

ED407881 1997-04-00 Myths about Language Diversity and Literacy in the United States. ERIC Digest.

ERIC Development Team

www.eric.ed.gov

Table of Contents

If you're viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

Myths about Language Diversity and Literacy in the United States. ERIC Digest.....	1
MYTH 1. THE PREDOMINANCE OF ENGLISH AND ENGLISH LITERACY IS.....	2
MYTH 3. ENGLISH ILLITERACY IS HIGH BECAUSE LANGUAGE MINORITIES.....	3
MYTH 4. THE BEST WAY TO PROMOTE ENGLISH LITERACY IS TO IMMERSE.....	4
CONCLUSION.....	5
REFERENCES.....	5



ERIC Identifier: ED407881

Publication Date: 1997-04-00

Author: Wiley, Terrence G.

Source: Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education Washington DC.

Myths about Language Diversity and Literacy in the United States. ERIC Digest.

THIS DIGEST WAS CREATED BY ERIC, THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

INFORMATION CENTER. FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT ERIC, CONTACT ACCESS ERIC 1-800-LET-ERIC

A number of popular myths surround discussions of language diversity and literacy in the United States and shed light on the education research, policy, and practice directed at these issues. This digest examines four of these myths or misconceptions, drawing on both historical evidence and contemporary data.

MYTH 1. THE PREDOMINANCE OF ENGLISH AND ENGLISH LITERACY IS

THREATENED. English has been the dominant language of the United States since its founding, and there appears to be little reason to assume that its status will be eclipsed in the foreseeable future. U.S. Census data indicate that, in 1990, there were approximately 32 million speakers of languages other than English in this country--13.8% of the total population. Only 1.8 million (less than 6%) of this group did not speak any English at all. Based on these data, it is clear that English is overwhelmingly the majority language. However, the presence of nearly 32 million individuals who speak languages other than English indicates that the United States is most appropriately described as a multilingual nation in which English is the dominant language.

This country has always been linguistically diverse. Although the dominance of English was established at the time of the first U.S. Census in 1790, estimates of the ethnic origins of the population indicate language diversity even at that time. According to Pitt (1976), roughly half of the population were of English origin; nearly 19% were of African origin; 12% were Scotch or Scotch Irish; and Irish accounted for about 3% of the total. People of Dutch, French, and Spanish origin represented an aggregate 14%; Native Americans were largely ignored by the first U.S. Census. Through the mid-nineteenth century, a high percentage of immigrants were from predominantly English-speaking areas. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, the majority of immigrants spoke languages other than English. In 1910, there were 92 million people in the United States. Some 13 million people age ten or older were foreign born; 23% of those did not speak English (Luebke, 1980, p. 2).

Some population researchers and policymakers note with alarm that recent immigration has reached historic highs. Although it is true that there are now more foreign-born residents in the United States than ever before, this is not the only relevant point of comparison to immigration historically. It is instructive to examine the percentage of foreign born in the total U.S. population.

Between 1970 and the late 1990's, the percentage of foreign born has risen markedly. The most recent statistics show that in 1996, 9.3% of the U.S. population were foreign born (Branigan, 1997). However, the high mark this century (14.7% foreign born in

1910) is still far above current numbers.

MYTH 2. ENGLISH LITERACY IS THE ONLY LITERACY WORTH NOTING.

Although millions of people in the United States are literate in languages other than English, their competence in those languages is often ignored. Therefore, literacy often becomes confused with English literacy. According to Macias (1990), there are three patterns of literacy among language minority groups in the United States: (1) native language literacy; (2) second language literacy (usually in English), which implies no native language literacy; and (3) biliteracy, literacy in two languages (typically in one's native language and in English). Nonliteracy (i.e., no literacy in any language) is also a possibility.

Even though literacy in languages other than English is rarely surveyed, it is not uncommon. Thus, claims made regarding the extent of illiteracy (meaning not literate in English) among language minorities must be reevaluated, and the assumption that English literacy is the only literacy that counts must be seen as reflective of the dominant ideology of English monolingualism. For the elderly, for recent immigrants, and for those who have lacked opportunities to study English, being able to use their native language provides immediate opportunities for social participation. For indigenous peoples, native language literacy provides a way to preserve languages and cultures and to reverse language loss (see Fishman, 1991).

Further, limited oral proficiency in English is commonly confused with illiteracy. Some individuals read and write in English but may not speak it well; conversely, some who are fluent orally in English are not literate in English.

MYTH 3. ENGLISH ILLITERACY IS HIGH BECAUSE LANGUAGE MINORITIES

ARE NOT AS EAGER TO LEARN ENGLISH AND ASSIMILATE AS PRIOR

GENERATIONS WERE. A common criticism aimed at recent immigrants is that they are disinclined to learn English or acquire literacy in English because of their loyalty to their native languages and cultures. It is also argued that recent non-English-speaking immigrants are different from those of a century ago who, it is believed, readily surrendered their languages and cultures. However, a study by Wyman (1993) of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European immigrants reveals that a high percentage of European immigrants emigrated back to their homelands. As now, millions of immigrants returned home while millions more remained here, to become either bilingual or bicultural or to assimilate into the English-speaking dominant culture.

What, then, of the current language situation in this country? Are individuals who speak

languages other than English really reluctant to learn English? Crawford (1992) notes that in California on the day that Proposition 63 (a proposal to make English the official language of California) passed, "more than 40,000 adults were on waiting lists for English as a second language (ESL) instruction in Los Angeles alone" (p. 17). Further, data from programs across the United States, compiled in 1996 and published in "NCLE Notes" (The waiting game, 1996), pointed to ESL program waiting lists numbering in the thousands and waiting periods extending to years. For example, in Seattle, the King County Literacy Coalition reported 3,000 adults on a waiting list; in New York, 1,100 were on a list for a program at a library; in Brockton, Massachusetts, the average wait was two to three years; and, in Dallas, a literacy council cited 6,000 people on a one-year waiting list.

MYTH 4. THE BEST WAY TO PROMOTE ENGLISH LITERACY IS TO IMMERSE

CHILDREN AND ADULTS IN ENGLISH-ONLY INSTRUCTION. One of the more enduring misconceptions is that raising children bilingually confuses them and inhibits their cognitive development. This misconception, bolstered by several generations of flawed research (see Hakuta, 1986), continues to underlie much of the opposition to bilingual education and has resulted in generations of language minority parents being admonished not to speak to children in their native language at home, even when parents have little facility in English.

It is also often argued that the best way to promote literacy is to push people into English-only immersion programs. However, again, neither the historical record nor the research supports this view. The most extreme attempt to implement an English-only education program began after the Civil War when the U.S. government pursued an aggressive Indian deculturation program. According to Spring (1994), deculturation involved "replacing the use of native languages with English, destroying Indian customs, and teaching allegiance to the U.S. government" (p. 18). Among the strategies used in the boarding schools where the children were sent "was an absolute prohibition on Native American children speaking their own languages, and those that did were humiliated, beaten, and had their mouths washed with lye soap" (Norgren & Nanda, 1988, p. 186). In spite of these practices, Weinberg (1995) notes that "Indian children were notoriously slow learners of the English language" (p. 206) and lessons of deculturation were learned more readily than those related to instruction in reading.

Current research on bilingual education for children (see, for example, Baker, 1996; Goldenberg, 1996; Merino & Lyons, 1990) and for adults (see Melendez, 1990) indicates that the bilingual education approach is generally more effective than the English-only approach if learners are put into comparable programs with comparable resources. Further, children taught in their native language develop higher levels of proficiency in "that" language than those who are directly immersed in English, and

bilingualism and biliteracy are "positive outcome[s] of any educational program" (Goldenberg, 1996, p. 10). Even critics of bilingual education such as Rossell and Baker (1996) suggest that language minority children should be seen as "an opportunity to develop bilingual adults" (p. 35).

State- and federally-funded bilingual education programs, however, reach only a fraction of eligible students. Three quarters of limited English proficient students receive ESL instruction, while only one-third to one-half of these students receive any instruction in their native language (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997, p. 13).

CONCLUSION

The persistence of the myth of English monolingualism in this country reflects the belief that English is the only language that counts and the mentality that language diversity is a problem rather than a resource. Most national literacy estimates in the United States are based solely on English abilities, and this tends to inflate the perception that there is a literacy crisis. In order to promote English literacy and biliteracy, the extent and implications of language diversity in the United States need to be understood, and literacy in "any" language needs to be viewed as a resource, rather than as a liability.

REFERENCES

- Baker, C. (1996). "Foundations of bilingual education and bilingualism" (2nd ed.). Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters.
- Branigan, W. (1997, April 9). Nearly 1 in 10 in U.S. is foreign-born Census says. "The Washington Post," p. 8.
- Crawford, J. (1992). "Bilingual education: History, politics, theory, and practice" (2nd ed.). Los Angeles: Bilingual Education Services.
- Fishman, J.A. (1991). "Reversing language shift: Theoretical and empirical foundations of assistance to threatened languages." Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters.
- Goldenberg, C. (1996). Latin American Immigration and U.S. Schools. "Social Policy Report," 10(1). Ann Arbor, MI: Society for Research in Child Development.
- Hakuta, K. (1986). "Mirror of language: The debate on bilingualism." New York: Basic Books.
- Luebke, F.C. (1980). Legal restrictions on foreign languages in the Great Plains states, 1917-1923. In P. Schach (Ed.), "Languages in conflict: Linguistic acculturation on the Great Plains" (pp. 1-19). Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Macias, R.F. (1990). Definitions of literacy: A response. In R.L. Venezky, D.A. Wagner,

& B.S. Ciliberti (Eds.), "Toward defining literacy" (pp. 17-23). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Melendez, W.A. (1990). "Native language instruction: An approach to combat illiteracy among language minority communities." Research report. Sacramento, CA: Literacy Task Force.

Merino, B.J., & Lyons, J. (1990). The effectiveness of a model bilingual program: A longitudinal analysis. "CPS Brief," 2(3), 1-5.

National Center for Education Statistics. (1997). "1993-94 Schools and staffing survey: A profile of policies and practices for limited English proficient students: Screening methods, program support, and teacher training." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

Norgren, J., & Nanda, S. (1988). "American cultural pluralism and the law." New York: Praeger.

Pitt, L. (1976). "We Americans. Volume I. Colonial times to 1877." Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman.

Rossell, C., & Baker, K. (1996). The educational effectiveness of bilingual education. "Research in the Teaching of English," 30, 1-68.

Spring, J. (1994). "Deculturalization and the struggle for equality: A brief history of the education of dominated cultures in the United States." New York: McGraw-Hill.

The waiting game. (1996). "NCLE Notes," 6, pp. 1-2.

Weinberg, M. (1995). "A chance to learn: A history of race and education in the United States" (2nd ed.). Long Beach: California State University Press.

Wyman, M. (1993). "Round-trip to America: The immigrants return to Europe, 1880-1930." Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

This digest was adapted from Chapter 2 of "Literacy and Language Diversity in the United States" (Wiley, T.G. 1996. McHenry, IL & Washington, DC: Delta Systems and Center for Applied Linguistics). (Available from Delta Systems at 1-800-323-8270.)

The National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education (NCLE) is operated by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) with funding from the U.S. Department of Education (ED), Office of Educational Research and Improvement, under contract no. RR93002010. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of ED.

Title: Myths about Language Diversity and Literacy in the United States. ERIC Digest.

Document Type: Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);

Available From: NCLE, 1118 22nd Street N.W., Washington, DC 20037.

Descriptors: Bilingual Education, Cultural Pluralism, English, English (Second Language), Immersion Programs, Language Attitudes, Language of Instruction, Language Role, Limited English Speaking, Literacy, Minority Groups, Public Opinion

Identifiers: ERIC Digests

###



[\[Return to ERIC Digest Search Page\]](#)