

A LINE ON LIFE

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English Only *

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Many are secure that English is the dominant language in the United States, but some are not. This had led to an **English-only** movement resulting in 18 states declaring English as their official language. Some members of Congress are even seeking a constitutional amendment to this end. Is this necessary? Will it be beneficial?

Representing the English-only view, Rep. Norm Schumway (R-CA) argues, "*Without legal protection, the primacy of English is being threatened.*" Critics of this movement see no such threat. These critics charge that the English-only movement is based more on racism and hostility toward immigrants. In the critics' view, these laws discriminate against non-English speakers, and they do nothing to help them learn English.

Early in 1990, the English-only movement had a setback, when Arizona's English-only law — requiring governmental officials to conduct all business only in English — was struck down by a federal judge. The judge ruled that Arizona law violated the First Amendment, because it curtailed the rights of government workers to free speech in dealing with non-English-speaking citizens.

A panel of the **American Psychological Association (APA)** — seven psychological experts in the use and function of language — wrote an extensive, 30-page report on this language problem. They found *no* evidence that the languages of some minority groups — particularly Hispanics — need to be restricted by language laws because they refused to learn English. In contrast, many studies indicate that these minorities realize the importance of learning English to improve their economic mobility. The report charged that the "*movement promotes racist and/or anti-immigrant sentiments.*"

Among the studies reviewed was one that compared three ways of educating non-English-speaking students.

1. **Transitional** or **early-exit** — the most common method — was designed to move students as quickly as possible into English mainstream classes.
2. **Late-exit** was designed to encourage maintenance of the native language while developing English over the years.
3. **English immersion** puts students into an English-only situation with minimum bilingual assistance.

This rigorous study clearly indicated *"the immersion students scored lowest in almost every academic subject, while the late-exit bilingual students scored highest, even when all groups were tested in English."* The report concluded, *"...high quality, bilingual education programs can promote higher levels of academic achievement and language proficiency in both languages, as well as more positive psychosocial outcomes."*

The ambiguous English-only laws may lead to increased discrimination against non-English-speaking minorities. For example, before Arizona's law was struck down, parole hearings for non-English-speaking prisoners were cancelled. Authorities were not sure whether it was legal to provide them with translators.

"Only" means that someone or something is being excluded or rejected.

In addition, the report noted ample evidence that health care is more effective, if health care providers can communicate in the client's own language. This includes better rapport and more compliance by clients with instructions. Unfortunately, bilingual providers are relatively scarce in comparison to the need for them. If bilingual governmental providers cannot speak in the client's language, this rapport and compliance could not be attained.

Because of the panel's report, the APA's Council of Representatives *unanimously* approved a resolution opposing official language laws and supporting cultural pluralism.

It is hard for someone who has spoken only one language from birth to understand the difficulties in learning a second language. If you have tried to learn a second language, you will have some idea of how difficult and frustrating it is.

Personally, I have had the experience of being in a foreign country and trying to get along in another language. Even with two years of high school Spanish and several semesters of college training, it was an uncomfortable strain. In fact, a year ago, I was asked to give a talk about nonverbal communication — in Spanish — to a group of teachers in Mexicali. After a two-hour talk, I was physically exhausted from the strain! My talk was effective, but it was only because a few of these Spanish-speaking teachers also knew some English. Because of experiences like this, I have great empathy for any non-English speaker trying to learn English. I strongly agree with a recent editorial in *USA Today* that stated:

"English-only — like males only, singles only or members only — is a disturbing sign of our times that does not signify inclusion, but exclusion; that implies some who belong, some who do not. That's why this proposal is divisive and unnecessary."

* Adapted from Peter Freiberg's article, "APA opposes English-only efforts," [*APA Monitor*](#), December 1990, pages 27-28.

