

OFFICIAL AMERICAN ENGLISH IS BEST

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The debate in favor of English as the official language of the United States focuses on narrowing national unity amid linguistic diversity for the sake of communicative clarity and the betterment of the country. Generally speaking, arguments for English as the national language boil down to assimilating immigrants to the United States. English-only supporters reason that if immigrants come to the United States, they must learn to speak, read, and write English. And more, U.S. citizens should not have to be burdened to speak, read, or write official business in languages that are not English—U.S. citizens should not be inconvenienced with *para español, marque número dos* when calling their banks or for footing the bill to translate driver’s license applications or signs at the Division of Motor Vehicles into different languages, let alone filling out an application in another language.

Thirty-one states have some form of English-only legislation, most recently Oklahoma in 2010. For over three decades, the political think tank known as U.S. English has been central for shaping legal policies advocating for the unifying role of an official language in the United States. U.S. English has lobbied to enact English-only legislation across the United States, or what the organization calls *Official English*. According to U.S. English, recognizing English as the official language of the nation benefits the government and its citizens by fostering a common means of communication among its 325 spoken languages. Official English urges that official government business at all levels be conducted solely in English, including signs, applications, public documents, records, official ceremonies, and meetings. U.S. English argues that making Official English the law of the land would “encourage immigrants to learn

English in order to use government services and participate in the democratic process.” Immigrants in the Official English movement must be forcefully encouraged to read, write, and speak English, because if they live in America, they better learn English, and learn quickly if they want to catch up with everyone else. Implicit in the argument is that immigrants don’t want to learn English, that immigrants don’t exercise their democratic rights, and that immigrants don’t integrate with the mainstream.

These huge misconceptions are at the root of U.S. English’s arguments dismissing bilingual education, literacy learning, and immigrant involvement for a mythologized monolingual United States, which are bad ideas for all writers in a democratic society. Rather than approach the diversity of our voices in the United States as gaps to be overcome toward learning English, we should look to all of our nation’s languages as gifts. The question of Official English unifying difference is a smokescreen for nationalist conceptions about immigrant integration and assimilation. Indeed, the argument for Official English swirls into a dichotomy between *us* and *them*, focusing specifically on how becoming American for immigrants means being encouraged to lose a central component of their identity to participate in the democratic process. This way of thinking about plurilingual burdens hurts how the United States thinks of its many linguistic gifts, however. The worst part of this plurilingual benign neglect is the unfair blame individuals and groups receive for their supposed English language lacks, deficits, and gaps. I propose instead that we learn how our writing repertoires move beyond and between languages. Instead of standardized monolingual writing in Official English terms, we can instead turn to how writing grounded in social justice and democratic pluralism connects local, national, and global struggles that challenge language nationalism.

The Myth of an English-Only United States

The English-only myth assigns deficits and gaps to anyone with home languages that are not English. English-only policies make prescriptions about official languages, and such debates also make prescriptions about who can be a citizen or pass as one. Among immigrant families across the nation there is a strong desire to learn English. Immigrants on one level believe in more economic opportunities with English, but also the power of English to be able to defend themselves. In fact, immigrant parents learning

English often blame themselves for not assimilating their children's language identities, and in cases of home language loss, blame themselves for that as well. What the English-only argument misses is the human struggles of immigrants, of individual and collective community struggles for bilingual education. For English-only advocates, immigrants are faceless statistics connected to cost analyses and alleged drains on public systems, such as printing public signs and materials in languages that are not English.

English as the official language of the United States has roots that go back to the founding of the United States. Benjamin Franklin, for example, was notorious for desiring to rid the nation of German-language schools. English-only was one of the Founding Father's major concerns for preserving and conserving the emerging American identity. This is ironic enough considering the English language's Germanic heritage, but nevertheless the sense of linguistic assimilation amid pluralism has deep sediment within the American monolingual psyche. Native Americans and immigrants from around the world have had their languages forcefully removed in the United States since its beginning and have continually suffered assimilative pressures in schools for generations.

It was not until the 1980s, however, that federal proposals for a constitutional amendment declaring English the official language of the nation became increasingly vocal. In 1981, U.S. Senator Samuel Ichiye Hayakawa, one of U.S. English's founders, introduced the amendment in the Senate, and though the amendment did not progress, the arguments awakened multiple lobbying groups to expand the efforts at the state level, succeeding in some 30 states to date. The U.S. English lobbyists made their biggest strides in California, the home state of Senator Hayakawa. In 1998, California voters passed Proposition 227, mandating that California Limited English Proficient (LEP) students be taught literacy overwhelmingly in English-only immersion programs not normally expected to exceed one year rather than provide any funding for bilingual education. After one year, students were encouraged to sink or swim in mainstream classes. As a result, California removed all bilingual classes and assessed thousands of emergent bilingual students as *limited* in their academic English proficiency. At the time, roughly a quarter of California's students classified as limited.

The arguments for national unity linked to English and assimilation compel bizarre patriotic themes that convince some

Americans who would find discrimination on any other spaces shameful. Through the guise of language, however, targeting immigrants turns discrimination into euphemisms about citizenship, belonging, and the public good. The limited in the LEP designation carries the stigma of deficiency, applied to students' language abilities and assuming potential and, as a result, opportunities. The children affected by the legislation are not researchers for think tanks or lobbyists, let alone against learning English or their home languages. The real limit for all students is mainstreaming policy that cuts away at the plurilingual gifts of our nation. All Americans stand to gain by learning to speak, read, and write many languages.

Embracing All the Languages of the United States as Gifts

The truth is that immigrants to the United States learn English faster today than at any point in history. Historically, immigrants to the U.S. transitioned from home languages to English within three generations. Today, this timeframe has been compressed for some immigrant groups to a single generation, as linguistic scholars Rubén Rumbaut and Douglas Massey explain. The problem, therefore, is not learning English but rather remaining bilingual.

In addition, the assumptions of Official English that students learning English find little support from their families or that students' home languages have no place in learning both fall flat. Official English assumes that there is no value to fluencies in languages not English and that monolingual English is sufficient for the global language. The narrow-minded view that English-only is the only model for literacy learning should be put to rest. English-only does not contribute to meaningful education on any grounds. Decades of research into bilingual learning strongly advocates for all students' plurilingual learning.

Plurilingual writers have extensive vocabularies beyond English and excellent abilities to translate and interpret across and between languages. Bilingual individuals have also proven to develop complex meta-cognitive skills for translating and communicating among diverse audiences. This movement between people and writing makes for complex imaginative and critical writing. Consider this plurilingual gift of writing as a way to move away from the misconceptions about English-only ideologies. In a global economy, the power of English is undeniable, yet the power

of bilinguals to communicate beyond and across languages and cultures is invaluable. Further, we can and must appreciate plurilingualism as a gift, a gift that some students bring to our schools from their homes and communities. When we try, we can learn to appreciate that all the languages of our nation are gifts, and those gifts shape our identities as unique individuals in communities who speak to one another between and across languages and differences, even in spaces imagined to be monolingual.

Writing Across and Between Languages

Ultimately, schools bear the responsibility for producing conscientious citizens; hence, the intolerant impetus behind Proposition 227 and efforts to standardize students and their languages do not follow the democratic tradition of U.S. schooling. English-only initiatives at the state level have not produced any evidence to back their arguments about increasing proficiency among emergent bilingual students or for aiding public communication. This lack of evidence is not surprising because in reality there are no language gaps, aside from those that policy makers create out of air. If you catch yourself using ideas of *language gaps*, *limited*, or *playing catch up* to arrive at English literacy, don't play into the game. There are no gaps or limits when it comes to languages; there are only gifts. So-called language gaps are bad for writing in all languages—not just English—and bad for democracy.

On a practical level, I write this from the level of students who don't lobby Congress but who must learn to value the dignity of all languages, most importantly the languages of all our nation's communities and families. Rather than mark emergent bilingual students by their limits, we should instead imagine students by their potential and by the strengths they gain from their communities that they carry with them into classrooms. Rather than assume students are limited writers or at fault in their individualized efforts, we must acknowledge that emerging bilingual students are not limited in their community contexts and instead look to the diverse repertoires they perform. Writing that is truly democratic values all languages and identities as they exist across the nation and not as imagined as English-only.

This type of writing means embracing all languages of communities, following the movements in diverse activities, performances, and genres, including across generations and social classes. For English-only purists, this view will remain contrary

to their ideology, but a realistic orientation acknowledges that all American communities are plurilingual and that the language hybridity of everyday practices happen in contexts that range from the boroughs of New York City to the Appalachian regions of the South, from Alaska to Hawaii to Puerto Rico. The reading of the word to re-read the world and the opportunity to re-write is where this hybridity can offer the liberating potential to envision social justice across languages.

Further Reading

For more information about linguistic diversity, see Rubén Rumbaut and Douglas S. Massey’s article “Immigration and Language Diversity in the United States.” Camille Ryan offers census data about American language use in *Language Use in the United States: 2011: American Community Survey*. U.S. English, Inc.’s website offers information about its efforts to make English the official language of the United States.

In 2003, Richard Gonzales reports on *National Public Radio* about kid translators in the context of California Assembly Bill 292, legislation that would have prohibited the practice of using children as translators for their immigrant parents in business transactions. The short film *Immersion* (2009) narrates the predicament of a creative emergent bilingual student coping with language differences at school. Accompanying lesson plan materials are available on the film’s official website. Finally, the City University of New York–New York State Initiative on Emergent Bilinguals offers an online guide with practical assistance on how to help facilitate learning content for emergent bilingual students.

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