



Why Do Many Americans Speak Only English?

By David L. Sigsbee



A native of Burundi enjoys a game of matching pictures with English words at an Idaho elementary school that offered Saturday English classes to parents of immigrant children who attended the school. ©AP images

For “practical purposes,” English is dominant but not official

Early English settlers spread their native language as they moved across the huge land mass that now is the United States. Today, most U.S. residents do not need to speak another language to communicate with people nearby. Also, the United States shares a 5,525-mile border with Canada, where most residents speak English.

In a few large cities and parts of the Southwest, English is spoken along with other languages, especially Spanish. In most of the United States, however, that is not the case.

The United States does not have an official language, but for practical purposes English has become the language that virtually all

residents speak and that immigrants are expected to master.

Proposals to make English the country’s official language arise from time to time. U.S. identity, unlike that of other countries, is not rooted in ethnicity or race, and some Americans believe that national unity requires a national language. They see English as a national unifying bond.

Others, however, oppose this change, believing U.S. residents should honor language differences and that the country's linguistic diversity is itself a unifying national identity.

English Around the World

The international use of English also may lessen Americans' need to learn different languages. Americans traveling abroad usually find English speakers in places they visit.

The spread of English occurred in part because two successive world powers, Great Britain and the United States, introduced their native language with the expansion of their influence in the world.

English is used in international trade and for many professions, including those of commercial airline pilots and medical doctors, and it is used widely in the sciences and engineering. Business people wanting to compete globally use English or provide English translations on the Internet.

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Also, because most technology developers in recent decades have been English speakers, English has been used in computer science and operating systems. English speakers were instrumental in the development of BITNET — one of the first wide-area networks — and of e-mail and the World Wide Web.

In countries where the use of regional languages can intensify ethnic tensions, English is a politically neutral language.

Learning Another Language

It is not surprising that many people outside the United States believe Americans do not learn other languages. Most American students do receive education in a foreign language, but the instruction usually is not continuous. In some parts of the country the curriculum may not be well designed.

The standards vary because the U.S. Constitution leaves education to the individual states. The national government encourages certain education programs, but it does not require instruction in a certain subject. The result is wide variation in foreign language instruction across the country.

Typically, students receive one or two years of introduction to a language in the early or middle grades, followed by one or two years in high school. Some high schools offer advanced study.

At the university level, foreign language study is required for some degrees, and extensive instruction is available to achieve fluency.

Overall, however, the limited and disjointed instruction in foreign languages does not bring most students to fluency.

Immigrants and English

Immigrants seeking U.S. citizenship must demonstrate a level of fluency in English. Commonly, they do this during their naturalization eligibility interview with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. The test has a clear set of guidelines and involves responding to questions as well as reading and writing.

For most immigrants, learning English is desirable for helping achieve economic success and community participation. While it is possible to live in cultural enclaves where a language other than English predominates, English skills are necessary for long-term well-being and success.

Some immigrants find it difficult to decide which languages to teach and speak with their children. They want their children to know their native language, but they also realize that for children to succeed, especially to earn a living, English speaking ability is required.

Sociologist Min Zhou's research shows that immigrant children often want to be like their American peers, so they learn English well to avoid standing out as different. As a result, immigrant children tend to relate to English, with third-generation descendants showing less interest in their grandparents' language.