English Only Essay, Research Paper

ENGLISH ONLY?

Language has always been an important part of a country s culture and way of life. When the U.S. was founded, it was common to hear as many as 20 languages spoken along with many documents that were printed in different languages. There have been many debates over establishing a national language, and a movement arose that strives to establish English as the nation s official language. This movement is known as the English Only movement, and it promotes the enactment of legislation that restricts or prohibits the use of languages other than English by government agencies and, in some cases, by private businesses (ALCU). Many people whom support the English Only movement believes that multilingualism is too costly and inefficient for the government to operate in. Making English as an official language will have little day-to-day effect on the population and their lifestyles or private lives. They believe that declaring English as the official language is the fairest way to handle over 300 languages spoken in the U.S. (LIA).

Many people support multilingualism and oppose having English as an official language because it is unfair to individuals who are not fluent in English. Also, they create false stereotypes of immigrants and non-English speakers. They conclude that it violates the diversity embodied in our Constitution, creating restrictions and limits instead of protecting individual rights, and it does not help the integration of language minority citizens into the American mainstream.

I personally support keeping the U.S. as a multilingual nation. I feel that the nation is running smoothly enough and it does not need to be changed in that way. There are many nations that hold multiple official languages that run very smoothly. I do not see why it is necessary for our nation to require English to be an official language with more than 30 percent of the nation coming from a different ethnic group or culture. Therefore, I believe that this nation should not enforce English as the official language.

According to James Crawford:

For more than 200 years, Americans have gotten by without declaring English our official language. Congress had never even considered declaring English the nation’s official language until 1981. The only previous official-language legislation dates back to 1923: a bill designating “American” the national tongue. Americans have traditionally resisted language legislation, beginning in 1780, when John Adams proposed to establish an official Language Academy to set standards for English. This idea was rejected by the Continental Congress as an improper role for government and a threat to individual liberties. There was no English proficiency requirement to become naturalized as a U.S. citizen until 1906 the first major language restriction to be enacted at the federal level.

Before World War I, bilingual education was common in areas where nonanglophone groups enjoyed political clout. During the 19th century, state laws, constitutions, and legislative proceedings appeared in languages as diverse as Welsh, Czech, Norwegian, Spanish, French, and of course, German.

At other times, Americans have imposed restrictive language policies. California rewrote its state constitution in 1879 to eliminate Spanish language rights. In 1897, Pennsylvania made English proficiency a condition of employment in its coal fields, a none-too-subtle way to exclude Italians and Slavs. Security fears during the World War I era led to unprecedented bans on public use of the German language in schools, on the street, during religious services, and even on the telephone. (Crawford)

Proposition 227 was passed by a substantial majority of California voters. Its passage is the direct result of the state’s poor student performance in English. Until its passage, California embraced bilingual education. Proposition 227 virtually ends bilingual education in California and reintroduces phonics based programs. The California Content Standards and California Education Code clearly define the course requirements under Proposition 227 and the goals for grade level performance.

Many groups and organizations feel that making English the official language is essential and beneficial for the U.S. government and its citizens. These groups believe that official English promotes unity. This long tradition of assimilation has always included the adoption of English as the common means of communication (USE). Many studies show that immigrants learn English slower when they are supported by their native language. Since multilingual government services actually encourage the growth of linguistic enclaves, this causes the U.S. to divide into separate language groups because of racial and ethnic conflicts (USE). Also, immigrants will benefit from learning English by being able to participate in the government and the workforce. If immigrants were not proficient in English, they would be subjected to the low-skilled and low-paying jobs. Knowledge of English leads to the realization of the American dream of increased economic opportunity and the ability to become a more productive member of society, which benefits everyone (USE). Many organizations also feel that official English can save money from the unnecessary duplication of government services in multiple languages. It is not the responsibility of the government to provide services in the 329 different languages spoken in the United States. It is the responsibility of each individual to either learn English or to find a friend or family member to translate (USE). Of course there are exceptions including emergencies, foreign language instruction, safety and health services, and tourism promotions. Also, official English does not affect private businesses, religious services, or private conversations (USE).

On the opposing hand, organizations oppose official English because they feel it is a violation of individual s rights. They believe that such laws are contrary to the spirit of tolerance and diversity embodied in our Constitution. An English Language Amendment to the Constitution would transform that document from being a charter of liberties and individual freedom into a charter of restrictions that limits, rather than protects, individual rights (ACLU). There are some versions of the proposed English Language Amendment that disregards the government from providing services in languages other than English. These groups that oppose the English Only laws believe that it violates the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. It interferes with the right to vote for individuals who can not read English and with the right of workers to be free of discrimination in certain workplaces. Today, as in the past, English Only laws in the U.S. are founded on false stereotypes of immigrant groups. Such laws do not simply disparage the immigrants’ native languages but assault the rights of the people who speak the languages (ACLU).

With the debate over English Only laws, a topic of bilingual education arose. Many people who support official English oppose bilingual education. They feel that bilingual education programs rely on the unproven theory that a child must spend years becoming literate in his native language before he or she can properly learn a second language. Under their own theory, bilingual educators should not have placed an English-speaking child in a Cantonese-speaking class (USE). Wasted funds have gone into the support of bilingual education with the schools being inefficient at teaching English. Studies have shown that these bilingual education schools have little or no effect. At the very least, federal and state bilingual education laws must be reformed to ensure that parents can easily remove their children from bilingual education programs. Because in America, a child shouldn t be forced to file a lawsuit to get his education in English (USE).

Since the 1960s, research has shown that multiple language skills do not confuse the mind. Quite the contrary: when well-developed, they seem to provide cognitive advantages, although such effects are complex and difficult to measure (Crawford). Another discredited notion is that children will learn a second language rapidly if they are totally immersed in it. For generations, this philosophy served to justify policies of educational neglect assigning minority students to regular classrooms, with no special help in overcoming language barriers. Disproportionate numbers failed and dropped out of school as a result (Crawford). The sink-or-swim approach was ruled illegal by the U.S. Supreme Court in Lau v. Nichols. Research has shown that the quality of English exposure is the major factor in English acquisition and not the quantity. Many believe that English as a second language is best taught in natural situations, with the second language used in meaningful contexts rather than in repetitious drills of grammar and vocabulary (Crawford). This approach is common in bilingual education programs, coordinated with lessons in students’ native language. Also, native-language instruction also helps to make English comprehensible, by providing contextual knowledge that aids in understanding.

Since language has always been an important part of a country s culture and way of life, I feel that the U.S. should keep this nation a multilingual nation. If this nation can go 200 years without making English the official language, I believe that things should continue this way. I do not feel that the possibility of saving money should substitute the ease of life for immigrants and schools. I also believe that an English Language Amendment to the Constitution would transform that document from being a charter of liberties and individual freedom into a charter of restrictions that limits, rather than protects, individual rights (ALCU). Also, I feel that bilingual education should continue. I feel that it is the parent s decision where their children go to school. I do not think that the government should interfere with that. Again, I do not believe that money should even be an issue in the rights of these individuals. I agree that English as a second language should be taught in a natural, relaxed environment, with the second language used in meaningful contexts rather than in repetitious drills of grammar and vocabulary (Crawford). It would be hypocritical since Americans learn a foreign language using English. For these reasons I believe that English should not be the nation s official language, and that bilingual education should continue.