

## Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor, Your Huddled Masses Yearning to Speak English: The *English Only* Debate in the United States

KIMBERLY W. DANIEL, UNIVERSIDAD DE LAS AMÉRICAS-PUEBLA <sup>1</sup>

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During the short history of the United States, language has played a major role in the texture of American society (Heath 1980). The United States began as a union of different people from many different countries with different linguistic backgrounds. The creators of the United States constitution appear to have taken this variety and difference into consideration when they wrote the United States Constitution, a document which expressed freedoms and rights but no clear restrictions (Heath 1980).

Many Americans currently see the missing language clause in the United States Constitution as a large error on the conscious of America. In efforts to fix this perceived “error” groups have formed, like English First and U. S. English, in order to push a constitutional amendment that would make English the official language of the United States. <sup>2</sup> The movement, called *English Only*, attempts to abolish the use of all languages, other than English, in government, education, and all public spheres within the United States.

This paper contains four major sections. The first section will review a brief history of languages in the United States and major language related legislation.<sup>3</sup> The second section will examine the *English Only* movement discussing the sides, their expressed and implied goals, and their possible effects on bilingual education. The third section will discuss some studies that have examined the effect of bilingual and *English Only* education for immigrant students and will summarize the conclusions they make regarding English acquisition and overall student language learning in the different environments. In summary, the fourth section will discuss the implications of the *English Only* movement on a world wide scale as well as a re-

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<sup>1</sup> The author can be reached at the Departamento de Lenguas, Universidad de las Américas-Puebla, Sta. Catarina Martir, 72820 Cholula, Puebla, México. Telephone: (22) 29-31-15. Fax: (22) 29-31-01. E-mail: la098588@mail.pue.udlap.mx.

<sup>2</sup> See English First 1997; House Republican Committee 1996

<sup>3</sup> See also Heath 1980 and Marshall 1986 that further review the history of languages in the United States.

cent California legislative decision to abolish bilingual education within that state.

### **United States Language History**

The 13 colonies that eventually became the United States were founded by a variety of different people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Heath (1980) reminds readers that when these people received independence from Great Britain they included no choice of a national language in their constitution. This is not very surprising considering their feelings towards the British control over their lives during the formation of their colonies and their successful attempt to break from the oppression of British rule.

Their break from British control is not to imply that Americans did not want to speak English. Some early national leaders such as John Adams and Noah Webster kept the goals of a national language in the minds of Americans through their writings on the English language (Heath 1980). These writings were influential during that time but they did not call for an amendment to the United States Constitution to make English the official language. Marshall (1986) writes that

There seems to have been a conscious effort to make the new and growing republic a country welcoming peoples from diverse cultures and with differing languages; few fears were expressed about the loss of national unity or the possibility of sundering the body politic. (p. 11)

He cites slavery, industrialization, urbanization, growing mechanization of agriculture, the rapidity of western expansions, and other concerns as higher on the list of priorities for Americans during this time.

Many of the first settlers during this time settled into colonies of Dutch, Swedish, French, German, and other language speakers. These settlers started schools where their native language was the primary source of teaching and learning (Marshall 1986).

The United States welcomed immigrants during its founding days but as more and more immigrants from Eastern Europe and Asia began to go to the United States, there was more concern with a national language and English literacy laws in efforts to control the distribution of power within the United States (Marshall 1986; Heath 1980). Among the fears of the people already in the U. S. citizens was the fear of the effects that new im-

migrants, who were not Protestant and not from Western Europe, would have on society. Many states passed literacy laws during the late 1800's and early 1900's in efforts to establish a level of English literacy, which limited the chances of citizenship of many immigrants (Marshall 1986). These laws continued into the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in their efforts also to curb the teaching of languages other than English in schools.

War time also effected the acceptance of other languages within American society. Fear of Germans, Russians, and other foreign "enemies" within the United States caused many states to make *English Only* laws. Marshall (1986) states that the "war psychology," which saw multiethnicity and multilingualism as threats to national unity, along with economic depression effected attitudes towards those who did not speak English.

Many laws, that often followed large historical changes within the U.S., affected the acceptance of different languages within public spheres and sometimes even private spheres. In the early 1900's, the state of Nebraska passed a law prohibiting the use of languages other than English in both public and private schools. Other states had similar laws prohibiting the use of languages other than English in their schools also. In 1923, the Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional to prohibit the use of languages other than English in private schools but citizens could do so in tax-supported public schools (Marshall 1986). This law provided one of the first explicit court Supreme Court actions regarding languages within the United States.

The national Civil Rights Movement within the United States also helped to positively effect the use of languages other than English for teaching. It gave American immigrants the rights to more educational opportunities in their own language through the Bilingual Education Act. The first Bilingual Education Act which passed in 1968, only four years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, recognized the role of teaching languages other than English for ethnic groups in the U. S. (Heath 1980 and Marshall 1986). Later in 1974, *Lau v. Nicholas* also found that instruction solely in English deprived students of understanding the curriculum of their school and of an equal opportunity in education. Marshall (1986) states that this case did not legally require schools to provide bilingual or bicultural education but it did prevent schools from excluding students from such programs.

For more in-depth coverage of the history and legislation of languages Marshall (1986) and Heath (1980) give more coverage of the topic in their writings on languages in the United States.

### **English Only: Proponents, Critics, and the Controversy**

The *English Only* movement grew out of the history of the United States and its acceptance of some immigrants and rejection of other immigrants (Wiley 1996). It has also grown out of the fear that new immigrants are not as susceptible to the assimilation paradigm used to “Americanize” immigrants for more than a century. The proponents of *English Only* use the history of many immigrant groups and their quick assimilation into American society and the English language as an example of how they think things should be.

There are several strategies that have been used by *English Only* proponents, many politicians, to build a case against bilingualism in schools and to implicate immigrants who do not want to use English as part of the perceived problem. Crawford (1997) gives two important examples of the politicalness of the *English Only* debate and how the public is convinced that there is a need to end bilingual education.

Crawford (1997) quotes speaker of the House Newt Gingrich as saying

there are over 80 languages taught in California school as the primary language... in a country where in Seattle there are 75 languages being taught, in Chicago there are 100.

Crawford reminds readers that Gingrich takes the number of student groups speaking other languages and uses it to intensify people’s disbelief and anger against the system. Neither 80 nor 75 nor 100 languages are being taught in these cities. Due to the lack of teachers to teach the astronomical number of languages Gingrich quotes and the transitional state of most bilingual programs, this is an extreme exaggeration. A smaller number of students are reached by bilingual programs which tend to be primarily in Spanish.

To go even further into the minds and the pockets of Americans, Crawford (1997) quotes Representative Roby Roth (Republican of Wisconsin) stating that:

Much has been said this morning about education and wasting of money. We spend some \$12 billion a year in this country, \$12 billion a year on bilingual education, which means we teach kids in other than the English language.

He, like U. S. English, manipulates statistics in order to further the cause of stopping “wasteful” spending, or at least stopping bilingual education. They both take the average expenditure nationally per pupil and multiply it by the number of LEP<sup>4</sup> students. This does not take into consideration that only a small percentage of these students are actually in bilingual classrooms and there are “real” figures about bilingual education that are closer to \$100 million rather than billions of dollars. This \$100 million includes transitional programs also (Crawford 1997).

Immigrant degrading comments also seem to be a tactic that is used to back *English Only*. Attempts to portray immigrants who don’t want to learn English or who haven’t learned English as “un-American” are also used as ammunition against bilingual education. Ron Unz, of the new California movement to ban bilingual education in 1998, compared today’s Spanish speakers in opposition to his own Jewish grandparents “who came to California in the 1920s and 1930s as poor European immigrants. They came to WORK and become successful... not to sit back and be a burden to those who were already here.” (Crawford 1997) These tactics are readily swallowed up by those who are against immigrants and bilingual education.

The House Republican Committee also warns readers that bilingual policies discourage immigrants from becoming part of the American Dream (House Republican Committee 1996). They feel that Americans must have a common basis for mutual understanding and English is it. They define differences in languages as “divisive linguistic separatism.” They also use language conflicts in Canada and Israel in order to back their argument on the divisiveness of language. Their arguments about Canada and Israel do not seem to take into consideration that if people would not try to force their own language on everyone within their country’s borders there might not be linguistic conflict.

On the other hand, there are many organizations that are attempting to fight *English Only* initiatives including the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund (MALDEF), Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), and the National Education Association (NEA) to name a

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<sup>4</sup> Limited English Proficiency.

few. The NEA is attempting to propose reverse legislation that would value all languages within the U. S.. They argue an English Plus position that takes into consideration that:

1. Many residents speak native languages other than English; these linguistic resources should be conserved and developed.
2. This nation was founded on a commitment to democratic principles and diversity. There was no commitment to racial, ethnic, or religious homogeneity.
3. Multilingualism is a tremendous resource and helps in American competitiveness and diplomatic efforts. (National Education Association 1996)

These are only a few of the reasons why they support bilingual education and are against *English Only*. The NEA and other organizations that have made statements concerning their views against *English Only* provide only a portion of the support for diverse language teaching within American society. Many language educators reject *English Only* also because its attempts to assimilate immigrants instead of valuing their cultures and their languages.

### **Academia and *English Only***

*English Only* receives much attention within academic literature in a variety of different academic disciplines. Authors write about *English Only* in political, social, psychological, educational, and language journals just to name a few. In this section I will first define the *English Only* movement as it is defined by many of the articles written in English language teaching journals. Next I will review *English Only* as it relates to academic language teaching literature discussing how academics see the use of other languages in teaching immigrant students and the effect the use of other languages has on students overall learning experience.

Language teaching literature often makes a dichotomy between those who are for *English Only*, generally labeled assimilationists or some almost equivalent derivative, and those who are against *English Only*, generally labeled cultural pluralists, in attempts to define the sides of the controversy (Lucas & Katz 1994; Phillipson & Skutnab-Kangas). These two sides constantly disagree concerning what is the best way to teach immigrant children. The assimilationists feel that English is the goal and should be the only method by which the goal is reached. While cultural pluralists feel that students should not have to abandon their culture or language in their attempts to learn English.

Cultural pluralists, which encompass many language educators, define the *English Only* movement as one of primarily political intentions with little or no connections with language pedagogy nor the goal of complete and sound education for children (Wiley & Lukes 1996; Auerbach 1993; Lucas & Katz 1994). They point out that the *English Only* movement only concentrates on the goals of English acquisition often to the detriment of other learning of content.

Auerbach (1993) writes about the use of other languages in the ESL classroom and cites experiences where students would have benefited from instruction in their native language to facilitate their acquisition of English. She also observes a better attitude toward language learning and learning in general as possible benefits of a bilingual education. Other benefits include reducing the affective barrier of the student which facilitates language learning in both English and the student's native language.

Lucas and Katz (1994) review effective programs that were *English Only* in theory and on paper, but the students interacted and helped each other understand difficult concepts and words in their native languages. Both of these authors take the view that students' native languages provide effective ways to strengthen students conceptual knowledge of English as well as students' ability to help each other within the ESL classroom.

There is not a large amount of literature concerning positive student language acquisition when English used solely in the ESL classroom. Although Lucas and Katz (1994) assessed classrooms where the teacher knew only English and English was predominately spoken, many of the teachers allowed students with greater English proficiency to help students with little or no English proficiency in the native language of the students. The demands of the assimilationists seem to have little to do with the pedagogical soundness of teaching other languages nor to teachers' in-class behaviors.

Bikales (1986), the leader of U.S. English at the time, reminds readers that public schools should socialize "immigrant young, teaching them our language and our ways, quickly transforming these young foreigners into citizens at home in the new society (79)." This conveniently conflicts with what she states in the beginning of the article as her personal view concerning her value of foreign languages and cultures. She states, that she is an "advocate of legal protections for English who is also fluent in several languages and deeply immersed in the richness of [her] ethnic heritage (77)." It is wonderful that she is immersed in the richness of her own ethnic

heritage but that says nothing about her valuing or tolerating of the ethnic heritages of others, particularly immigrants, that she wants to “quickly transform” into someone more like herself. She later refers to “corrupt ethnic politicians ready to trade favors in return for votes (80),” exhibiting more of a moral argument than one on the grounds of the educational benefit or detriment in learning native languages along with English.

Clearly Bikales (1986) gives more arguments against bilingual education and for *English Only* but primarily she is exemplary of the politicalness of the argument. Many of the assimilationists argue solely on the basis of assimilation without regarding any intrinsic educational value of learning foreign languages in the classroom. They also want to look at the learning of English as something that is quick and easy.

As can be seen by the literature there are two main views exist concerning what is the best or more appropriate way to teach languages in the classroom (Lucas & Katz 1994). This difference and variety provides evidence and possible fuel for both sides of the *English Only* debate. Views concerning language use in English as a Second Language (ESL) range from those practitioners whose mainly emphasize the goal of learning English to those whose main concern is the overall learning experiences of the student.

### **Conclusion: English Now and Around the World**

Currently one of the most pervasive battles for *English Only* is being fought in California. Recently an *English Only* initiative passed which attempts to make English the only language spoken in Californian public schools and has implications not only for California but also the rest of the states that are looking at California and its history of landmark cases and laws.

Currently many states have laws legislating *English Only*. Marshall (1986) lists in detail the states with *English Only* laws up until 1986. He also provides brief histories of many states that have the most influential language laws. One aspect of state law that can be pointed out to the present is that they have had little if any influence on bilingual educational opportunities though there are many states with Official English laws.

The initiative in California is more extreme than the usual politics of U.S. *English, English First*, and more extreme than any of the previous state



law English provisions. Within California they have voted on and passed an initiative that will, according to Crawford (1996):

- Outlaw the use of languages other than English to instruct any student in the California public schools
- Dismantle successful programs that not only teach English but keep children from falling behind in other subjects (bilingual programs)
- Impose unproven pedagogical approach “sheltered English immersion... not normally intended to exceed a year.”
- Limit options for English-speaking students to learn another language by requiring them to score above grade level in English to receive a waiver.
- Destroy two-way bilingual education.
- Invite lawsuits to enforce the English only mandate and hold teachers and administrators personally liable for such “crimes” as using another language in class.
- Stimulate yet another round of ethnic conflict in California.

This legislation would not only effect the way in which immigrants are educated but it would also effect the access of language programs to all students within the state of California.

This stance on English seems also to be one that has been taken around the world. Phillipson & Skutnab-Kangas (1996) present a persuasive view of English around the world. The stance taken by many Americans and British, advocated that English be spoken around the world often to the exclusion of other languages. The assumption is that the common world-wide language should be English without consideration of the imperialistic language goals of such language policy. Thus the *English Only* mindset affects not only the United States but it is also going beyond country borders to a more global mindset.

As one can see at the beginning of the history of languages within the United States, there was little concern demonstrated regarding languages. With the influx of non-Protestant and non Western European immigrants there became concern over the superiority of English and the Protestant religious tradition. This concern provoked language legislation that sought to curb the teaching of languages other than English within schools and attempted to make immigrants assimilate as soon as possible.

Further legislation during the civil rights era made it possible for immigrant students to have access to education in their native languages as well as access to English. Currently there is much pressure to do away with bilingual education programs that were facilitated during this era in attempts to go back to the early 20th century assimilationists approach to education. This is currently being fought by many educators that value language and cultural differences and feel that these traits should be promoted instead of ignored within schools.

Even though , the California *English Only* Initiative did pass this could provide another opportunity to prove how the chance and choice to learn different languages are part of the rights that are described within the U.S. Constitution and cannot be taken away from immigrants to the U.S. As many language educators believe, language and culture should be integral parts of the education of immigrant students and all students. There seems to be little possible to stop the imperialistic tendencies of *English Only* around the world but at least knowledge of the intentions of *English Only* proponents could provide motivation to countries to attempt to control the *English Only* tendencies within their countries.

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