

THE LINGUISTIC CONSEQUENCES OF “ENGLISH-ONLY” IN THE UNITED STATES

Boston University Pardee Center Graduate Summer Fellowship Program

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Summer 2021

Abstract

This paper discusses the language attitudes and educational policies associated with the U.S. “English-Only” movement and the negative linguistic implications of these policies for Americans with a wide variety of language backgrounds. The paper provides a brief historical background on language and multilingualism in the United States. It then goes on to present a review of the scientific literature related to multilingualism and adult language acquisition, emphasizing evidence regarding how English-Only policies and attitudes negatively impact language acquisition and maintenance for bilingual Americans.

The paper focuses on three key groups of bilingual Americans, and the unique linguistic difficulties presented to them by English-Only attitudes and policies. For adult immigrants learning English as a foreign language, that risk relates the attrition or loss of their native language, despite the native language have the potential to serve as a key learning tool for second language education. For children raised in bilingual households this relates to incomplete acquisition and eventual loss of their heritage language. For native English-speaking Americans, this risk relates to unnecessary difficulties in foreign language learning as a result of U. S. foreign language education standards.

“English-Only” advocates have made a variety of claims related to the linguistic benefits of their policy for both English-speaking American citizens and immigrants learning English as a foreign language. The paper will emphasize how these claims lack scientific support and instead reflect an underlying anti-immigrant sentiment. Additionally, it will emphasize how policies encouraging linguistic diversity will better prepare the United State to thrive an increasingly multilingual world.

1 Introduction

On his campaign trail for the 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump made the statement “This is a country where we speak English, not Spanish” (Goldmacher, 2016). While Trump stands out as the first U.S. presidential candidate in over a century to choose not to reach out to millions of American voters whose preferred language is Spanish, he is not alone in his opinion that English should be the exclusive language used by U.S. citizens. This “English-Only” ideology, which is currently seen as a far-right talking point in contemporary U.S. politics, is not a new idea. Politically speaking, the American English-Only campaign, which ultimately aims to have English declared the official national language of the United States, dates back as early as the 19th century.

While supporters of English-Only laws argue that the universal use of English in the U.S. would aid in uniting the American people, potentially strengthening democratic participation and economic progression (Chandra, 2016), those that oppose such policies argue that the policies promote discrimination against non-English speakers in the country (Padilla et al., 1991). From a legal and political prospective, The American Civil Liberties Union argues that official English policies impede on citizens’ First Amendment right to communicate with or petition the government (American Civil Liberties Union, 2021). Others, meanwhile, argue that the implications of such policies go beyond official governmental procedure, and have clear socio-cultural and economic impacts. Those opposed include linguist Geoffrey Pullum (1987), who argued that official English policies promote hatred and suspicion of aliens and immigrants. Donaldo Macedo (2017) seconds this idea, adding that supporting an English-Only policy in an educational context promotes the incorrect assumption that English is a superior language, and ignores our country’s centuries-long history of linguistic, cultural, and racial discrimination.

As a researcher in multilingualism, the linguistic consequences of such policies stand out as both critically important and under-examined. In a statement on Language Rights, The Linguistic Society of America notes that much of the public debate about multilingualism is often based on misconceptions about language. These misconceptions include the tendency to regard multilingualism as a “handicap” or “language barrier” (Executive Committee of the Linguistic Society of America, 1996). Experts on multilingualism, however, note that the relationship between languages in the multilingual mind is a complex one which can provide unique experiences, benefits, and opportunities unavailable to monolinguals.

Umbrella terms such as “bilingual” and “multilingual” are often used to refer to a diverse set of people who vary greatly in terms of what languages they speak, their language proficiency, the degree to which they have a “foreign accent”, and the context and degree to which they use each language. For the 20% of Americans who identify as bi- or multilingual (U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2019), English-Only policies and attitudes in American government, education, and business will continue to directly affect their language acquisition and maintenance. However, the ways in which these speakers will be affected and the resulting linguistic consequences dramatically differ as a result of the factors listed above.

This following paper outlines the unique risks and negative impact of English-Only policies and their resulting language attitudes on language acquisition and maintenance in bilingual Americans. The paper will be organized as follows: Section 2 will briefly outline the linguistic history of the United States and the U.S. English-Only political movement. Section 3 will outline how English-Only policies and the attitudes and ideologies behind them impact the language acquisition and language maintenance of three different groups of bilingual Americans: (1) Section 3.1 will focus on immigrants acquiring English as a second language in adulthood Section 3.2 will discuss children raised in bilingual households and Section 3.3 will discuss native English-speaking Americans interested in learning foreign languages. Finally, Section 4 will outline actions that can be taken to better promote successful second language acquisition and bilingual language maintenance for Americans who speak more than one language.

2 Linguistic History of the United States

As of 2019, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that 78% of American households use exclusively English to communicate at home, while another 18% of households report using both English and another language (U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2019). It was not always the case that a staggering 96% of U.S. households spoke the same single language, English. Historically speaking, in addition to the estimated 245 indigenous languages spoken in the United States before the arrival of Europeans (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2021), the colonization of U.S. lands by Europeans brought with it the use of a variety of European languages, including not only English, but also Spanish, French, German, Portuguese, and Dutch among others. Meanwhile, the slave trade introduced a wide array of African language to the continent. This previously unprecedented cross-cultural interaction led the U.S. to be arguably the most linguistically diverse area in the world at the time (Shell, 1993).

America’s founding fathers had mixed opinions related to language use and bilingualism in their new country. Some founding fathers, such as Thomas Jefferson, felt that the acceptance an inclusion of other European languages, including French and Spanish in particular, could serve as key tools for international relations. During his presidency, Jefferson applied these pro-bilingual attitudes towards francophone citizens living in the lands acquired by the United States in the Louisiana Purchase. Benjamin Franklin, meanwhile, expressed very differing views. Franklin expressed his concern about the use of German in Pennsylvania (Shell, 1993), stating “Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a Colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our Language or Customs any more than they can acquire our Complexion?” (Franklin, 1755). These language beliefs, however, did not make their way into the U.S. Constitution. The Constitution makes no explicit statement about language, and there is no national official language of the United States and the federal level.

Attitudes towards bilingualism in the United States began to shift at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, as a result of two key factors: immigration and nationalization. Starting in the 1880s, the influx of immigrants coming to the United States begin to shift from “old” European immigrants who came from Great Britain, Germany, Holland, and other parts of northwestern Europe, to “new” European

immigrants, coming from comparatively poorer and less democratic areas such as the Russian Empire, Austria-Hungary, Italy, and the Balkans (C. Schmidt, 2000). This increasingly diverse new population one again began to instill the same fear discussed above by Benjamin Franklin (Franklin, 1755), that the increase in the use of different languages could serve as a threat to American culture. As a result, several movements began with an aim to Americanize these new immigrants, both culturally and linguistically. President Theodore Roosevelt, in his 1917 appeal “The Children of the Crucible,” said that “we must ... have but one language. That must be the language of the Declaration of Independence” (Roosevelt, 1917). While such movements claimed to have the aim of helping immigrants to immerse themselves in and become a part of American culture, when taken together with the decreasing job opportunities and economic struggles of the time, to becomes clear that the restriction of language rights that resulted from these policies was used as means of limiting educational and economic resources for those minority immigrant communities (Garcia, 1984).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the onset of World War I further strengthened American English-Only attitudes. Before World War I, German Americans were the largest language minority in the United States, and the German language was seen as one of the most prestigious foreign languages spoken in the country. German-English bilingual schools and German newspapers were in many cases seen as prestigious organizations. When the U.S. entered into WWI in 1917, a variety of measures were taken against the German-American population, as well as other immigrant populations, in an effort to eradicate anything that could be perceived as “non-American.” This included the censorship and/or eradication of the vast majority of non-English newspapers printed in the U.S. In terms of education, by 1923, 34 states had adopted laws prohibiting instruction in languages other than English, and several states banned the teaching of foreign languages before high school (C. Schmidt, 2000).

Since that time, the attitudes towards any particular language such as German, Russian, or Arabic have waxed and waned based on political events of the day, but the general consensus of monolingual English as a key aspect of American culture has grown significantly stronger not only as a cultural construct, but also as a political movement. This shift toward an English-Only American language attitude inspired many to call for English to be declared the official language of the United States.

The term “official language” refers to the language used in all government proceedings, public documents, records, legislation, regulation, and public education. It should be noted that the declaration of a national language in a country does not directly prohibit the use of other languages on an individual level. The right of freedom of expression, including the right to choose any language as the medium of expression, is protected by both the United Nations United Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations General Assembly, 1948) and the First Amendment of the U.S. constitution (Supreme Court of United States, 1965). However, with the appointment of a national language comes a distinct level of prestige for that language, which directly effects social and cultural perceptions of not only the national language, but also other languages spoken in the country, which may then be considered less prestigious or of lower status than the national language (Compendium of Language Management in Canada, nd). It is critical to note that while official language policies have certain distinct powers to dictate language use, such as in a legal or educational context, inseparable from these direct powers are their indirect socio-economic and cultural implications, such as the association of a supposedly less prestigious minority language with the people who speak that language.

The modern English-Only movement is led by two organizations, U.S. English (U.S. English, Inc., 2021) and Pro-English (ProEnglish, 2021), both of which share the primary goal of declaring English as the official language of the United States. On a national level, both of these organizations discuss two key steps in accomplishing this goal: the passing of the English Unity Act (117th Congress of the United States, 2021), and the revocation Executive Order 13166 (Clinton, 2000). The English Unity Act is a bill that was first proposed to Congress in 2005, and has since been re-introduced to in 2007, 2017, and 2021. If passed, would make English the official language of the United States and would require that all official government business be conducted in English. The bill includes a framework for implementation and enforcement of the law, including the implementation English testing as part of the process to apply for U.S. citizenship. Executive Order 13166: *Improving Access to Services for Persons With Limited English Proficiency*, is an order made in 2000 by President William Clinton which requires federal agencies to “examine the services they provide, identify any need for services to those with limited English proficiency (LEP), and develop and implement a system to provide those services so LEP persons can have meaningful access to them”. While it is the case that U.S.

government proceedings are currently conducted in English, English-Only campaigns to date have yet to succeed in either of their goals at a national level, and the U.S. federal government has no official language.

This is not the case, however, in lower levels of government. 36 U.S. states and territories have declared English the official language for state-level government procedure (Crawford, 2008), as outlined in Figure 1 below.

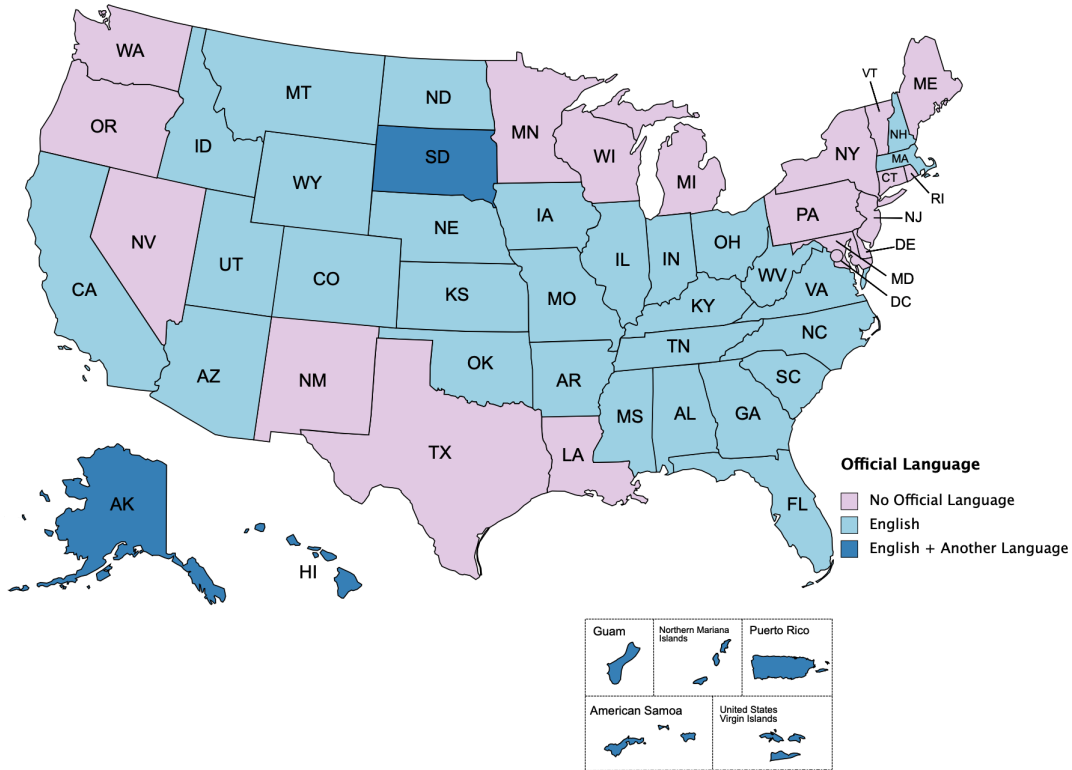


Figure 1: A map of U.S. states and territories and their official language policies. This map was created based on information provided by Crawford (Crawford, 2008).

A variety of incidents have demonstrated how English-only laws and policies, in combination with the language attitudes and perceived superiority of English that are fundamentally inseparable from these laws and policies, directly impacts people living in the U.S. After Arizona made English the state’s official language, a teacher allegedly began slapping students for speaking Spanish in class, claiming that she did so as a method of enforcing the new language laws (Ryman & Madrid, 2004). More recently, a Houston man sued a hospital in Texas for failing in their legal obligation to provide a qualified interpreter. As a result of this negligence, the man was unable to understand his diagnosis and post-discharge instructions, and suffered a stroke less than a week after being discharged (Newnum, 2018). In both cases, the accused was found at fault. However, these cases bring attention to the fact that language discrimination remains a key issue in the United States, and that while such discrimination may occur in states such as Texas which do not have an official language, the official language policies of other states such as Arizona does not seem to resolve this problem. Language-related cases remain common in the court system across the country, emphasizing that language policy remains a deep-rooted issue.

Despite such incidents, English-Only groups and congressional representatives continue to advocate for English as the national language. The English Unity Act was most recently re-introduced to the U.S. House of Representatives on February 11th, 2021, and is currently under review by the Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship (117th Congress of the United States, 2021).

3 The Linguistic Implications of English-Only

In addition to the racial and socio-cultural issues outlined in Section 2, the passing of the English Language Unity Act, in combination with the negative socio-cultural implications that are likely to result from it, has potentially devastating linguistic consequences for Americans of all language backgrounds who wish to acquire and maintain two or more languages. This section will outline the linguistic implications of such policies and attitudes on language learning and use in American bilinguals.

“Bilingual” is a broad term which is typically used to describe an individual who knows two or more languages. Bilinguals can vary greatly in terms of their proficiency in each of their languages, how often and in what context they use each of their languages, whether they learned their language naturalistically or in a classroom setting, and the degree to which that have a so-called “foreign accent”. While the U.S. is home to an incredibly diverse set of bilingual individuals, this paper will focus on two specific subsets of bilingual individuals. Section 3.1 will discuss the implications of English-Only attitudes and policies on immigrant adults who learn English as a second language in the United States. Section 3.2 will discuss the effects of such policies on children who grow up bilingual in the United States, and the challenges associated with maintaining their heritage language. Section 3.3 will discuss how such policies and attitudes impede the effectiveness of foreign language education for native-born American citizens.

3.1 Adult Learners of English as a Second Language

There are a wide array of reasons why the more than 1 million adult immigrants who come to the United States every year might see learning English as a critical step in assimilating into American life and culture. These reasons could include socialization, educational or job opportunities, or simply to heighten their own sense of belonging to their new community. If English is made the official language of the United States, however, there will be an even more critical reason for these immigrants to learn English: U.S. citizenship.

English-Only advocates such as U.S. English (U.S. English, Inc., 2021) and Pro-English (ProEnglish, 2021), argue that such policies serve to help these immigrant communities by providing with them with even stronger motivation to learn English, and thus helping them to even more quickly and thoroughly assimilate into American culture. What such groups do not account for, however, are the unique linguistic development challenges of adult language learners, making the process of language learning uniquely difficult for adults learning English in the United States.

3.1.1 Neurological and Social Difficulties in Adult Language Learning

While children are typically able to learn language easily, often without explicit instruction, the success of adults learning a new foreign language varies greatly. While there have been documented cases of language savants, who even through adulthood were able to learn and speak new languages as if they were a native speaker, the vast majority of adult language learners struggle with particular aspects of grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary in their new language. Still other adult learners end up giving up on the task completely.

Many language acquisition researchers believe that this difference is the result of a neurological differences between child and adult learners. It has been argued that humans have a “critical period” or “sensitive period” for language learning, after which the brain is unable to process and store linguistic information in the same way (Lenneberg, 1967). While the exact age when this critical period ends has been heavily debated, and has been shown to be earlier for phonological/pronunciation aspects of language (Ruben, 1999) than it is for grammatical/syntactic phenomena (Hartshorne, Tenenbauma, & Pinkerc, 2018), the general consensus is that this critical period ends sometime around puberty. Some of the strongest support for the role of the critical period in second language acquisition research comes from the work of Kim, Relkin, Lee, and Hirsch (1997). Kim and colleagues examined a wide variety of bilingual individuals who started learning their second languages at different ages. Using fMRI, they examined speakers’ activation of Wernicke’s area, one of the two main language centers of the brain, when they were speaking in each of their languages. As shown in shown in Figure 2, they found that so-called “early” bilinguals, who had acquired their second language before puberty, showed much more overlap in terms of the parts of Wernicke’s area that were activated when they spoke in each of their languages. Meanwhile, as shown in Figure shown in Figure 3, the “late” bilinguals who acquired their language

after puberty demonstrated two separate neurological areas for each of their languages with little to no overlap in activation.

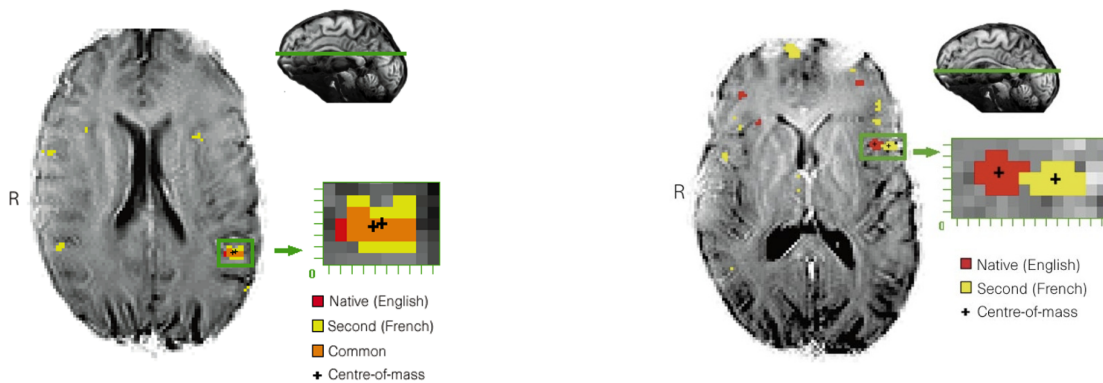


Figure 2: From Kim et al., 1997, **early bilinguals** show clear overlap in the activation of Wernicke's area when using each of their languages (Kim et al., 1997). Figure 3: From Kim et al., 1997, **late bilinguals** show minimal overlap in the activation of Wernicke's area when using each of their languages (Kim et al., 1997).

These findings suggest that adults who choose to learn a second language, such as many U.S. immigrants learning English, do not have access to the same neurolinguistic mechanisms for language learning that help children to become such fast and effective language learners. Instead, adult's foreign language learning success can be dependent on a variety of personal variables. These include cognitive factors such as language aptitude (how fast, how well and by what means and individual is able to learn an additional language) (Carroll, 1981), memory capacity (Burgess & Hitch, 2006), and attention (R. Schmidt, 1995), as well as social factors such as motivation to learn the language (Gardner, 1985), general outgoingness and willingness to communicate in a foreign language (Verhoeven & Vermeer, 2002), and levels of foreign language anxiety (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994).

The consideration of the many individual factors discussed above strengthens a notion that most people who have attempted to learn a language in adulthood are aware of intuitively: language learning in adulthood is a difficult and deeply personal process, and success may vary greatly from person to person even between individuals who have been immersed in the language for the same amount of time. This complicates the argument made by English-Only advocates that declaring English as the national language of the United States will help immigrants to immerse themselves into U.S. culture and communities. While some learners may thrive in such an environment, an English-Only culture and policy may not promote the success of all, or even most English as a second language learners.

3.1.2 Native-Language Use in Second Language Learning

Given this vast array of challenges faced by adults learning a foreign language, the question remains as to how English as a second language instructors can best assist these learners in this process.

Language acquisition and linguistic pedagogy researchers have looked to answer this question, and recent research on the topic has brought attention to the potential value of native language use in the second language classroom. Since the proposal of the Communicative Language Teaching pedagogical philosophy in the 1970s (Hymes, 1971), English as a second language instructors worldwide generally discouraged, if not actively disallowed, the use of native languages in the classroom. This was based on the assumption that native language use in this context would bring about "error transference," encouraging the learner to transfer incorrect grammatical information from their native language into their second language grammar (Al-Dera, 2011).

While most pedagogy researchers agree that native language use should still be limited to specific situations so as not to impede on the critical opportunities to be exposed to and practice speaking in the new language (in this case, English), recent research has shown that allowing for students to use their native languages in certain situations has distinct advantages. For beginner/low-proficiency learners and learners with

high levels of foreign language anxiety in particular, the use of the native language in a classroom context has been found to be helpful in aiding students in understanding task instructions and difficult concepts, and that the allowance of occasional linguistic breakdowns of the second language can help instructors to create an enjoyable and stimulating classroom environment for students with varying degrees of proficiency in the target language (Abid, 2020).

However, this native language resource is also at risk for learners in an English-Only context. Like almost any skill, language has an aspect of “use it or lose it.” Language attrition is a phenomenon where people who are isolated from the use of their native language begin to lose their knowledge of that language (Yilmaz, 2019). Language attrition can start as soon as a few months after the immigration (Chang, 2010), and it can affect not only highly proficient second language speakers, but also immigrants with low proficiency in their second language (Beganovic, 2006).

Immigrants living in English-dominant U.S. communities are at high risk for such attrition. English-Only policies put these people in the difficult position of needing to conquer the challenging task of adult language learning while also being deprived of their native language as a key resource.

3.2 Growing Up Bilingual: Maintaining Two Native Languages in a Monolingual Environment

Children exposed to a language early in life are typically able to acquire that language easily, even when exposed to more than one language at a time. The successful development and maintenance of both languages, however, requires that the child has sufficient exposure to both languages not only in infancy, but throughout their youth. If this is not the case, that heritage language is unlikely to develop completely, and is more likely to be lost later in life (Döpke, 1992).

Balanced bilingual development requires frequent exposure and use of all of a child’s languages with a variety of social settings, speech partners, and environments. A key political goal of English-Only advocates is the implication of English-only policies in the American public school system. Such policies deprive bilingual children of the opportunity to gain experience in their non-English language and inhibit the development of functional and proficient bilingual adults.

A key argument by English-Only supporters on this issue relates to the concern that bilingual education could be cognitively overwhelming for children, and that children whose focus and education is split between two languages might have less “space” to learn English as a result of learning their heritage language.

This argument, however, is based on the misconception of the mind is a limited-capacity container. Linguistic research has shown that native/heritage language maintenance in children does not deter or impede on the development of a second language (Hakuta & Garcia, 1989). Instead, research has found that proficiency in a heritage language can influence the rate of acquisition as well as the level of proficiency attained in the second/community language, suggesting that the two language systems are fundamentally interconnected and can build off of each other (Padilla et al., 1991).

Beyond its’ potential linguistic benefits as a tool to aid in English learning, balanced bilingualism and maintenance of a heritage language has been found to show some cognitive benefits for bilingual individuals over their monolingual peers. These benefits include including increased cognitive flexibility, which is the ability to adapt our behavior and thinking in response to the environment; metalinguistic awareness, which is to the ability to consciously reflect on the nature of language; concept formation, and creativity (Padilla et al., 1991). From a sociocultural perspective, such linguistic inclusion and encouragement of positive attitudes toward students’ native/heritage language is critical for literacy education (Kádár-Fulop, 1988). The implementation of English-Only policies would on impede heritage speaking children’s opportunity to acquire and maintain balanced and highly proficient bilingualism.

3.3 Foreign Language Instruction in the U.S.

According to Eurostat, the statistics arm of the European Commission, a median of 92% of European students are learning a foreign language in school (European Commission, 2018). Meanwhile, the United States education system has fallen far behind its peers in this domain, with only 20% of U.S. students being enrolled in foreign language coursework (American Councils for International Education, 2017). The U.S. Department of State has noted that American adults increasingly lack the language skill necessary to work in jobs related

to Foreign Service (Department of State, 2017). This decline in American second language education and its resulting consequences for American international relations and business in an increasingly multilingual international marketplace is the direct result of English-only attitudes and policies. Current cultural attitudes and educational policies towards English directly impede the foreign language education of native English-speaking Americans.

3.3.1 Motivation and Language Attitude

In foreign language learning, one of the best predictors of student success is the student’s own motivation to learn a given language. This motivation can come from internal sources, such as interest in the culture, a sense of accomplishment, or a desire to socialize, as well as external sources such as school or job requirements (Noels, Pelletier, Clément, & Vallerand, 2010).

Internal motivation to learn a foreign language is often driven by a learner’s desire to interact with and/or learn more about a particular culture or group of people, and is heavily influenced by a learner’s general attitude towards and interest in a particular language and the people who speak that language (Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994). In order for American students to develop a motivation and interest in foreign language learning, they must first be exposed to the people and cultures where they would have the opportunity to use that new language. English-only policies, in combination with the nationalistic attitudes that inspire them, actively inhibit such opportunities for American students.

In terms of external motivation for American students to learn foreign languages, the U.S. educational system does little to motivate U.S. students to study foreign languages through course requirements or education standards. K-12 educational requirements are mandated at the state-level in the U.S., and vary from state-to-state. This is particularly the case when considering foreign language education requirements. As shown in Figure 4 below, only four states, New York, New Jersey, Michigan, and Texas, as well as the District of Columbia, have explicit foreign language requirements for all high school students. Tennessee and North Carolina meanwhile have such a requirement only for high school students who are placed on a “college-bound” educational track. The rest of the states have either no foreign language requirement at all, or include foreign language course credits under general education or elective requirements for high school students (The Education Commission of the States, 2007).

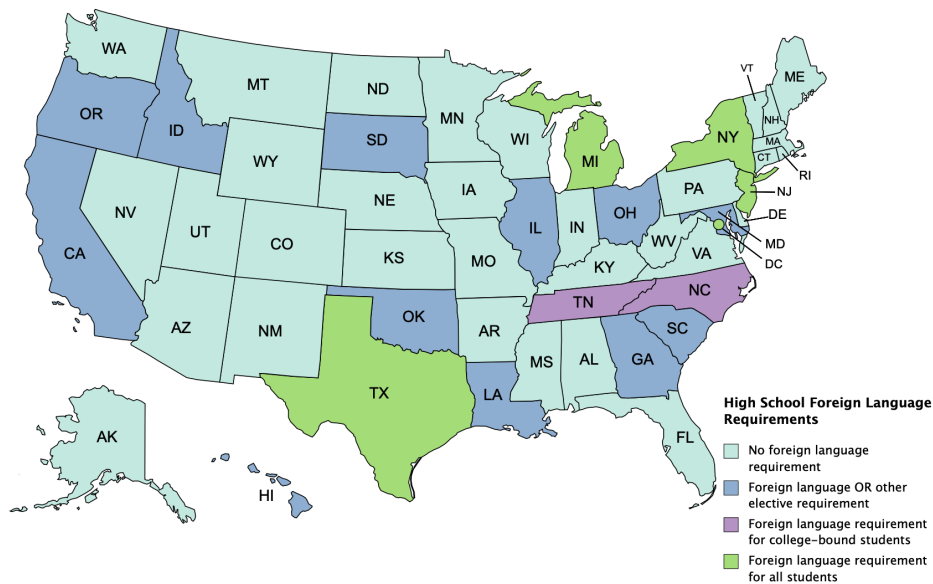


Figure 4: A map of U.S. states and their high school language requirements. This map was created based on information provided by the Education Commission of the States (The Education Commission of the States, 2007).

Given the combination of a lack of formal educational incentive to study foreign language coupled with U.S. English dominance limiting foreign language exposure, it is not surprising that U.S. students are generally less motivated to learn foreign languages than their European peers.

3.3.2 Age, Access, and Immersion for Foreign Language Learners

For those students who do have the motivation to pursue a foreign language, U.S. educational and cultural norms set that at an additional disadvantage compared to foreign language educational approaches in other parts of the world.

Section 3.1.1 of this paper outlined the Critical Period Hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967) and the emphasizes key role of age in language learning. For the majority of immigrant English as a second language learners, the age at which they arrived in the U.S. and began learning English is simply a given fact that cannot be changed, and simply must be considered in the design of teaching materials and practices. In the case of foreign language learners, however, the age at which students begin to learn a foreign language is determined by the educational system, typically either at the state or local level.

In order to consider the state of current U.S. foreign language instruction and course offerings, we must refer back the historical context in which many of these language policies have their roots. As noted in Section 2, the rising nationalism surrounding World War I in the early 20th century led to a significant prioritization of English education in the United States. In many states, foreign language education was discouraged or even banned for students younger than high school-aged (C. Schmidt, 2000). Since that time, the Supreme Court of the United States has ruled that the right to teach and learn foreign languages fell under the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments, and therefore could not be prohibited (Supreme Court of United States, 1927). However, the policies put into place at that time set the harmful precedent of normalizing the introduction of foreign language coursework at the high school level, a trend which continues to this day in the U.S. educational system.

In a 2008 survey of U.S. foreign language instruction by the Center for Applied Linguistics, 91% of U.S. high schools offer some form of foreign language coursework (regardless of whether this coursework is required or considered elective/optional) (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2008). However, American students typically begin high school around the age of 13-14 years old. As noted in the previous section, the critical/sensitive period for language learning is generally thought to end sometime around puberty, making entrance into high school a less than ideal time point for students to begin foreign language instruction. Meanwhile, the same study found that the number of elementary and middle schools offering foreign language instruction had decreased. While 75% of U.S. middle schools offered some form of foreign language education in 1997, by 2008 this number had decreased to 58%. In elementary schools, this number had decreased from 31% in 1997 to 25% in 2008.

While, as of July, 2021, a more recent assessment of the state of U.S. foreign language course offerings since the 2008 survey published by the Center for Applied Linguistics, the American Academy of Arts & Sciences' Commission on Language Learning states that the availability of foreign language education, especially at the elementary and middle school levels remains a concern. Their report identifies a significant shortage of qualified K-12 foreign language teachers, in combination with a national prioritization on STEM education over that of foreign languages. The report also draws attention to a significant discrepancy between the availability of foreign language coursework between public and private schools, which likely reflects larger socioeconomic disparities in terms of access foreign language education (Commission on Language Learning, 2017).

As a result, American students who wish to pursue a foreign language are unlikely to be provided with such an opportunity through their school system until they reach high school, by which time the critical/sensitive period for language acquisition has passed and students are significantly more likely to struggle with foreign language pronunciation, comprehension, use of complex grammatical constructs in their foreign language.

Meanwhile, regardless of the age at which they begin learning a foreign language, these American foreign language learners face an additional disadvantage in their foreign language acquisition experience related to language exposure and immersion. One of the most important factors for successful foreign language acquisition is what Stephen Kratchen refers to as comprehensible input. This means that learners need regular exposure to foreign language content that is understandable given their current proficiency level, but which contains data that is slightly above that level from which they can learn (Kratchen, 1978). Comprehensible input can come from conversing in the foreign language with more proficient conversation partners, reading or consuming media

in the language, or even navigating the street signs and directions of a city where that language is spoken.

While it is often the case that the English-learning adults discussed in Section 3.1 are in a position where they are surrounded by language immersion experiences and opportunities, both inside their English classroom and from the larger linguistic environment, American foreign language students are often in the opposite situation. Outside the context of the foreign language classroom, access to conversation partners, books and other media in the foreign language, and general opportunities to use one's foreign language are generally limited.

One example of this limited access can be found in the language of the internet. While one might assume that the rise of the internet in the last two decades would have led to unprecedented access to foreign language materials, a series of analyses examining language use on the internet have found that as much as 61.8% of web pages on the internet use English. The second most common language is Russian, at 7.7%, followed by Spanish at 3.8% (W³ Techs, 2021). Additionally, such surveys found that web browsers and search engines tended to show a bias towards English pages in search results (Pimienta & Blanco, 2009). This exemplifies the difficulties faced by foreign language learners in their attempt to access foreign language reading materials and provide themselves with the immersive experiences necessary for language learning.

Taken together, English-Only policies and their resulting socio-cultural implications have led to an overall low motivation among American students to study foreign languages. Meanwhile, those students who do choose to study a language and immediately put at a distinct disadvantage as a result of U.S. educational system norms and limited availability of foreign language resources.

4 Discussion

The need for multilingual communication across the globe is expected to continue to rise in the coming decades, and in the meantime, the U.S is falling behind in their ability to meet this challenge. While the European Commission reports multilingualism rates as high as 56% (Special Eurobarometer, 2012), the U.S, with a 20% bi-/multilingual population (U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2019), will find itself unprepared to interact in a multilingual atmosphere. English-Only policies at the national level actively inhibit language acquisition and maintenance for bilingual Americans of all language backgrounds, and would only work to further discourage the country's progress in engaging with the global community.

As outlined in Section 2, the United States has arguably one of most diverse linguistic histories in the world. The modern English-only movements can trace its history back to anti-immigrant discrimination and nationalism in the face of World War I. Such policies and their corresponding linguistic attitudes can directly inhibit immigrants' acquisition of English as a second language, discouraging their use of their native language despite its potential as a critical tool in foreign language learning, as outlined in Section 3.1. For the children of those immigrants, as well as other Americans who grow up in a bilingual household, Section 3.2 discusses the challenges these individuals face in acquiring and maintaining balanced and proficient bilingualism, and how as a result, many of these individuals are at risk of being deprived of the cognitive benefits of growing up bilingual. Finally, Section 3.3 outlines how the American education system does little to promote or encourage foreign language education, and in many cases introduces unnecessary challenges into the foreign language education process by delaying such instruction until high school. Taken together, we can see that despite the growing global need for multilingual communication, English-Only policies and their associated language attitudes actively inhibit the growth of a thriving multilingual culture in the United States.

The dismissal and/or abolition of such official English policies at the national, state, and local levels would be a fundamental step in acknowledging the United States' diverse cultural and linguistic heritage and promoting balanced and proficient bilingualism for all U.S. citizens. However, such progress cannot be fully achieved until we address the underlying issues surrounding these policies: nationalistic language ideologies and the perceptions of English as a language of high social status in the country.

A key first step in this process would be to address the issues related to foreign language education discussed in Section 3.3. Foreign language education provides a window of understanding into other cultures and has the potential to curb the perception of the supremacy of English by informing learners of the social, personal, professional, and travel opportunities that are unavailable to English monolingual individuals. Increased foreign language education in the United States has the potential to help curb the underlying linguistic and social

stigmas that encourage the resulting official language policies. Such educational changes may involve the introduction of new and different social interactions, technologies, and teaching students to accommodate for personal differences.

The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic of the past year has proven that in critical situations, Americans are able to quickly adjust to drastic changes. If the U.S. were to impose such educational policies of language learning, language tolerance and multilingualism, it is likely that Americans would quickly adjust in a similar way, creating a more inclusive linguistic community that encourages and supports language acquisition and maintenance for all current and aspiring bilinguals in the U.S.

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