

Richard Rodriguez, Norman Podhoretz, and Arnold Schwarzenegger: Learning English by “Immersion.” Really?

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Abstract: A close look at the English acquisition processes of Richard Rodriguez, Norman Podhoretz, and Arnold Schwarzenegger reveals that, far from their contentions that they learned English by immersion, which led them to dismiss bilingual education, they benefitted from numerous sources of help largely unavailable to English Language Learners nationwide.

The debate on the merits of bilingual education to teach English to English Language Learners (ELLs) has been present throughout the history of the United States. Traditionally portrayed by its adversaries as a threat to the assimilation of ELLs into the American mainstream due to its supposed allegiance to students’ native languages and cultures to the detriment of English, bilingual education has been subject to constant attacks, dating back to the birth of our nation as an independent country (Crawford, 2004). Some examples of this trend were Benjamin Franklin and the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge’s attempts to anglicize Pennsylvania’s German-speaking population by establishing English schools in the state in the 18th century; the approval of English-only legislation by various Mid-Western states towards the end of the following century (Crawford, 2004); or nationwide laws against the use of German and other foreign languages during both World Wars (Castro Feinberg, 2002). More recently, the passage of anti-bilingual legislation in California, Arizona, and Massachusetts (Ramos & de Jong, 2003), or the mandates of No Child Left Behind have nearly eliminated bilingual education programs from public schools (Menken, 2008).

Notwithstanding these attacks, languages other than English have continued to be present in the American educational system thanks to specific legislation in some instances, namely an 1839 Ohio law permitting the education of students in English, German, or both languages pending parental authorization (Crawford, 2004); or the result of hard-fought court cases, such as *Lau v. Nichols*, or *Castañeda v. Pickard*. The verdicts of these cases allowed school districts nationwide to replace ineffective English-only approaches with alternative methods of instruction, many of which included a native language education component (Crawford, 2004).

Contrary to the aforementioned accusations of promoting minority students’ native languages and cultures to the detriment of English, bilingual education is simply an educational program that uses varying amounts of native language instruction to prevent ELLs from falling behind in academics due to their insufficient command of English. The primary language knowledge and literacy thus developed helps ELLs better understand the English they hear and, as a result, experience a faster and easier transition to classes conducted solely in English (Crawford & Krashen, 2007).

The outcomes of scholarly research in the field largely favor this instructional approach. Thus, the findings of program evaluations (Ramirez, 1992), meta-analyses (Greene, 1997; Krashen & McField, 2005), and surveys conducted among teachers (Karathanos, 2009; Ramos, 2005; Ramos, 2009; Shin & Krashen, 1996), parents (Shin & Gribbons, 1996; Shin & Lee, 1996), and administrators (Shin, Anton, & Krashen, 1999), strongly support the positive impact

of native language instruction on the schooling of ELLs. Notwithstanding, the consistency of these findings has been questioned in the media and in public forums (deJong & Ramos, 2003), on the basis that many non-English-speaking individuals mastered English by just being immersed in it (De la Peña, 1991). Three of the best-known, most outspoken individuals in this regard are Richard Rodriguez, Norman Podhoretz, and Arnold Schwarzenegger. A well-known journalist and author, a reputed magazine editor and author, and a former governor of California, respectively, Rodriguez, Podhoretz, and Schwarzenegger have used their clout to boast their successful immersion experiences in English and to discredit bilingual education. Moreover, Podhoretz and Schwarzenegger are members of the Advisory Board of U.S. English, an organization advocating the declaration of English as the official language of the U.S. and opposed to bilingual education (U.S. English, 2013).

The present investigation conducted content analyses (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) of available primary and secondary sources in order to examine Rodriguez', Podhoretz', and Schwarzenegger's routes to English acquisition, and to identify possibly unacknowledged factors impacting their respective successes. A closer look at these routes revealed the presence of additional sources of help, including support in their first and second languages, sources of comprehensible input in English, and access to print, largely unavailable to a majority of ELLs nationwide. In other words, Rodriguez', Podhoretz', and Schwarzenegger's English acquisition processes were not as streamlined as purported. With these premises in mind, the following sections feature Rodriguez', Podhoretz' and Schwarzenegger's explanations of their respective English acquisition processes, uncover those unidentified factors impacting their accomplishments, analyze similarities and differences in their routes to English mastery, and draw conclusions and implications for further research.

Routes to English Acquisition

Despite having been born in San Francisco to Mexican immigrant parents, Richard Rodriguez grew up in Sacramento, where he attended Catholic, English-Only, parochial schools. When Rodriguez was in 2nd grade, three nuns from his school visited his home and asked his parents to use English in order to help Rodriguez improve his command of this language. While the switch appeared to benefit Rodriguez at school, it had a very negative impact on family interactions. Thus, the family's vibrant exchanges in Spanish were progressively replaced by a "new quiet at home" (Rodriguez, 1982, p. 23), given the parents' limited command of English and the offspring's continuously increasing proficiency in this language. Rodriguez gradually embraced English, which he described as the public language of success, and renounced to Spanish, which he identified as a private language. After his years of compulsory education, Rodriguez attended Stanford University, Columbia University, the University of California, Berkeley, and the Warburg Institute in London. He became the San Francisco editor of Pacific News Service and wrote op-eds for numerous publications, among them *U.S. News & World Report*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, or the *Wall Street Journal*. His successful experience learning English led him to become a fervent critic of bilingual education on the grounds that, "supporters of bilingual education today imply that students like me miss a great deal by not being taught in their family's language" (Rodriguez, 1982, p. 19)

Norman Podhoretz was born in Brooklyn to Yiddish-speaking parents and thereby grew up speaking more Yiddish than English, especially with his non-English-speaking grandmothers (Podhoretz, 2000). Because of this circumstance, he developed a heavily accented English, which often caused him to be misidentified at school as a recently arrived immigrant (Jeffers, 2010). To help him rid of his accent, the school principal placed Podhoretz in a remedial-speech

class focusing on drill-and-kill pronunciation exercises (Podhoretz, 2000). The class had an extraordinary impact on Podhoretz' life in that it eliminated his accent and enabled him to "speak like a classier and more cultivated person that I actually was" (Podhoretz, 2000, p. 32). From then on, Podhoretz consistently credited the class for his subsequent accomplishments and became a staunch supporter of English as the pivotal tool for success in the U.S. Simultaneously, he considered himself lucky for not having been placed in bilingual education programs. In his own words, "as I was blessed, so they were cursed, and as I was enriched, so were they impoverished" (Podhoretz, 2000, p. 58). In fact, he considered bilingual education a "demented and discredited theory" (Podhoretz, 2000, p. 58) and pejoratively disregarded research in the field as biased and contrary to "common sense" (Podhoretz, 2000, p. 58). Upon completing his mandatory education, Podhoretz attended Columbia University, the Jewish Theological Seminary, and the University of Cambridge, became the Editor-in-Chief of "Commentary" for nearly four decades, contributed to the *National Review* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and authored several books on domestic and foreign policy.

Finally, Arnold Schwarzenegger spent his childhood and adolescence in Austria and Germany, gaining worldwide recognition as the winner of several bodybuilding contests (Andrews, 2003). After arriving in California at the age of 21, he continued his involvement in bodybuilding, winning additional contests and pursuing careers in acting and politics; he also earned a business degree in the international marketing of physical fitness from the University of Wisconsin in Superior (Halperin, 2010; Leigh, 1990). Notwithstanding his movie career, it was in the field of politics that Schwarzenegger achieved his most significant milestone, becoming Governor of California from 2003 to 2011. From this powerful position, he encouraged immigrants to follow his path to English mastery, which he summarized as not using his native German and practicing English as much as possible. He described this process as learning English by immersion (Ramos & Krashen, in press). Thus, he explained that, "...when I came to this country, I did not, or very rarely, spoke German to anyone" (Office of the Governor, 2007). On the contrary, he stated he took "every opportunity to spend time with friends who spoke English and practice English all the time. There was no other way" (Glaister, 2006). This naturally included watching television in English: "I couldn't understand a word they were saying, but nevertheless I watched it, and eventually I got with it, and I learned" (Office of the Governor, 2007).

Factors Impacting Acquisition of English

Based on his personal experience, Rodriguez contended that immigrants should learn English in English and that parents contribute to this effort by communicating in English at home (Rodriguez, 1982). Yet, it seems necessary to note that he enjoyed some advantages in his route to English mastery. First, he grew up in an English-speaking neighborhood, and this, at least theoretically, facilitated his exposure to sources of conversational English. He also attended remedial reading sessions with an old nun, who read to him from her favorite books, mostly biographies of American presidents. These sessions stimulated Rodriguez' passion for reading and, following other teachers' recommendations, he finished "Moby Dick," "The Good Earth," and "The Pearl" in 4th grade and the hundred most important books of Western Civilization, as listed in a newspaper article, while in high school (Rodriguez, 1982). Rodriguez always credited reading for its positive impact on his life:

My habit of reading made me a confident speaker and writer of English. Reading also enabled me to sense something of the shape, the major concerns of Western thought... In

these various ways, books brought me academic success as I hoped that they would. (Rodriguez, 1982, pp. 63-64)

Despite his accent troubles, and according to his own recollection, Podhoretz was already a fluent speaker of English upon entering elementary school. As he himself explained, “in any event, when I was a little boy, I spoke Yiddish... as fluently as I did English” (Podhoretz, 2000, p. 21). Moreover, he received extensive one-on-one help for three years from a teacher who exposed him to numerous enriching literary and cultural experiences. From the time Podhoretz was 13 until turning 16 his teacher accompanied him to museums and theatres and shared with him the works of T.S. Eliot, Robinson Jeffers, Keats, and Baudelaire, among many others (Podhoretz, 2000). His love for reading, first developed at home upon witnessing both his grandfather and his father read Yiddish and English newspapers daily (Podhoretz, 2000) and later groomed by his teacher, propelled Podhoretz to read the Grimms’ brothers’ fairy tales, Norse myths, and Mark Twain’s books in elementary school, Shakespeare and Walt Whitman in secondary school, and Rabelais, Dostoevsky, and Chaucer, as well as “Disraeli himself and everything ever written about him, nineteenth-century history, Victorian novels and memoirs” later on while at Columbia (Podhoretz, 1967, p. 104). Similarly to Rodriguez, Podhoretz credited his passion for reading as a major contributor to his accomplishments.

Notwithstanding his contentions that he never spoke in German in the U.S., Schwarzenegger did in fact use this language with several individuals, one of them his close friend and fellow bodybuilder Franco Columbu, whom he had met in Munich a few years before. In fact, their conversations in this language were especially troubling for Schwarzenegger’s girlfriend at the time because she thought they were joking and talking about her (Leamer, 2005). Moreover, Schwarzenegger conversed in German with members of the Kennedy family such as Rose and Ted Kennedy, and Sargent Shriver, about music, art, opera, books, history, Soviet premiers, and European law (Andrews, 2003; Leigh, 1990).

In regards to his exposure to English, Schwarzenegger’s high school education in Austria included seven years of formal study of this language (Outland Baker, 2006). Once in California, he enrolled in various English as a Second Language classes, as well as English for Foreign Students, and regular English and general education classes at Santa Monica College. Furthermore, he received help in English from fellow bodybuilders and acquaintances, and from Barbara Outland Baker, his girlfriend of six years. Baker, an English teacher and reading specialist herself, helped Schwarzenegger hone his writing skills by drafting and revising letters to contest sponsors, bodybuilding officials, and clients during his entrepreneurial beginnings. Schwarzenegger gratefully acknowledged her support, stating, “Who knows where I’d be today if it weren’t for her lessons!” (Outland Baker, 2006, p. ix).

Lastly, Schwarzenegger had taken business courses in Austria (Halperin, 2010) and enrolled in such business-related courses as microeconomics, macroeconomics, accounting, and computers at the community college and university level once in California (Ramos & Krashen, in press). Additionally, a fellow bodybuilder, himself a Math teacher, tutored him in math and algebra (Outland Baker, 2006) while a second one, a successful entrepreneur, helped him start his own marketing company (Schwarzenegger & Hall, 1977).

Discussion

Rodriguez, Podhoretz, and Schwarzenegger illustrate many different routes to English mastery. Rodriguez was placed in a mainstream English classroom on entering school, while Podhoretz grew up bilingually, hearing Yiddish at home and English at school, and

Schwarzenegger learned English as a foreign language in his native Austria and benefitted from individual tutoring in English and business-related issues once in the U.S. Despite these differences, their respective paths to English acquisition show some commonalities (see Table 1). These include support in their first and second languages, comprehensible input in English, and access to print.

Table 1.

Advantages for Rodriguez, Podhoretz, and Schwarzenegger

Advantages	Rodriguez	Podhoretz	Schwarzenegger
Support in native language	Yes	Yes	Yes
Comprehensible input in English	Yes	Yes	Yes
English as a Second Language	No	No	Yes
English as a Foreign Language	No	No	Yes
Friends/Acquaintances	?	?	Yes
Reading	Yes	Yes	Yes

Rodriguez', Podhoretz' and Schwarzenegger's exposure to their respective primary languages at home for several years allowed them to develop knowledge and literacy in their native tongues. Despite his adamant rejection of Spanish after 2nd grade, Rodriguez had already communicated in this language with his parents for the first 8 years of his life, while Podhoretz continued to converse in Yiddish with his family and Schwarzenegger used German steadily to talk to acquaintances and future in-laws. Moreover, all three individuals benefitted from sources of comprehensible input in English. Rodriguez, for example, received individual help from a nun who read to him, while Podhoretz became a "special pet" (Podhoretz, 1967, p. 8) to a teacher who enriched his education for 3 years, and Schwarzenegger's acquaintances provided constant, ongoing linguistic and business-related tutoring. Interestingly, these two factors, primary language development and comprehensible input in English, are essential components of well-designed bilingual education programs (Ramos & Krashen, 2011) and of what is known as *de facto* bilingual education: content and literacy development in primary language and comprehensible input in English (Ramos & Krashen, 2011). Primary language subject matter and literacy development helps students increase their background knowledge and knowledge of the world. This knowledge, in turn, helps make the English heard in class more comprehensible thanks to the existing transfer of skills between languages (Crawford & Krashen, 2007). This process was clearly described by Fernando De la Peña, himself ironically another well-known adversary of bilingual education, in his book *Democracy or Babel* when explaining his own father's acquisition of English: "He learned a lot of English in this class-which was not a grammar or composition class-but one in refrigeration (since he already knew the subject, he could focus on the words, so it was an English course for him)" (De la Peña, 1991, p. 21). In the present manuscript, Schwarzenegger's business background from Austria clearly made the business concepts heard in English more comprehensible, thereby allowing him to concentrate on the language.

Rodriguez and Podhoretz became voracious readers during their childhood and all three individuals continued to develop their reading skills during their academic careers. In so doing,

they benefitted from the power of reading, a potent source of comprehensible input unfortunately largely unavailable to many immigrants with low levels of English literacy and limited access to libraries (Krashen, 2004). Reading has a powerful impact on the development of first and second language literacy (Krashen, 2004), as well as on the acquisition of academic language (Krashen, 2012). Moreover, extensive reading may become the springboard to significant school and life accomplishments, as exemplified by the present cases and other individuals who, despite childhood predicaments, achieved important milestones later in life, for example Bishop Desmond Tutu, Geoffrey Canada, Liz Murray, or Reyna Grande (Krashen, 2011; Krashen & Williams, 2012).

In sum, contrary to their assertions, neither Rodriguez, nor Podhoretz or Schwarzenegger learned English simply by being immersed in this language. On the contrary, they received additional support, mostly unavailable to a large majority of ELLs attending our schools, which made this process much more palatable (Ramos & Krashen, in press). This included additional one-on-one tutoring in English, prior knowledge of the language, comprehensible input, or access to print. Their advantageous positions in this regard make their unsubstantiated criticism of bilingual education more difficult to understand. First, neither of them participated in these programs. In Rodriguez' case, his initial difficulties with English derived from his placement in English-Only classrooms. While he appeared to believe not to have missed "a great deal" by not being taught in his family's language at school, his family certainly seemed to have missed a great deal at home. As for Podhoretz, he was never a candidate for bilingual education due to his English fluency upon entering school. Hence, his real "blessing" was his familiarity with English rather than his not having been placed in a bilingual education program. Finally, Schwarzenegger was a product of primary language schooling in German and English as a foreign language. The individual tutoring received from acquaintances and the numerous English courses he enrolled in once in California discredit his advice for immigrants to avoid using their primary languages while relying exclusively on English as the best way to learn this language.

Conclusion

The present manuscript examined the English acquisition processes of three vocal critics of bilingual education, Richard Rodriguez, Norman Podhoretz, and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Despite their contentions that they learned English by immersion, which led them to discredit bilingual education, Rodriguez, Podhoretz, and Schwarzenegger received large amounts of help largely unavailable to most immigrant students in our schools. Additionally, their negative opinions about bilingual education appeared to be based on hearsay rather than first-hand experience. In light of these findings, it appears necessary to approach these and other, analogous considerations presenting a simplistic view of English acquisition with a certain degree of caution and to conduct closer examinations of those cases in order to identify undisclosed or overlooked factors playing significant roles in the process.

Rodriguez', Podhoretz', and Schwarzenegger's are not atypical stories of success in English. In fact, every adult immigrant who has succeeded in this language thanks to their being "immersed" in it enjoyed advantages parallel to the ones described here (Ramos & Krashen, 1997; 2001). Be it in the form of continuous provision of comprehensible input or extensive reading, research on English acquisition reveal that the challenges encountered along this long and complex endeavor are significantly mitigated when individuals receive, as Rodriguez, Podhoretz, and Schwarzenegger did, a little help from their friends.

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