

# LINGUISTIC AUTOBIOGRAPHIES IN THE ENGLISH CLASS<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Alicia Pousada

University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras

## Abstract

This presentation discusses how to use linguistic autobiographies as a pedagogical tool in the English class at the intermediary, secondary, and higher education levels. It begins by explaining the genre and its literary origins and then describes how it served as the basis for a new book titled *Being Bilingual in Borinquen*. Afterwards it lays out concrete ways in which English teachers can utilize the linguistic autobiography to get to know their students better, encourage their language awareness, and foster their writing in English.

## 1. Background

According to Paul John Eakin (1985), the *linguistic autobiography* is a personal narrative in which language is a central feature. Typically the account begins with infancy and proceeds to the time of writing, although in literary cases, it may just cover a particular period of the writer's life. A linguistic autobiography may be written by a monolingual, since there is dialect and stylistic variation even among monolingual speakers, but it is most commonly produced by multilingual authors whose speech repertoires can be quite complex and fascinating. It is frequently the result of the writer's encounter with situations of cultural and linguistic contact and forced assimilation.

Some well-known cases of linguistic autobiographies that you may have read are Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory* (1982), Ariel Dorfman's *Heading South, Looking North: A Bilingual Journey* (1998), and Gloria Anzaldúa's essay "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" (1987). Less well-known but very good linguistic autobiographies are

---

<sup>1</sup>Presentation at PRTESOL Northern Chapter conference, August 26, 2017, University Gardens High School, San Juan, PR. Please do not quote without asking for permission and giving proper attribution to the author. This talk will eventually be converted into an article for publication.

Nancy Huston's *Losing North: Musings on Land, Tongue and Self* (2002) and Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (1989). There is also an excellent volume edited by Isabelle de Courtivron titled *Lives in Translation: Bilingual Writers on Identity and Creativity* (2003) which includes autobiographical essays by Dorfman, Huston, and Hoffman along with other prominent bilingual writers like Ilan Stavans, Sylvia Molloy, Yoko Tawada, and Anita Desai.

A short excerpt from *Hunger of Memory* will give you a feel for how sensitive Rodríguez was to his early linguistic experiences growing up in a Mexican immigrant family in San Francisco:

During those years when I was first conscious of hearing, my mother and father addressed me only in Spanish; in Spanish I learned to reply. By contrast, English (*inglés*), rarely heard in the house, was the language I came to associate with *gringos*. I learned my first words of English overhearing my parents speak to strangers. At five years of age, I knew just enough English for my mother to trust me on errands to stores one block away. No more.

I was a listening child, careful to hear the very different sounds of Spanish and English. Wide-eyed with hearing, I'd listen to sounds more than words. First, there were English (*gringo*) sounds. So many words were still unknown that when the butcher or the lady at the drugstore said something to me, exotic polysyllabic sounds would bloom in the midst of their sentences. Often, the speech of people in public seemed to me very loud, booming with confidence. The man behind the counter would literally ask, 'What can I do for you?' But by being so firm and so clear, the sound of his voice said that he was a *gringo*; he belonged in public society. (pp. 11-12)

There are also cultural memoirs not directly focused on language but which nevertheless contain useful information regarding the authors' (or their ancestors') language acquisition and cultural transformation. Among these are Maxine Hong

Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976), Saul Friedlander's *When Memory Comes* (1979), and Selina Siak Chin Yoke's *The Woman who Breathed Two Worlds* (2016), which explore, respectively, Chinese-American, U.S. Jewish immigrant, and Chinese-Malayan experiences of "otherness" (Ramsdell, 2004).

An excerpt from *The Woman who Breathed Two Worlds* will give you an idea of the utility of such works for understanding language and culture in flux:

That night she and Father gathered us children together and informed us matter-of-factly that we would soon be leaving Songkhla. With his Adam's apple bobbing, Father told us there would be a better future for us in Penang, where Cousin-Uncle Lim lived. Father explained where Penang was.

'Far south of here. It's controlled by the British.'

'Oh, white devils? I asked, adopting the same sneer I had observed among the adults.

Father smiled, showing off his even teeth. 'You mustn't call them that, Chye Hoon,' he said.

I couldn't see why. After all, he and Mother had always used the term in the past, but there was a change in Father's tone that night, a deference that had not been there before. He talked enthusiastically about the 'British' and the development they had brought. 'They are opening tin mines and rubber plantations. There are new schools and hospitals and plenty of jobs for men like me who speak English.' (pp. 17)

There is additionally a social science genre called *autoethnography* which shares many characteristics with the linguistic autobiographies and cultural memoirs. Ellis, Adams, & Bochner (2011) state that this type of study describes and systematically analyzes personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. It is based on a fundamental principle shared by both autobiography and ethnography—the detailed description from the perspective of an insider's personal experience—and it focuses on both the process and the product of language development. What distinguishes it from

each of these genres is its use as a critical research tool that regards anthropological or sociological research as a politically and socially-conscious act.

## 2. My use of linguistic autobiographies

Linguistic autobiographies have long been used as exercises and data gathering tool in linguistics classes. As far as I've been able to determine, they go back to dialectologist Raven McDavid's work in the 1950s<sup>2</sup> and have continued to be used since then in a wide variety of university courses.<sup>3</sup> They occupy a very special place in my pedagogical toolbox. Every third semester I teach a Master's level course on Bilingualism at UPR, Río Piedras. The first major assignment the students have is the preparation of linguistic autobiographies in order to begin the process of reflecting on their own linguistic journeys. The graduate students who take this class are generally majoring in language-related fields (literature, linguistics, translation, and TESOL). While language has been key to their success in school and work, they have seldom taken the time to go back to their infant years and trace their linguistic development.

In order to help the students carry out the assignment, I provide a set of guidelines which you can see in your handout and in the Appendix of this paper. We will be discussing these in detail very shortly. Students end up consulting their parents and grandparents on the details of their early years and find the task both entertaining and enlightening.

---

<sup>2</sup> In a brief note by Michael Erard on the *Linguist List* on January 10, 2003, McDavid's widow Virginia is quoted as saying that her husband was the first to use linguistic autobiographies as a research tool in the 1950s (<https://linguistlist.org/issues/14/14-78.html> ).

<sup>3</sup> Today they are utilized in many universities, including Yale, University of Hawaii, Lewis University, University of Maryland, Rutgers University, University of Oregon, University of California at Berkley, various campuses of the State University of New York (SUNY), and the University of Montreal.

Reading the linguistic autobiographies has always been a high point of the course for me, since I learn so much about my students and even more about the way people experience bilingualism in Puerto Rico. Two years ago, I finally decided that I wanted to share some of their varied and compelling life histories with the rest of the world in the hopes that others could see themselves reflected in the accounts. I contacted my former and current students from the past ten years and persuaded 30 of them to agree to revise their essays for publication. This consisted primarily of removing all mention of personal names and dates in order to protect the privacy of both individuals and institutions, editing for style, grammar, and vocabulary, eliminating redundancies, and updating any aspects they thought pertinent. Only 25 of the 30 completed the entire editing process.

Once I had clean texts to work with, I organized them into three groups based on the type of bilingualism the individuals seemed to have. I then created a frame in which to showcase the autobiographies composed of a general introduction to bilingualism, with particular emphasis on Puerto Rico, and a conclusion analyzing the similarities and differences in their backgrounds and proposing a more nuanced approach to language policy on the island that acknowledges and incorporates diversity.

The result is the book you see before you titled *Being Bilingual in Borinquen: Student Voices from the University of Puerto Rico* which was published in July of 2017 by Cambridge Scholars Publishing. You are getting a sneak preview of this project today, since the official launch won't be until September 29th at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras campus. I encourage you to take a look at the copies available for sale at the author's discount price in the book exhibit area and to take flyers to

encourage your library to order a copy. [The book can also be ordered directly from the publishers at: <http://www.cambridgescholars.com/being-bilingual-in-borinquen> .]

### **3. Working with the linguistic autobiography guide questions**

Now let's take a closer look at the guide questions that I use with my graduate students and see how you may adapt and apply them to your middle school, high school, and college classes. I would not recommend trying them out with younger students, since they haven't accumulated enough life experience to make the effort worthwhile. I would also advise rewriting some of the questions to be more adolescent friendly. (I'll try to make suggestions regarding these as we go along.)

As the instructions explain, the point of the linguistic autobiography is to account for one's linguistic development since birth. This requires taking into consideration the following (I've numbered the points to make reference easier.)

1. *The languages, dialects, and styles used by your parents, grandparents, and siblings (oral, written, or gestural)*

It's important to explain to students the concepts of dialects (regional and social) and styles (formal, casual) beforehand, so they can understand that everyone knows and uses more than one dialect and style. Here in Puerto Rico this can include mentioning words or phrases that are typical of certain regions of the island or the fact that Dominicans and Cubans speak differently than Puerto Ricans. Stylistic variation can be clarified via role playing an encounter with a teacher or boss versus a friend or sibling.

2. *Your first language(s) and the context of acquisition--Did you have any language pathologies as a child? (stuttering, lisping, etc.)*

Stuttering and lisping should be explained and demonstrated in a neutral manner for the students so they understand what they are. Any laughter should be deflected to make it clear that mocking other students' speech difficulties is inappropriate. Students should ask if they were taken to a speech pathologist for a *frenillo*, *ceceo*, or *defecto del habla*. If they had speech problems, they likely have vivid memories of teasing by other children. This is dramatically exemplified by the following excerpts from Sharif El Gamal's autobiography in the book:

At about this time, I began developing a stutter, and talking in public was a nightmare. My mouth would fill with air, and I couldn't utter an intelligible sound, much less a string of words. (p. 96)

Given the tensions prevalent in the world on a global scale and the fact that I was half Egyptian, half Puerto Rican and came from an Islamic background, the other children called me "camel jockey," "sand nigger," and would poke fun at my stutter by saying "Sha-Sha-Sha-Sharif" and "El Gamma-ha-ha-ha," and making Porky Pig noises. I retreated further into myself and would speak more with my fists than with words. (p. 97)

3. *Your second language(s) and their relation to your first language(s)--Were they acquired simultaneously or sequentially? Were they acquired in the same context? Who were your adult models?*

In dealing with this set of questions, you should begin by explaining the difference between simultaneous and sequential actions and give examples from your own linguistic history. Contexts should also be explained (home, community, classroom, foreign country). Possible adult models are parents, grandparents, other relatives, neighbors, teachers, etc. In the book, Anne Beatty explains how she was raised as a simultaneous bilingual:

Growing up in a small, yet uniquely diverse, society like Puerto Rico, I have been exposed to the linguistic richness of a bilingual environment my entire life. I was raised straddling two linguistic and sociocultural worlds. I learned English and Spanish simultaneously at home, a pro-bilingual environment. I had the liberty to choose and would effortlessly switch languages as I pleased, but I could ultimately speak any one of them depending on the interactional context. (p. 105)

Frieda Hasting's linguistic autobiography underscores the importance of neighbors as language models:

My best friend and next-door neighbor spoke English and Spanish since her parents were American. That gave me an additional opportunity to practice both languages as a child. As a matter of fact, her parents played an important role in helping me improve my English at a fast pace. My friend would share the books her parents gave her, and I came to know Dr. Seuss, Peter Rabbit, and Mother Goose. Later I even learned to play Scrabble in English with her mother. (p. 109)

4. *Any additional language varieties (can include dialects, styles)?--Context of acquisition? Problems in acquisition? Benefits of previous languages?*

You should give examples using languages or dialects that students are likely to have heard in their daily lives or on TV or film (e.g., Chinese, French, Dominican Spanish, U.S. Southern English, Black English). Michelle Rodríguez explains in her linguistic autobiography how, in addition to English and Spanish, she was exposed to Italian and Turkish as a teen growing up in New Jersey:

Additionally, during my adolescent years I was exposed to Turkish and Italian through two close friends. Anytime I visited their homes, especially at dinner time, their parents would speak the family's native tongue. I was thus exposed to the Standard Turkish of Istanbul and Sicilian Italian. At times I was able to understand the Italian spoken around me due to its similarities to Spanish as a Romance language, but the Turkish was just a pretty melody I was unable to decipher. (p. 71-72)

5. *Literacy--In which languages? What was the context of acquisition? Which language(s) are most developed in literate form?*

Literacy may be a new term for some students and should be explained as reading and writing. This is a good time to mention that not everybody in Puerto Rico knows how to read and write well enough to handle all the forms and documents that are needed to live in a modern society and that it's really important for them to develop their reading and writing to the highest level possible. Literacy is not generally developed to the same degree in all the languages of one's repertoire unless one has been schooled bilingually at all levels and regularly reads and writes in more than one language. It is also possible for the dominant language of literacy to be a second or third language. Dayraliz Carrillo explains how she favors English over her native Spanish for literacy:

I'm definitely more literate in English than in Spanish. I can't read a Spanish novel without feeling alienated and confused by the variety of sophisticated sounding words. Even in college, I always performed best in my English courses. I also prefer writing in English to writing in Spanish, and when I do write in Spanish in contexts such as social media, I end up code-switching throughout the entire post. (p. 27)

6. *Education--What kinds of school(s) did you attend? What was their role in your language acquisition?*

Your students don't need to mention the names of the schools, but they should talk about whether the schools were public or private, parochial or lay, taught in English or Spanish, and if they influenced their language learning in some way. Janice Rivera recounts her traumatizing experience of being taken from New York to live in Levittown, Puerto Rico and being plunged into an all-Spanish environment:

One day, my mother announced that she and my father were reconciling and asked us how we felt about moving to Puerto Rico. We had only visited on

vacation, and my initial reaction was “No way!” My first issue was the language. I told my parents that I didn’t know Spanish and that it would be difficult for me. My father convinced me by telling me I’d be placed in a bilingual school, but once we moved, I went to a regular Spanish-speaking private school, and everything in my life changed completely. (p. 91)

7. *Language usage patterns at different stages of your life--In which domains do you use each variety? Which is used most frequently? Which variety do you feel is your dominant one?*

You will need to explain what domains are (e.g., home, community, school, church, government, etc.). You will also need to explain language dominance and expose them to the notions of being stronger in one language (Spanish-dominant, English-dominant, etc.) for certain tasks and of having equal proficiency in two languages (balanced bilingualism). In the grid below, we see how one speaker rates her frequency of use of English and Spanish in various domains and language skills.

<b>LANGUAGE SKILLS USAGE BY SOCIAL DOMAIN</b> (scale of 1-5; 1 refers to very infrequent use, and 5 refers to extremely frequent use; 0 indicates no use at all)								
<b>Domain</b>	<b>Speaking</b>		<b>Writing</b>		<b>Understanding</b>		<b>Reading</b>	
	Sp	Eng	Sp	Eng	Sp	Eng	Sp	Eng
<b>Home</b>	5	0	4	2	5	4	5	3
<b>Community</b>	5	3	5	3	5	4	5	4
<b>Church</b>	4	0	3	0	5	1	5	1
<b>School</b>	4	3	4	3	5	4	5	4
<b>Government agencies</b>	3	0	0	0	5	1	5	1

Many people in Puerto Rico believe that only “balanced” bilinguals are true bilinguals. However, this is actually a very rare category world-wide and sets up a very

high standard for speakers, since most people's lives don't provide completely balanced exposure to and use of two or more languages. Javier Martínez explains how even being an English teacher doesn't guarantee that you're a balanced bilingual:

Thanks to English, I have always had job opportunities. I had no problems getting a teaching job when I graduated from UPR, and now I am part of the full-time English faculty of Inter American University. I even finished my doctoral degree in the Teaching of English as a Second Language. Nevertheless, I don't consider myself a balanced bilingual. I still have more control over Spanish and consider speaking in English my weakest point. The curious thing is that when I am with my students in the classroom, my English flows almost naturally. I feel more comfortable speaking English in a classroom than in a social interaction. (p. 37)

8. *Self-rating of language competence in each variety you know (speaking, listening, reading, writing, norms of appropriate usage)*

There are a variety of grids and rubrics that can be used to self-rate one's competence in the different language skills of each language. Grosjean presents one in his book *Bilingual*. Each language in the speaker's repertoire is labelled (La, Lb, Lc, Ld) and placed on the grid. The Y-axis (vertical) indicates the frequency of use ranging from Never to Daily, while the X-axis (horizontal) indicates the degree of fluency ranging from Low to High. As we can see, La is used daily at a high level of fluency. We can conclude that La is the speaker's dominant language, In contrast, Ld is never used, and the speaker has low fluency in it, leading us to conclude that it is either a language that has just begun to be learned or perhaps a language that is attriting or being lost by the speaker due to lack of opportunities for its use. By filling out a grid like this, students can create a linguistic profile which can be compared with those of others.



doughnuts→ <i>las donas</i>	mattress→ <i>el matre</i>
to fax→ <i>faxear</i>	spark plugs→ <i>los espares</i>

Once again, it's important to keep the presentation free of purism or negative judgments. English and Spanish both are inveterate borrowers. You might take the time to explore all the Spanish words that exist in American English (e.g., *burro*, *Sierra Nevada*, *Montana*, *Los Angeles*, *sombrero*, *tortilla*, *alligator*, *ranch*, *armadillo*, *salsa*, etc.). Just listening to an old Western movie reveals how a great deal of Cowboy English was actually made up of Spanish loanwords learned from Mexican *vaqueros* (or *buckeroos*, as the cowboys called them). The cowboy would put on his sombrero, fasten his chaps, coil his lasso, mount his pinto pony, and ride off into the sierra. If he got drunk or in trouble, he might end up in the hoosegow (*juzgado*) or calaboose (*calabozo*). If the sheriff wanted him out of town, he might tell the cowboy: "Vamoose" (*vamos*).

#### 10. Your attitudes toward the different varieties in your repertoire

Everyone has certain attitudes or feelings toward languages. Typically these are expressed via adjectives of emotion or personality. Languages can be judged as friendly/cold, loving / hateful, beautiful / ugly, elaborate / plain, harsh / musical, sophisticated / hillbilly, etc. Individuals and groups may have stereotypical associations of a given language with certain human characteristic or activities. A language may associated with business, wealth, higher education. It may be seen as the perfect vehicle of religion or poetry. It may be linked to physical strength, familial love, or poverty. Have your students

explore their attitudes toward English and Spanish and other languages they have contact with.

### *11. The attitudes of others in society toward your language usage*

Learning another language (and becoming truly proficient in that language) can produce positive and negative attitudes among your friends. Have your students think about times when they were criticized for speaking English too well or of not speaking Spanish well enough. Jenny Lozano describes how her old friends view her now that she's lived in the U.S. and perfected her English:

I do not speak often with my friends from my undergrad and MA years, but if I do, I use more standard Spanish than casual Puerto Rican Spanish because they are not as close to me anymore. They seem to be bothered if I use English with them. They accuse me of being pretentious and claim that I am not in the U. S. anymore, and I have to speak in Spanish. I understand. Once upon a time, I had the same attitude. (p. 43).

### *12. Benefits or disadvantages of being multilingual*

Most bilinguals can readily come up with benefits they have received as a result of being bilingual, but there may also be some disadvantages. Anyeliz Pagán explains this:

All in all, I would have to say that being bilingual has brought its share of benefits; however, there is a certain responsibility that comes along with being the most developed bilingual in your family. I have always been in charge of helping my siblings in their English development. I read their assigned books, edited their essays, and helped them with homework. Furthermore, I have had to deal with every customer service call, serve as interpreter whenever we traveled to the United States, and translate the résumés of practically every member of my family. Although tiresome, these experiences have helped shape me as a bilingual and have given me standing in my family. I am the family translator and editor. (p. 127)

13. *Employment--How has your job influenced you linguistically? Did being multilingual allow you to pursue certain job opportunities (including military service)?*

This question is not usually applicable to students below college age and can be omitted. However, it should definitely be explored among college students and adults in continuing education programs. All of the contributors to *Being Bilingual in Borinquen* testified that their multilingual skills enabled them to get good jobs. Marlene Aponte, a practicing lawyer and English professor, speaks to this point:

In 1991, I became the first Hispanic Assistant General Counsel for the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP). My proficiency in Spanish landed me a job as an attorney evaluating inmate claims. Because of the large Hispanic inmate population, the BOP was looking for a lawyer who could handle the claims in Spanish and interview witnesses who did not speak English. With this job, I had the opportunity to travel all throughout the United States and even negotiate the acquisition of the plot of land where the Metropolitan Detention Center in Guaynabo is located today. (p. 120)

14. *Travel--How have your travel experiences influenced you linguistically?*

A principal reason that people give for wanting to learn foreign languages is to be able to travel. While your students may seem too young to be seasoned travelers, you may be surprised how many places outside of Puerto Rico they have already visited. We live in a highly mobile society. Jonatan Cruz, who regards himself as Spanish-dominant, travels extensively. Here is what he has to say about being bilingual while traveling:

I've visited various countries and many states in the U.S. in which I've had to communicate in English. When you meet tourists on a train, bus, or eight-hour flight, they often know English because they are from an English-speaking country or they are bilingual in English and their mother tongue. Speaking English while travelling is vital in order to understand travel instructions. As soon as I start packing my luggage before a trip, my brain switches to "bilingual language mode" for survival reasons. (p. 47)

*15. Personal relationships--Have your personal relationships affected your language usage over the years?*

Our personal relationships are primary determinants of our language use. We tend to speak like the people we associate with. We tend to distance ourselves from people we dislike or feel superior to. Have your students explore how their language use varies when they are interacting with family members, friends, romantic partners, teachers, and bosses. Role playing is an excellent way to reveal that we don't speak the same way to everyone.

*16. If you have children, what varieties do you use with your children? What are your linguistic aspirations for them?*

For younger students, this should be adjusted to read: *If you have children someday, what types of language would you use with them? What languages do you hope they will learn? What kind of school will you send them to?* Roberto Olmeda, a high school English teacher with a toddler daughter, muses on this point:

As a bilingual, I have resolved that she will acquire Spanish and English simultaneously. My wife, a receptive bilingual whose first language is Spanish, is responsible for providing the Spanish input. I've already started to speak to the baby in English so that she may become familiarized with the phonology. I don't want her to perceive English as "foreign" when she hears it outside of our home. Our goal is for her to distinguish the two languages pragmatically by age two. Since she is our first child, I foresee that the process may not run as smoothly as we would wish. (p. 62)

*17. Any other pertinent information regarding your linguistic development*

Your students may have particular language experiences that are not always considered under the topic of bilingualism, for example, experiences with the Deaf community and sign language. Mention the special issues of the Deaf and sign

language. Encourage the students to share anecdotes regarding sign language they've observed or times when they reacted to sign language. Once again, defuse any laughter or mockery that may arise. Several of the contributors to the book are skilled in sign language and mentioned this in their essays. Others have had a different sort of contact with sign language. Kevin Kelly, an English-dominant bilingual, speaks of initially using sign language with his hearing infant son for practical reasons:

When he was about seven months old, I read an article about baby sign language, and I researched the concept a bit. I attended a workshop where they taught me how to teach a baby sign language through repetition, the rationale being that babies can communicate through simplified hand signs before they have fully developed vocal apparatuses. My son learned several signs quickly, which reduced his crying because he could tell me when he wanted milk or food, eliminating guesswork. He stopped signing once he said his first words. (p. 137)

### **3. How can linguistic autobiographies help in the English class?**

Beyond allowing one to prepare a book as I did, linguistic autobiographical essays can serve various important functions in the English classroom, regardless of the educational level.

First of all, having students research and write about their language histories allows you to get to know them at a much more profound level. It's like having a very intense personal conversation with the students and exploring all sorts of issues that they may be reluctant to bring up during class discussions. It is also an excellent diagnostic tool for assessing students' needs and backgrounds. When you have students analyzing their own linguistic proficiency in different skills and domain, it is much easier to see the strengths and weaknesses that they perceive and determine whether these are real or imagined and adjust teaching strategies accordingly.

Secondly, the linguistic autobiography task deepens the students' metalinguistic awareness. By this, I mean their consciousness of the structure and role of language in their daily lives. The linguistic autobiography can be used in the classroom to open discussions about the formal properties of language and the relationship between language and society, language and identity, and language and historical change. The guide questions do not have to be used all of a piece. They can be chopped into sections and used as the basis of smaller language awareness lessons.

Finally, crafting a cohesive linguistic autobiography strengthens students' research and writing skills in English. Since the content is fairly familiar to them and intrinsically interesting, the writing process flows more fluidly, and the students have more of an investment in the assignment. The questionnaire helps them to structure their work, and the prior teaching of the terminology involved makes certain that the writing is both coherent and cohesive.

## **7.0 Conclusion**

In closing, my work so far indicates that linguistic autobiographies can yield a surprising amount of information about how bilingualism/biculturalism is actually lived in Puerto Rico. The technique is flexible and can be adjusted to the age and proficiency level of your students. It can be shared publically or maintained as a completely private communication between the teacher and student.

Let me know if you decide to try out this activity with your group and how it went. You can contact me at: [prof.alicia.pousada@gmail.com](mailto:prof.alicia.pousada@gmail.com) . Recently, on Facebook, in response to a post announcing this very talk, a former graduate student who currently teaches English at the high school level, wrote: "This was one of my favorite

assessments during my MA! Thank you for such an amazing class! I'm looking forward to incorporating linguistic autobiographies this year in a Language and Culture Unit that will focus on bilingualism and Puerto Rico." I couldn't ask for a better unsolicited testimonial of the pedagogical utility of the linguistic autobiography. I encourage you all to give it a try.

Thank you.

## REFERENCES

- Anzaldúa, G. (1987). How to tame a wild tongue. In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The new mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute.
- de Courtivron, I. (2003). *Lives in translation: Bilingual writers on identity and creativity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dorfman, A. (1998). *Heading south, looking north: A bilingual journey*. New York: Penguin.
- Eaken, P. J. (1985). *Fictions in autobiography: Studies in the act of self-invention*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12 (1), Art. 10. Retrieved from: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589/3095>
- Friedlander, S. (1979). *When memory comes*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- Grosjean, F. (2010). *Bilingual: Life and reality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hoffman, E. (1989). *Lost in translation: A life in a new language*. New York: Penguin.
- Hong Kingston, M. (1976). *The woman warrior: Memoirs of a girlhood among ghosts*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Huston, N. (2002). *Losing north: Musings on land, tongue and self*. Toronto, Canada: McArthur & Co.
- Ramsdell, L. (2004). Language and identity politics: The linguistic autobiographies of Latinos in the United States. *Journal of Modern Literature*, 28 (1), 166-176.
- Rodríguez, R. (1982). *Hunger of memory: The education of Richard Rodríguez*. Boston, MA: David R. Godine.
- Siak Chin Yoke, S. (2016). *The woman who breathed two worlds*. AmazonCrossing.

## Appendix 1: Guidelines for Linguistic Autobiography

The goal of the Linguistic Autobiography is to account for every aspect of your linguistic development since birth and report it utilizing the linguistic terms learned in class. In order to do a good job, you should take into consideration the following:

- the languages, dialects, and styles used by your parents, grandparents, and siblings (oral, written, or gestural)
- your first language(s) and the context of acquisition--did you have any language pathologies as a child? (stuttering, lisping, etc.)
- your second language(s) and their relation to your first language(s)--were they acquired simultaneously or sequentially? were they acquired in the same context? who were your adult models?
- any additional language varieties (can include dialects, styles)?--context of acquisition? problems in acquisition? benefits of previous languages?
- literacy--in which languages? what was the context of acquisition? which language(s) are most developed in literate form?
- education--what kinds of school(s) did you attend? what was their role in your language acquisition?
- language usage patterns at different stages of your life--in which domains do you use each variety? which is used most frequently? which variety do you feel is your dominant one?
- self-rating of language competence in each variety you know (speaking, listening, reading, writing, norms of appropriate usage)
- code-switching and loanwords--do you use them? how do you feel about them?
- your attitudes toward the different varieties in your repertoire
- the attitudes of others in society toward your language usage
- benefits or disadvantages of being multilingual
- employment--how has your job influenced you linguistically? did being multilingual allow you to pursue certain job opportunities (including military service)?
- travel--how have your travel experiences influenced you linguistically?
- personal relationships--have your personal relationships affected your language usage over the years?
- if you have children, what varieties do you use with your children? what are your linguistic aspirations for them?
- any other pertinent information regarding your linguistic development