

OFFICIAL ENGLISH? NO!

TESOL's Recommendations for Countering the Official English Movement in the US, TESOL 1996

A Chronology of the Official English Movement

By Jamie B. Draper and Martha Jiménez

Not since the beginning of this century has language received as much attention in the United States. Like the language battles of the early 1900s, those of the 1980s were rife with appeals to patriotism and unity casting language minorities in the role of outsiders who deliberately "chose" not to learn the English language. But unlike the earlier period, when these issues were confined primarily to local and state arenas, the 1980s featured a campaign orchestrated at the national level by a powerful and highly funded lobby, US English. Ostensibly, the whole purpose of this organization is to establish English as the official language of the United States, but its connections to immigration restriction groups suggest a more far-reaching agenda. The irony of the appearance of the English Only movement in the 1980s is that it advocates a return to a mythic era of English monolingualism in the face of growing demands for multilingual abilities in the world marketplace.

At the beginning of the decade, states already had measures on the books declaring English to be their sole official language. Nebraska's constitutional amendment dated back to 1920, when the country was experiencing a wave of anti-German sentiment because of World War I. An Illinois statute, passed in 1969, amended a 1923 law which had declared "American" the state's official language. A third state, Hawaii, adopted a constitutional amendment in 1978 designating both English and Native Hawaiian as its official languages.

In 1979 the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies released its report on Americans' "scandalous" lack of foreign language ability. Not one state had foreign language requirements for high-school graduation, and many did not even require schools to offer foreign language instruction. Meanwhile, bilingual education was coming under close scrutiny. Under the Bilingual Education Act of 1968, federal funding had been available for programs that maintained and developed languages other than English. But in 1978 Congress amended the law to emphasize the goal of competence in the English language and restricting support *transitional* programs only; no funds would be available for language maintenance. At the same time, federal civil rights authorities were aggressively enforcing the *Lau v. Nichols* ruling of the US Supreme Court, which established the right of limited-English-proficient students to special help in overcoming language barriers. Still, many school districts resented the federal insistence on bilingual instruction. The stage was set for a decade of debate on language in American society.

1980

- Dade County, Florida, voters approve an "anti-bilingual ordinance" prohibiting the expenditure of public funds on the use of languages other than English. Fire safety information pamphlets in Spanish are prohibited, Spanish marriage ceremonies are halted, and public transportation signs in Spanish are removed.

1981

- Senator S.I. Hayakawa, Republican of California, introduces a constitutional English Language Amendment (S.J. Res. 72), the first proposal to declare English the nation's official language. The bill dies without Congressional action.
- The Virginia legislature declares English the state's official language and makes English the language of public instruction.

1982

- Senator Alan Simpson, Republican of Wyoming, introduces the first version of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (later known as the Simpson-Rodino bill). The measure would provide amnesty to illegal immigrants who have resided in the United States for a period of time and provide sanctions against employers who hire the undocumented. It passes the Senate, but goes nowhere in the House.

1983

- US English is founded by Senator Hayakawa and Dr. John Tanton, a Michigan ophthalmologist who also heads the Federation for American Immigration Reform.
- The California Committee for Ballots in English sponsors Proposition 0 in San Francisco, calling for an end to bilingual ballots. The measure passes with 63 percent of the vote.

1984

- New York State passes sweeping educational reforms, including foreign language requirements for all students. Nonnative English speakers may receive credit for proficiency in their native language.
- Indiana and Kentucky adopt English as their official state language; these measures amend sections of the law code dealing with state emblems.
- Tennessee declares English the "official and legal" language of the state. The statute further requires all official documents; communications, including ballots; and public instruction to be in English.
- An immigration bill passed by the US House of Representatives requires a "minimal understanding of ordinary English" to qualify for permanent residency under the amnesty program. The House and Senate fail to agree, however, on a final version of the legislation.
- The Senate Subcommittee on the Constitution holds hearings on S.J. Res. 167, an English Language Amendment sponsored by Senator Walter Huddleston, Democrat of Kentucky. Congress takes no further action on the measure.
- The Education for Economic Security Act becomes law, authorizing federal funding for the improvement of foreign language instruction.
- In extending the Bilingual Education Act through 1988, Congress creates several new programs. *Developmental* bilingual programs offer students an opportunity to maintain their native tongues after learning English; *academic excellence* programs replicate successful approaches in binlingual education; and *family English literacy* programs involve parents of limited-English-proficient children. a limited amount of funding (4 to 10 percent of program grants) is allowed for "special alternative instructional programs," or nonbilingual programs in which students' native language is not used.
- California voters approve Proposition 38, "Voting Materials in English Only," sponsored by Senator Hayakawa and other leaders of US English. The measure places California on record in opposition to the bilingual ballot provisions of the federal Voting Rights Act.

1985

- Secretary of Education William J. Bennett delivers a speech questioning the effectiveness of bilingual education over other methods, including the "sink or swim" approach. He calls for eliminating the requirement that schools use native-language instruction to qualify for most grants under the Bilingual Education Act.
- Responding to Bennett's speech, the Spanish-American League Against Discrimination coins the term *English Plus* in describing the goals and benefits of bilingual education.
- In a Miami survey, 98 percent of Hispanic parents say it is "essential for their children to read and write English perfectly" (as compared with 94 percent of Anglo parents). A Rand Corporation study reports that more than 90 percent of US-born Mexican Americans are proficient in English and more than half of their children are monolingual in English.

1986

- Two more lobbies for Official English are organized. English First, a project of the Committee to Protect the Family, is founded by Larry Pratt, a former Virginia state representative and president of Gun Owners of America. Lou Zaeske, of Bryan, Texas, organizes the American Ethnic Coalition "to prevent the division of America along language or ethnic lines."
- Congress finally passes the Immigration Reform and Control Act, including the English proficiency requirements for amnesty. Before final passage, a Senate-approved "sense of Congress" resolution declaring English to be the nation's official language is removed.
- Proposition 63 passes in California with 73 percent of the vote, the first Official English measure passed by ballot initiative. Included is a provision allowing anyone living or doing business in the state to sue state or local governments for actions that diminish or ignore "the role of English as the common language of the State of California."
- Norman Cousins resigns from the US English advisory board on learning that 40,000 people in Los Angeles are on waiting lists for English-as-a-second-language (E.S.L.) classes. He criticizes the "negative symbolic significance" of Proposition 63 and warns it could lead to discrimination against language minorities.
- The Georgia legislature passes a nonbinding resolution declaring English to be the state language.

1987

- Official English measures are considered in 37 state legislatures. They pass in five: Arkansas, Mississippi, North Carolina, North Dakota, and South Carolina.
- North Carolina mandates foreign language instruction for all students in kindergarten through the fifth grade.
- A Cultural Rights Amendment to the US Constitution, recognizing "the right of the people to preserve, foster, and promote their respective historic, linguistic, and cultural origins," is proposed by Senator John Breaux and Representative Jimmy Hayes (both Louisiana Democrats). Congress takes no action.
- Linda Chávez, former staff director of the US Commission on Civil Rights and director of public liaison in the Reagan White House, is hired as president of US English.
- The English Plus Information Clearinghouse (EPIC) is established in Washington, D.C. A coalition of education, civil rights, and ethnic advocacy organizations, EPIC seeks to centralize information on the Official English/English Only movement and respond to efforts to restrict language rights.

1988

- In *Gutiérrez v. Municipal Court*, a case striking down English-only rules in the workplace, the 9th US Circuit Court of Appeals declares Proposition 63 to be "primarily symbolic."
- The House Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights holds hearings on five English Language

Amendments proposed in the 100th Congress, but takes no further action.

- Congress passes an omnibus bill affecting elementary, secondary, and adult education. It increases to 25 percent the portion of Bilingual Education Act funds available for "alternative," nonbilingual programs. The new law authorizes aid for model foreign language programs at the elementary and secondary level and creates the English Literacy Grants Program to support adult E.S.L. instruction.
- An internal memorandum by Dr. John Tanton, the chairman of US English, surfaces in the press. It warns that Hispanic immigrants could be importing unwanted traits: "the tradition of the *mordida* (bribe)"; "low educability"; Catholicism, which could "pitch out the separation of church and state"; and high birthrates. Further investigation links Tanton's funding to a eugenics foundation and a distributor of nativist propaganda. These revelations prompt the resignations of Tanton and Linda Chávez as leaders of US English, and Walter Cronkite as a member of the group's advisory board.
- Voters pass Official English amendments to their state constitutions in Arizona (50.5 to 49.5 percent), Colorado (61 to 39 percent), and Florida (84 to 16 percent). Afterward, a rise in incidents of discrimination against minority language speakers is reported.

1989

- New Mexico becomes the first state to endorse the policy of English Plus. Washington and Oregon will soon follow suit with their own English Plus resolutions.
- Voters in Lowell, Massachusetts, approve a nonbinding resolution requesting their state legislature and the US Congress to declare English the official language.
- Defying a well-financed lobbying campaign by US English, the New York State
- Board of Regents votes to extend eligibility for bilingual education by raising the "exit criteria" for graduation from bilingual programs from the 23rd to the 40th percentile in English proficiency.

1990

- US District Judge Paul Rosenblatt strikes down Arizona's Official English amendment as unconstitutional. The measure's requirement that state officers and employees "act in English and no other language" is ruled to violate free speech guarantees under the First Amendment.
- Alabama voters, by a margin of 89 percent to 11 percent, adopt English as their official language. Official English measures have now passed in a total of 17 states.

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Addendum to Chronology of the Official English Movement

1991

- President George Bush signs the National Literacy Act, which in part promises increased funds for services to the limited-English proficient population.

1992

- Rhode Island endorses the policy of English Plus.

1993

- In *Garcia v. Spun Steak Company*, the Ninth Circuit Court reverses a lower court's decision that an employer's English-only rule violated Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. It finds that bilingual English- and Spanish-speaking workers were not unduly burdened by the rule since they could speak English fluently. The case has been appealed to the Supreme Court.
- Congress passes the National Security Education Act, for the purpose of providing American intelligence agencies and diplomatic posts with more personnel proficient in foreign languages. The Act provides scholarships for undergraduates to study abroad, grants to colleges and universities to improve cultural and language training, and fellowships for graduate students to study in other countries.
- The Languages for All Peoples Initiative is introduced in Congress. It declares English the official language of the government. It provides a tax credit for employers who offer English language training to their employees. Also included is a resolution recognizing the cultural importance of the many language spoken in the United States while warning of the potential of language diversity to foment societal discord and disintegration.
- The Amending the Immigration and Nationality Act is introduced in Congress. This bill requires that citizenship ceremonies be conducted exclusively in English.
- Governor Pedro Rosseló of Puerto Rico signs a law making Spanish and English the official languages of the commonwealth, an action which he hails as a step toward statehood.

1994

- An official-English bill is passed by the Georgia Senate, but discussion is stalled in the House and no action is taken.
- Governor William Donald Shafer vetoes an official-English bill passed by the Maryland legislature.
- Governor Tom Carper vetoes an official-English bill passed by the Delaware legislature on advise from his Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, but indicates that he will sign a revised bill in the future.
- The Ninth Circuit Court upholds the decision for the plaintiff in *Yniquez v. Mofford*, which found Arizona's official-English amendment unconstitutional, US English's appeal fails.
- President Bill Clinton signs the Improving American Schools Act, which includes substantive support for bilingual instruction.
- Proposition 187 is passes in California. It denies undocumented aliens access to public health clinics, social services, and all levels of public education, and requires state employees to report suspected undocumented aliens to the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Law suits have delayed its enforcement.

1995

- Several new bills, variously titled the Language of Government Act, the Declaration of Official Language Act, and the National Language Act, are introduced in Congress.

- Three bills seeking to limit illegal and legal immigration and to limit immigrants' access to government services are introduced in Congress; the Immigration Accountability Act, the Immigration Moratorium Act, and the Immigrant Financial Responsibility and Sponsorship Act.
 - Five more states pass official-English laws: Georgia, Oklahoma, Montana, New Hampshire, and South Dakota.
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