

Position Paper on English-only Legislation in the United States

English-only, Official English, and English First are various names used by a movement whose goal is to have English declared the official language of the United States such that all government business is conducted only in English. The current English-only movement began in 1981, when the late Senator S. I. Hayakawa of California introduced a joint resolution (S.J. Res. 72) to amend the U.S. constitution to have English declared the official language. Since then, there have been numerous bills introduced in the U.S. Congress with similar goals, and, to date, 27 states have declared English as their official language¹.

TESOL has historically opposed restrictive language policies, as stated by its *Resolution on Language Rights* (1987) and its *Position Statement on Language Rights* (2000). In discussing the merits of English-only, proponents have used a number of erroneous arguments to mislead the public on the nature and goals of such policies.

Myth 1: English-only promotes unity.

Proponents of English-only suggest that a linguistically and culturally diverse country is a divided one, and that divisions along linguistic lines contribute to racial and ethnic conflicts. They claim that the English language, then, is a common bond that holds a country together. Citing conflicts over language in other countries such as Canada, proponents of English-only suggest an official language in the United States will prevent such conflicts by unifying the nation and promoting assimilation by immigrants.

Reality: Linguistic diversity is rarely the cause of conflict in other countries, but rather is often used as a symbol to reflect social inequalities, as is the case in Canada. More importantly, however, the argument above assumes that those who speak a language other than English are monolingual, and therefore can't communicate in English.

The 2000 Census indicated that although the U.S. population is diverse, only 4% of the U.S. population speaks little or no English (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Moreover, the diverse population that speaks a language other than English is not a distinct group that is geographically or culturally isolated, but rather is spread throughout the county. As this population is tremendously diverse, there is no danger of some kind of unity within this population to challenge English-language speakers, therefore comparisons to situations in other countries is inaccurate.

¹ Hawaii has both English and Hawaiian as its declared official languages.

Myth 2: English-only will empower immigrants.

According to proponents of English-only, conducting all government business in English-only will empower immigrants because they will understand that they must know English to fully participate and succeed in the United States. This myth would have people believe that providing multilingual government services sends a mixed signal and creates a dependence on linguistic welfare, isolating immigrants from mainstream society and encouraging the growth of linguistic enclaves and ghettos.

Reality: Immigrants fully understand that the ability to speak English is the key to success in the United States. Immigrants and those with limited English skills generally do want to learn English, but often there are few opportunities to do so. There is no arguing against the value of learning English in the United States; English is already recognized worldwide as the de facto language of this country. Government funding for adult education, language, and literacy programs is much more limited than for elementary and secondary education. In many major urban areas, the demand for affordable adult English as a second language (ESL) programs far outpaces the supply, and thousands of adults are on waiting lists to attend available ESL programs.

Furthermore, if the aim of English-only policies were truly to empower immigrants, they would be matched by increasing the opportunities for immigrants to learn English. English-only provisions have only focused on the language of government, and not on opportunities to learn English. For example, the two English-only bills introduced at the start of the 109th Congress – H.J.RES. 43 and H.R. 997 – offer no provisions to expand resources and funding for ESL programs.

Myth 3: English-only will promote efficiency and fairness in government by conducting all official business in a single language.

Offering multilingual government services is costly and inefficient, according to proponents of English-only. Supposedly, thousands of dollars spent on multilingual services would be saved if government business were to be conducted only in English. Furthermore, if government services cannot be provided in all languages, they claim that it would be fairer to provide them only in a single language.

Reality: Very little money is spent federally on translation of documents and multilingual services. In fact, when government agencies choose to provide multilingual services, it is almost always to promote more efficient operations, such as in law enforcement, informing the public of their rights and responsibilities, safeguarding public health and safety, and providing greater access to government and the political process. In the case of the Internal Revenue Service, the primary reason multilingual services are provided is for cost-effectiveness: The amount of taxes collected as a result of such services far exceeds the cost.

Furthermore, by providing government services in a single language, English-only provisions in fact penalize English language learners by limiting their access to public services. Any law that makes it more difficult for certain segments of the population

to access services is by its nature discriminatory and cannot be either fair or efficient. Moreover, limiting access to public services and opportunities that could help immigrants better integrate into the country is illogical as it would further stigmatize and disenfranchise English language learners rather than help them acquire the language.

Myth 4: English-only will help protect the English language in the United States, which is in danger of being replaced by Spanish.

Many proponents of English-only fear that the growing Hispanic population and visibility of Spanish-language media in the United States threatens the status and use of English. Declaring English the official language, the argument goes, will protect its status as the historical and national language of the United States.

Reality: According to the 2000 Census, 82% of the population speaks only English, and 96% speak English well or very well (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Although the Spanish-speaking population has grown dramatically in the United States since 1990, English clearly remains the dominant language of the country. Moreover, studies have shown a rapid language shift to English among immigrants and their children in the United States (Portes & Hao, 1998.) Further, the demand for English language teaching has grown dramatically around the world, and English has become a common language of global communication. The notion that somehow the English language is endangered and is in need of protection is a fallacy.

Myth 5: Bilingual education and bilingualism prevent immigrants from effectively learning English and integrating effectively.

Furthering the argument that multilingual government services are a kind of linguistic welfare that only encourage the growth of linguistic enclaves, proponents of English-only single out bilingual education as one of the main causes of this problem. They are against bilingual education, saying this discourages and hinders young limited English speakers from learning English, further segregating them from mainstream society. Moreover, the proponents argue, the language spoken at home is a private family matter, and its teaching and maintenance is not the responsibility of the government.

Reality: Bilingual education, which uses the native language of its students to aid in academic achievement, can take many different forms. Regardless of the methodology used, effective bilingual education programs develop high levels of proficiency in the students' native language and English, as well as content knowledge. The cognitive, linguistic, social, and academic benefits of enrichment bilingual contexts have been well documented (Payne & Collier, 1998). Research on second language acquisition has consistently shown that the use and development of the students' native language while they are acquiring English has no detrimental effect on learning English and in fact aids second language development and academic learning (Payne & Collier, 1999).

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With regard to government involvement in language development, the U.S. Department of Defense and other security agencies spend millions annually training native English speakers to speak a foreign language, and the Department of Defense has even gone so far as to develop an action plan for building the nation's language capacity (U.S. Department of Defense, 2005). Meanwhile, little money is spent to develop the existing resources in this country's linguistically and culturally diverse communities. Moreover, as the ability to communicate in more than one language provides greater access to opportunities in this increasingly interdependent world, the language diversity in the United States should be viewed as a rich resource that should be fostered, rather than as a deficit that needs to be countered.

Although proponents of English-only declare the intention of such legislation is to help unify the country and assist immigrants, the reality of English-only is that it will do the exact opposite. English-only policies will polarize and divide rather than unify; they will exclude rather than include immigrants and other English language learners from civic life and hence further marginalize this group.

Like many nations that encourage multilingualism for all, the United States should treat linguistic and cultural diversity as an asset for all individuals in the United States. Policies should create services and opportunities for English language development as well as competence in other languages. Rather than create exclusionary and restrictive language policies, lawmakers should focus their efforts on creating more resources and opportunities for English language development for English language learners, as well as fostering bilingualism and multilingualism for all Americans.

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