
Except from:

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What Can Be Learned from This?

When it comes to learning English, many believe the more, the better. The sooner, the better. The faster, the better. The harder, the better. Turns out it is not true. Many of the long-held assumptions about bilingual education do not stand up to the bright light of data; nor do these assumptions serve the United States well for the future. Properly organized bilingual programs hold the promise of high academic achievement in two languages and positive intergroup relations. The future calls us to create such vibrant programs. How dare we not? Being bilingual is not bad. "Bilingual is best" (Krashen, 2003).

Sometimes we can learn things in the most surprising places and in amazing ways. Probably some of our most memorable learning takes places when we least expect it. Such was the case of Lonnie, who actively resisted learning anything about being bilingual, until one day...

Joan was in Mallorca, Spain, teaching adult international educators ESL and bilingual theory and methods. One of the students, Lonnie, was particularly resistant to learning anything about bilingual education; she could tolerate a little ESL, but no bilingual education. She came from a business background with very little experience in education and no experience in bilingual education. She had not experienced acquiring another language, although she was quite worldly and sophisticated in many ways.

As Lonnie resisted, Joan kept remembering how long it took her to understand bilingual education. Joan needed a meaningful story, and Lonnie needed time to make her own meaning.

One night as Joan sat looking at the Mediterranean Sea, she wrote her the following letter.

Dear Lonnie,

My trip from our ranch in the northern plains of the United States to our apartment, *Edificio Pelicano*, in Mallorca took 40 hours with many unexpected events. My husband is coming to visit next week, and in order to prevent him from experiencing some of my problems, I faxed him the following letter. (Included at the end)

The next day in class, Joan read the letter aloud to Lonnie and the class. They laughed.

"Lonnie, why did I write this letter in English to my husband?" Joan asked her.

"Because you wanted him to understand," she replied.

"Yes, Lonnie, if you understand why I wrote this letter in English, then you understand bilingual education," I replied. If I had written the letter in Mallorquín, the language of Mallorca, he would probably still be in the Newark airport.

Bilingual education is grounded in meaning—in schools and in life. Kids have to make meaning in order to understand. Dean had to make meaning in order to get from Rapid City to Mallorca. Behind all the political rhetoric are children who are trying to understand. Their lives are currently on the line. When we think of bilingual education, we do not think in abstract terms. Instead we envision the faces of Manuel, Natalie, Victoria, and Margarita. Their lives will be forever touched by the political and educational policies of the day. Our future will forever be touched by what we do today.

Our mother tongue, our primary language, our heritage language: Each of us has one. Each of us feels passionately about it, as it is how we first came to know love. It is how we make sense of the world. It is central to our being. It links our heart with our heritage, as it is how we filter our past, present, and future. Our mother tongue is the language of the heart and soul.

Putting politics aside, we ask you to think of a child you love and imagine what you want for him or her. Would you voluntarily cut that child off from the language of family, culture, and roots *in addition* to giving him or her a handicap in academia and life? Of course not! None of us would. Bilingual education connects children's language of the heart with their new language of schools and life, and it does it all with no cost to learning English. In fact, bilingual education will enhance the acquisition of English.

Dean,

When you get to Rapid City, be sure to check your baggage all the way through to Mallorca. The woman who works in the airport in Rapid City will tell you that you can't do this, but you can and must. You do not want to go through customs in Madrid. In fact, you won't have time to go through customs there and catch your connecting flight to Mallorca.

When you get to Newark, do not go down the Continental National wing at the airport. You need to go farther to the right and find the International wing for Continental. We left from Gate 75 and a very competent Continental employee, named Judith, helped us as much as possible although the plane was delayed in Florida all night because of bad weather. We slept in the chairs at Gate 75, so we were all on first name basis before the transatlantic flight even departed.

When you get to the Madrid airport, the minute you go through the passport area, turn immediately to your right and go to the end of the room to a very small desk with a sign above which says *Conneciones*. There will be two or three people at the desk to help several hundred other people. The woman at the computer yells at everyone and has total control over your life for the next several hours. If you are nice to her while she yells at you, the young woman behind her will reward you with a first class seat to Mallorca. Smile, thank her, and get the heck out of there.

Turn around and go back to the main exit of the customs room. As you will not have luggage, this will be a breeze. Just keep walking like you know where you are going.

As soon as you leave the customs room, turn right again. Keep going and going and going until you find *Iberia Nacional*. Everyone will tell you *al fondo; al fondo; al fondo*. This is exactly what the Mexicans mean when they say *derecho; derecho; derecho*. No matter what, just keep going straight ahead; straight ahead; straight ahead.

Finally, you will come to the end of the building; we left from Gate D45. There is a very nice man there who seems to take care of all the gates in the 40's and 50's. He will insist you have time to go to the First Class Lounge and have a drink . . . that is, if you were nice to the woman who yells at everyone back at the *Conneciones* desk near customs.

When you arrive in Mallorca, go to the luggage area and look for your luggage. The luggage handlers may be sitting on the luggage ramps because they are having a slow-down. It is not a complete strike -- more like a brown-out of baggage.

When you leave the Mallorca airport (with or without your bags), the taxi drivers will be waiting. Just go up to any one of them and tell them, *Edificio Pelicano* in *Cala Mayor*. They will charge you about \$3000 pts. or about \$20 to \$25 dollars.

When you get to the *Pelicano Mayor*, walk up the hill. There is a building on the right -- this is not the *Pelicano*. There is a building on the left -- that is not the *Pelicano*. *Al fondo. Al fondo. Al fondo. Derecho. Derecho. Derecho.* This building will look like a little one-story cantina. Go into the front entrance and wait for one of the residents to open the locked door. *Al fondo. Derecho.* Straight to the Mediterranean. Look down. You will note that this is not a little one-story cantina; it is really an eight-story apartment complex built into the wall surrounding the sea.

Juan, in the bar, has all of the keys for the faculty apartments. I'll be waiting for you.

Love,
Joan