

Melting pot boils over: Wide range of languages contributes to diversity

Increasing numbers of foreign language speakers in America cause one to question English as the "national language."

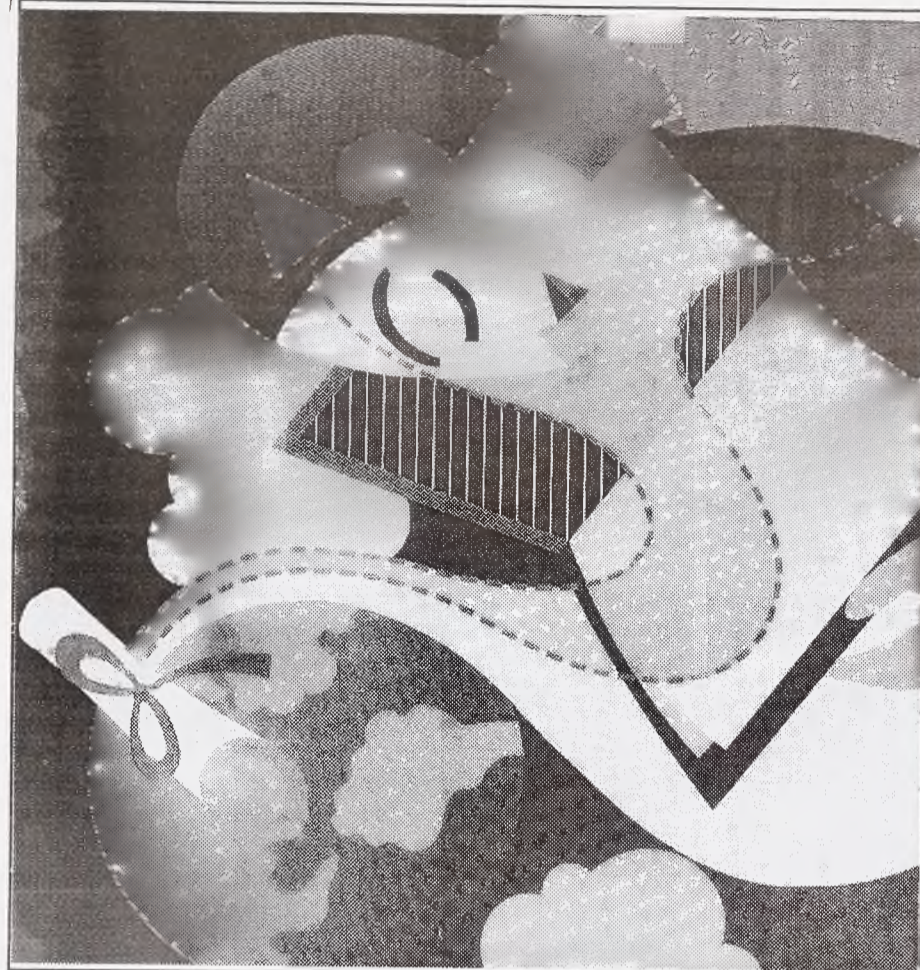
By Sara Nelson
Staff Writer

The United States has no official language. As a nation of immigrants, this country has long embraced the idea that America is a melting pot full of different cultures, languages, religions, and ideas. The US has not emphasized any sort of assimilation or even considered requiring immigrants to learn English, until now.

Millions of people speak a total of 300 languages, and this diversity is not a new trend in the United States. Since its inception, this country has been host to speakers of many different languages. At the country's founding, there were hundreds of Native American tribes as well as colonists from England and Spain. The immigration boom in the 19th century brought immigrants from around the world, causing boroughs like New York's Chinatown and Little Italy and Miami's Little Havana to spring up around the nation. Today, people emigrate primarily from Spanish-speaking countries and Southeast Asia.

The 2000 Census estimates the population of Spanish speakers in the United States has reached 32 million. With millions of illegal immigrants pouring over the borders each year in search of a better life, the number climbs to nearly 40 million. In North Carolina alone, the number of people who speak primarily Spanish has grown from 105,963 in 1990 to 378,942 in 2000.

The sheer volume of people with little or no English proficiency cannot be ignored. There are more non-English speakers in the United States than ever before, but not because the immigrants who come here are not learning English. Simply, there are more



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immigrants and thus the number of people without English skills is higher.

Requiring that people who immigrate to the United States learn English is both impractical and foolish. Granted, most of the people in this country speak English, but the United States is a nation united by its democratic ideals of tolerance and freedom, not a common language. Most of the immigrants who move to America come here in search of a better life and are more than willing to learn English in order to improve their chances of success here.

Posting signs and sending out bills in another language or hiring bilingual police officers does cost companies and the government money, but providing English lessons to the millions of people who immigrate here each year is more costly. Immigrants pay taxes just like citizens and are thus equally deserving of government services. Non-English speakers also spend money the same way as those who speak English. Given that the population of this group is growing almost exponentially, it is foolish for companies to ignore these people.

Spending a little more money on printing advertisements and sending out bills in Spanish or any other language will only result in more profit for these companies in the future.

Requiring immigrants to learn English would be nearly impossible. To do so would mean eliminating boroughs such as Chinatown and Little Havana, which provide communities in which immigrants can become accustomed to life in the United States while still maintaining elements of life in their home countries. Surrounded by speakers of their native language, immigrants can make a comfortable transition to life in America. Traditions are kept the same, the food is familiar, and extended family is often close by. Non-English speakers can rely on relatives and friends who have lived in America longer and have a better grasp on the language to help them adjust to life here.

Many immigrants arrive in the United States penniless and must work two or three jobs just to make ends meet. These people have neither the time nor the money to become fluent in English and will learn only what is necessary. If they live in a community of primarily non-English speakers or have children or other relatives who speak English, they will not learn it at all. Because these communities exist across America, requiring that immigrants learn English would be almost impossible.

Non-English speakers pose no threat to society. In fact, the presence of immigrants in America offers English speakers a chance to learn about other cultures and to be exposed to another language. Given the nature of commerce today, knowing another language can only help a person.

In order to become productive members of society and to feel at home while living in America, most immigrants will eventually learn English of their own volition. However, if a person chooses not to learn English for whatever reason, that option is perfectly acceptable.

Testing methods

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Not everyone in every math, science, or English class specializes in that subject. How can a teacher

expect one to be able to contemplate some of the questions presented on tests when the first time the pupils have ever seen that type of problem is on the very and quite evil test sitting before them? Most are under enough anxiety over the

simple fact that they have to take a test and, eventually, show the grade to their parents. It is disquieting to be chuggin' right along and fumble across an insane problem. Immediately, one is certain that there is no possible way the ques-

tion can be answered. Furthermore, it is assumed that the students will not be able to argue their way out of the incorrectly answered problem after they receive the red-slash marked remnants of what used to be their H Algebra 2 tests back from the teacher.

It is especially frustrating to bomb a test on material that I can honestly say I understood. I pay attention in class while the teachers present notes and ask questions when they arise. I do most of my homework and go over the problems with which I had trouble. A teacher would probably say that if I did poorly on a test, I obviously was not prepared or did not know the material well. Sometimes, that is just not the case. Sometimes, teachers give tests that are unjustly obscure or abstract.

Ideally, there would be some alternative testing method. I often find that I will not do so hot on a written history exam despite that just the night before, I had a stimulating discussion with my history buff father on the topic. I think I

would do just fine if my teacher could allow me to come in to class and simply talk about the unit. Test questions are often oddly worded and it throws me off. I feel like I am being tested on whether or not I can figure out what the question is asking versus some fact from my notes.

In foreign language, I think that it would make sense for the teacher to test the students by having a conversation with them instead of popping on some ridiculous tape cassette from which they are expected to find answers. Or perhaps students could be required to write out a conversation from a designated list of vocabulary and grammar. This method would surely prove whether or not pupils have learned the material, and it would allow room for some expressive creativity.

I know that I am an idealistic dreamer. Tests are tests, and I will continue taking them for at least the next six years. That is if they do not prevent me from getting in to a decent college at all.



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