, read, and write English with ease – as opposed to 31% of non-native-English speakers in the European Union at large (EUROPA). This suggests that Spaniards' intense interest in English-language learning may be in part a result of a perceived need to 'catch up' with the rest of Europe.

In a survey of 29 students aged 14–18 regarding perceived need for English, Seedhouse (1995) found 'surprising unanimity' in the students' answers: They wanted to be able to travel to other countries, speak to foreign people, and get a better job when they finished school. They also wanted to learn English because it is a 'world language' (60). Although the number of youth surveyed was small, their answers lend insight into young people's motivations in this regard. Seedhouse notes that his results coincide with his experience; his students' sources of motivation seem primarily social and psychological: They want 'to see themselves as sophisticated, internationally mobile Europeans of the future, for whom ability in English is vital' (60), and view English as the language of youth culture and entertainment.

Indeed, many young people in Spain listen to English-language music, and English-language television stations are also available (depending on which cable package one selects). English-language movies in the original language can be found in some theatres although most English-language movies are dubbed into Spanish.

English is perceived as both socially and professionally important, by teens and adults alike. Smith (1997:22) describes the prestige value of English in Spain, noting that one of the primary reasons for using English terms in Spanish is the desire to 'show off'. English, he writes, is trendy in virtually every field: 'Teenagers pick out English expressions from the music they listen to; businessmen feel a need to demonstrate their mastery of commercial English; TV and newspaper journalists want to make it clear that they are not lagging behind'.

In the 1980s, British English was clearly the model aspired to in Spain (BC, 1980), due in part to the proximity of the UK and the support for English instruction provided by the British Council. Currently, students' preferences vary concerning varieties of English, but British English has a strong presence: Many of the private language institutes are run by Brits, the Cambridge system of language certificates is valued in Spain, and British materials are often used because they enjoy a good reputation and because of their obtainability. Additionally, many native English speakers employed as instructors in Spain are from Britain because, as European Union members, they can more easily obtain work permits than native speakers from outside the EU.

English in a multilingual setting

The current status of English in Spain is complicated by the fact that the nation is multilingual. Spain is currently attempting to attain English-language proficiency levels comparable to those in other European countries while

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at the same time grappling with its own internal linguistic diversity and attendant controversial political factors.

Although outsiders often think of Spain as primarily monolingual, around one in four Spaniards has a native language other than Castilian Spanish, including the regional languages Basque, Catalan, Galician, and Valencian (cf. World Education, 1997). Minority languages were severely repressed under Franco, who forbade their teaching in schools. These languages consequently came to be seen as symbols of resistance to authoritarian government (cf. Hoffmann, 1996). In 1978, a new constitution granted the various regional languages co-official status with Castilian Spanish (cf. Mercator-Education, 2000a), and initiatives have been undertaken to recover ('normalize') the use of minority languages in a range of contexts.

As a result, in six of Spain's seventeen autonomous regions, one of the nation's four minority languages – Basque, Catalan, Galician, or Valencian – enjoys co-official status with Castilian Spanish. Basque is a co-official language in the Basque Autonomous Community and Navarre; Catalan in Catalonia and the Balearic Islands; Valencian in Valencia; and Galician in Galicia. Overall, initiatives in favour of minority-language recovery enjoy popular support, but some feel uneasy about some aspects of this change. (See Hoffmann, 1996, for more on language planning in Spain and attitudes toward it.)

Basque, Castilian Spanish, and English

In the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC), matters relating to language are especially political, and controversies about the role of Basque in schools affect perceptions of the role that English instruction should play. Basque is a required subject in all BAC schools. At the primary and secondary levels, three models of bilingual education exist: Model A, in which Spanish is the medium of instruction, and Basque is taught as a subject; Model B, in which both Spanish and Basque are used as media of instruction and also taught as subjects; and Model D, in which Basque is the medium of instruction and Spanish is taught as a subject. There is no Model C because the letter C does not exist in the alphabet as used for Basque.

At the pre-school and primary levels (ages 3–12) in the BAC and Navarre, the role of Basque is significant, with approximately 68% of students enrolled in Model B or D programs. In the BAC, Basque is especially strong among pre-schoolers, aged 3–6, with approximately 87% of students enrolled in Model B or D programs. At the compulsory secondary level (ages 13–16) in the BAC and Navarre, approximately 52% of students are enrolled in Model B or D programs, with approximately 33% in Model B or D programs at the non-compulsory secondary level. Given the fact that the percentage of students in initial levels of Model B or D programs has been increasing over the years, it is likely that Basque will gain more and more importance in the educational systems of the BAC and Navarre (Mercator-Education, 2000a).

Within this context, the role of English in education is quite complex. By law, English instruction begins by Grade 1 (*Ley Orgánica de Calidad de la Educación*, 2002), but some children start learning English as early as age three. Research suggests that learning English from age four does not negatively affect students' acquisition of Basque or Spanish, nor undermine children's overall cognitive development (Cenoz, 2000). However, some parents are concerned about the early introduction of English, fearing that instruction in three languages will confuse children, threaten the status of Basque, or undermine overall educational achievement (Cenoz & Genesee, 1998; Lasagabaster, 1998. See also Lasagabaster, 2003, for more on attitudes toward English in the BAC).

Most parents, however, have positive attitudes toward early introduction of English instruction (Cenoz & Genesee, 1998; Lasagabaster, 1998). In fact, the widespread perception that English skills are crucial for financial and professional success sometimes conflicts with initiatives in favor of teaching Basque, with some parents feeling that more resources should be devoted to teaching English than to teaching Basque (Cenoz, 2000). However, Cenoz and Valencia (1994) found that the Spanish-Basque bilingualism of the children in their study had a positive rather than detrimental impact on students' English-language learning.

Along with these controversies, another challenge for English-language education in the Basque regions is finding teachers with

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sufficient English to use the language as a medium of instruction in academic subjects; in addition, hiring native-English-speaking teachers from outside Spain is politically unpopular in a climate of high local unemployment (Cenoz & Genesee, 1998).

Catalan, Castilian Spanish, and English

Like other minority languages in Spain, Catalan was repressed under Franco and was not taught in schools until 1970–71, when it became minimally present in Catalonian schools (Mercator-Education, 2000b). At the time of Franco's death in 1975, only a little over ten per cent of Catalonia's population was literate in Catalan (Muñoz, 2000). The Spanish Constitution of 1978 permitted the use of Catalan in schools, and initiatives in Catalonia in the 1980s facilitated its use first as a subject and later as a medium of instruction. In 1992, the Catalan Parliament passed an act decreeing Catalan the language of school instruction at all levels. Castilian Spanish is considered a second school language. In students' homes, however, according to data from 1995–6, 36% of school children spoke only Catalan at home, 47% spoke Spanish only, 15% spoke both. In schools at least one subject must be taught in Catalan (Mercator-Education, 2000b). In 1995–6, 81% of primary schools and 50% of secondary schools used Catalan as the language of instruction; 18% of primary schools and 22% of secondary schools used both Catalan and Castilian, and 21% of secondary schools used only Castilian (Muñoz, 2000).

Since the 1990s, some schools have been experimenting with trilingual education in Catalan, Castilian Spanish, and English, and since 2000–2001, the Catalonian Department of Education has promoted the learning of English from the first grade. Research findings indicated that students receiving education in three languages achieved similar to, or better results than, their counterparts in bilingual programmes in their abilities in Catalan and Castilian Spanish (Mercator-Education, 2000b).

However, trilingual education in Catalonia is not without controversy. Hoffmann (2000:437) notes that:

> [T]he new trend has put English and Spanish in direct competition for teaching time in an education system which increasingly uses Catalan as medium of instruction, with the result that Spanish is often given the same, or even less, time than English. Reports that youngsters from Catalan- and Castilian-speaking backgrounds alike feel that they leave their Catalan schools with insufficient competence in written Castilian and knowledge of Spanish literature are not missed by those who oppose further promotion of Catalan.

Galician, Castilian Spanish, and English

Galician (Gallego), another minority language in Spain, became a joint-official language with Castilian Spanish in 1981 in the region of Galicia, where about 68% of the population speaks Galician daily, 86.4% claims to be able to speak it, and 97.1% claims comprehension (Mercator-Education, 2001). According to Hoffmann (1996), this is facilitated by the high degree of mutual intelligibility between Galician and Castilian Spanish. Galician is the official language of all educational institutions in Galicia, and students age 8 to 16 are to have the language as a subject while also receiving Galician-medium instruction in two to four subjects.

English-language instruction

1 Infant education

English-language learning in Spain begins at a very young age. In 1996, the Spanish Ministry of Education began a pilot programme introducing a few hours per week of foreign languages for 3– to 6–year-olds in selected schools (ESL Opportunities, 2004). According to the Spanish Office of Statistics, in the academic year 2001–2, 39% of students in infant education (ages 3–6) studied English (Oficina del Estadística, 2004).

2 Primary Education

Young children in Spain have begun learning English at earlier and earlier ages. Before 1993, introduction of English was mandatory at age 11. Between 1993 and 2002, English instruction was compulsory starting in Grade 3; currently, a 2002 Spanish law mandates introduction of English from Grade 1 (Ley Orgánica de Calidad de la Educación, 2002). Many students begin learning English even earlier than required by law; some pre-schools begin instruction in English as early as age three.

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Since education is administered by the various regional governments, hours devoted to English instruction may vary up to 12%. Primary students typically receive 120–180 minutes per week (Dickson & Cummins, 1996); maximum class size for foreign languages is 25 students (Eurydice, 2002). Throughout Spain, English/Castilian bilingual schools also exist; in July 2002, it was reported that the Spanish government and the British Council were working together to introduce a bilingual/bicultural curriculum in 42 primary schools (Eurydice, 2002). In response to the previous use of a grammar translation teaching of English, curriculum reforms instituted in the 1990s emphasized the importance of oral and written expression and the use of English for exploring topics relevant to students' lives. Typically, textbooks are chosen by teachers from a ministry-approved list of both international and locally-produced materials (British Council, 1999; Palacios Martinez, 1994).

In 1999, the Spanish Ministry of Education and Culture undertook a study of the English-language proficiency of 12-year-old students in their last year of primary school. Results indicated that students were performing best on oral comprehension skills and worst in written expression; their performance on reading comprehension and oral expression were about equal (Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, 2000).

3 Secondary Education

During the obligatory years of secondary education (through age 16), virtually all students in Spain study English. (Data from the 2001–2 school year, for example, indicate 98.8% of these students took English.) Typically, students at this level receive 120–180 minutes per week of English instruction (Dickson & Cumming, 1996). For those enrolled in non-obligatory secondary education (ages 16–18), 96.6% of those pursuing the academically rigorous *Bachillerato* [Baccalaureate] studied English, and 86.5% of students pursuing occupational training studied English (Oficina del Estadística, 2004).

At the secondary level, the maximum class size for foreign languages is 30 students (Eurydice, 2002). In the past, secondary-level English instruction focused on grammar instruction, and teachers relied heavily on textbooks. Curricular reforms of the 1990s focused on communication, cultural enrichment, motivation and independent learning, and establishment of direct relationships between English and other subjects through projects. Additionally, trends have begun toward increased use of technology in foreign-language learning. As is true at the primary level, teachers select textbooks from a list of ministry-approved materials, typically published in Great Britain or within Spain (Palacios Martinez, 1994).

In 2001, the Spanish Ministry of Education and Culture undertook a study of the English-language proficiency of students in the second and fourth years of obligatory secondary education (14- and 16-year-old students), comparing scores on: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, written expression, language/language-learning awareness, and sociocultural aspects. Students' oral skills were tested but not measured in ways which allowed comparison with scores on other skills.

Fourteen-year-olds scored best on sociocultural aspects, followed closely by listening comprehension, and scored worst on written expression. Sixteen-year-olds performed best on listening comprehension and worst on language/language-learning awareness (Ministerio del Educación y Cultura, 2002).

4 Tertiary education

For students at the tertiary level, English is important in many subject areas, including engineering, computer science, architecture, pharmacy, and history. There is not however a well-developed program of ESP in Spain (Palacios Martinez, 1994), and students in these and other areas typically have little or no English-language instruction available to them other than what they seek out through private schools or individual tutoring.

In university English departments, students specializing in English enter university with a range of English-language proficiencies because they have often received different amounts of English-language instruction previously, and some but not all have had several years of private instruction. University classes are usually large, often ranging from 50–100 students. English is the language of instruction in many of the courses offered. Students specializing in English take courses in 'practical English' (reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, and translation), along with courses related to English-language linguistics and literature. According to Palacios Martínez (1994), only one-third of university English

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departments offered courses in English-language teaching methodology in 1994.

5 Adult education

Adult education is offered in the public realm primarily by the *Escuelas Oficiales de Idiomas*, a network of approximately 176 government-funded language schools for adults that teach up to 20 foreign and local languages, including English. The schools offer instruction at three levels – basic, intermediate, and advanced, completion of studies leading to the award of a certificate (Eurydice, 2002, Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia). The Ministry of Education and Culture, along with the BBC, also offers a distance course via television and radio called *That's English* (Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia).

6 Private language schools

There is a thriving market for private language schools in Spain, where enrollees typically take 1–3 hours per week of instruction in English. Students range from young children to retirees. Parents send their children to these schools in order to help them 'get ahead'. Private instruction typically supplements the English instruction students receive in school, with most students beginning English in school by age 6 or earlier. Many parents who send their children for private instruction want their children to earn certificates such as those in the Cambridge certificate system.

University students may also attend private language schools in order to improve their English skills for their studies, future careers, or for foreign exchange programs. Adult students who study English at private language schools typically do so for travel and work-related reasons. To keep tuition costs lower and to provide enrollees with flexibility, some private language schools offer most of their instruction via computer, with just a few hours of personal contact with an instructor for conversation classes.

A recent scandal involving abrupt closure of a major chain of private English schools has caused some students to be cautious when enrolling and paying for classes.

Conclusion

Spain faces unique challenges in the area of English-language teaching (ELT). The current enthusiasm for learning the language, the thriving private market for ELT, and curricular reforms in public schooling, along with initiatives for earlier and earlier English-language education, indicate strong determination to improve levels of English-language proficiency. It is likely that this determination will result in the desired results of increased achievement. ■

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LOOKING BACK

More on English orthography: <ph>

From Alan S. Kaye

ET readers have taken me up on my offer ('Linguistic notes on English orthography and current usage,' 22:1 [2006:54]) to list further examples of English words where <ph> are not pronounced [f]: *tophat*, *uphill*, *straphanger*, *slaphappy*, *taphole*, *shipholder*, *chiphead* (slang for 'computer engineer'), and *ophthalmic* (and derivatives).

... and a corrigendum:

Readers should note an inadvertent error in my article 'Gemination in English,' in 21:2 (April 2005), which occurs in the Notes.

Note 20: The words 'adults' and 'children' should be reversed. Thus, the sentence should read: 'There were 20 pictures of children and only five of adults, thus netting many more pronunciations of *immature*.'

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