

Invasion of the Non-English Speakers

By EDWIN S. RUBENSTEIN

The ability to speak English may well be the best indicator of a person’s ability to assimilate and succeed in the U.S. Poor language skills are correlated with poverty, inadequate medical care, and alienation from mainstream American culture. English language frustration often leads to depression, which can lead to violence: think Virginia Tech.

The link between linguistic and national unity was acknowledged early in our history. Benjamin Franklin expressed concern that German — at one time the language of about a third of the residents of Pennsylvania — was a corrosive political force. By the late nineteenth century the belief emerged that “*American English both reflected and constituted the democratic and rational nature of the country.*”¹

In 1906, at the height of the Great Wave, Congress enacted an English language requirement for naturalization.² In 1907 it appointed a joint committee, the Dillingham Commission, to study immigration’s impact on the country. Of the many restrictions the Commission urged Congress to impose on new immigrants, only two became law: literacy (in any language) for all immigrants aged sixteen or older in 1917, and a quota of 350,000 immigrants per year in 1921.

During World War I several states passed laws prohibiting the teaching of German and the usage of any language other than English in public places. Illinois even targeted speakers of British English, declaring “American” to be the state’s official tongue in 1923. As immigration ground to a halt during the Depression, the belief that this hiatus would facilitate the linguistic assimilation of those already here gained credence. Eng-

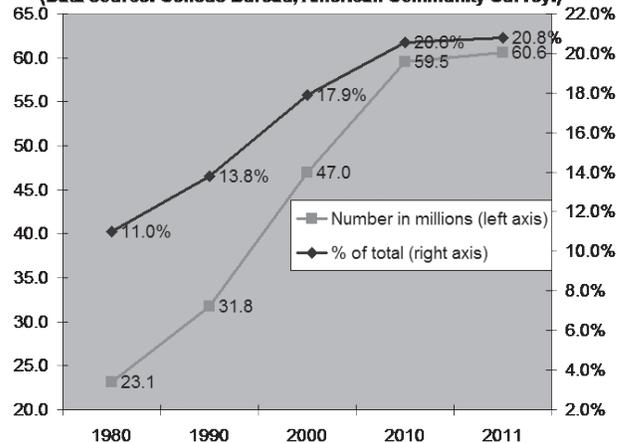
lish monolingualism among third generation immigrants was widely expected.

The Civil Rights movement in the 1960s foiled this happy prospect. The notion that the use of English in the public sphere disadvantaged non-English speakers was codified in the language initiatives embodied in the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Acts. In particular, the position of Spanish in American life became part of the civil rights agenda. New York State, for example, was obligated to provide election ballots in Spanish and English.

The decades following the civil rights movement saw a new wave of immigration, and a new backlash against it. The push-back included a movement to make English the nation’s official language as well as Official English laws passed by 23 states. Nevertheless, the incursion of non-English speakers was unbroken:

The invasion: Population 5-years and over speaking a language other than English at home, 1980-2011

(Data source: Census Bureau, American Community Survey.)



Some 60.6 million people, or slightly more than one of every 5 people in the U.S. aged 5 years and older, spoke a language other than English at home in 2011, according to the American Community Survey. By comparison, in 1980 only 23.1 million persons, or one in 9 residents, spoke a foreign tongue at home.

By 2020 the number of non-English speakers is expected to increase to 66.3 million, or about 6 million more than today. The non-English speaking share of the U.S. population will edge up to 21.3 percent in 2020, according to Census Bureau projections.³

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Over the 1980 to 2011 period the number of people speaking a non-English language at home increased by 162 percent, while the overall U.S. population rose by 39 percent.

Spanish is by far the largest foreign language group, accounting for 37.6 million, or 62 percent of all non-English speakers in 2011. Chinese is a distant second, accounting for 2.9 million, or 4.8 percent, of all non-English speakers. Those two languages, along with Vietnamese, Russian, Persian, Armenian, Korean, and Tagalog, saw their usage more than double in these last 31 years.

Meanwhile, many European languages are fading away in the U.S. There are now less than half the number of Italian speakers as there were in 1980. German, Hungarian, French, Greek, Yiddish, and Polish also saw significant drops, according to the Census survey.

The economic impact

Persons who speak a foreign language at home pay a price: although they account for about 21 percent of the total population, they represent 30 percent of America’s poor, 38 percent of those with no health insurance, and 43 percent of people with less than a 12th grade education.⁴

The problem has nothing to do with national origin or foreign language usage per se. It simply reflects their relatively poor English language skills. Forty-one percent of persons who spoke a foreign language at home in 2011 spoke English less than “very well.” Among Spanish speakers, 44 percent spoke English less than “very well”; among those speaking languages other than Spanish, 39 percent spoke English less than “very well.”

Immigrants who do not speak or read English well earn 17 percent less than immigrants of similar backgrounds, educational experience, and education who are proficient in English. First generation immigrants living with immigrant parents who do not speak English at all, or speak it poorly, are also at an economic disadvantage. One economist projects the wage penalty for Spanish speakers, foreign and native-born alike, can be anywhere from 4 percent to 40 percent.

The population most at risk for problems related to poor English is designated as “Linguistically Isolated” (LI) by the U.S. Census Bureau. An LI household is defined as one in which no person age 14 and over: (1) speaks only English at home or (2) speaks another language at home and speaks English “very well.”

The second part is significant. It means that if at least one person in a household where no English is spo-

ken is able to speak English very well, no one in the household is considered linguistically isolated — the assumption being that that person can communicate on behalf of other members of the household.

You could have a ten-person household in which 9 persons could not speak English, yet none of them would be counted as LI so long as the tenth person spoke English well. Obviously the LI population understates the magnitude of English language dysfunction among immigrants and their children.

By definition, English only households cannot be LI. Thus ordinary Americans, many of whom speak English less than “very well,” are excluded from a classification that could trigger increases in language education funds.

Persons living in linguistic isolation may have difficulty performing mundane activities outside the home, such as grocery shopping or banking. They cannot independently communicate with government officials or medical personnel. They tend to cluster in foreign-language enclaves, where no one speaks English well, if at all. Their geographic isolation reinforces their linguistic isolation, and vice-versa.

LI is a fairly recent designation. Not until 1990 did the Census Bureau deem it necessary to report on a category of residents who couldn’t speak English. The 1990 Census found 7.7 million persons, or 3.4 percent of the U.S. population 5-years and older, living in LI households. Over the next decade the LI population soared by more than 50 percent.

The latest reading, for 2012, shows a significant rise in the LI population since 2000:

THE LINGUISTICALLY ISOLATED POPULATION

	2000	2012	present change
Linguistically Isolated Population			
All Foreign Language Households	11,893,572	13,512,335	13.6%
Speak Spanish at home	7,671,481	8,729,279	13.8%
Speak other foreign languages at home	4,222,091	4,783,056	13.3%
Percent of Population Linguistically Isolated			
All Foreign Language Households	25.3%	21.8%	-13.8%
Speak Spanish at home	27.3%	22.8%	-16.6%
Speak other foreign languages at home	22.5%	20.3%	-9.3%

Data source: 2000 Census; 2012 American Community Survey

There were 13.5 million U.S. residents living in Linguistic Isolation in 2012, up 13.6 percent from 2000.

As seen in the table, the fraction of foreign-language speakers classified as LI declined for each major language group between 2000 and 2012. That sounds good, but how reliable are the responses?

Census allows individuals to self-report English language proficiency. Respondents who fill out the “long

form” questionnaire are asked if they speak a language other than English at home. If they did, they are asked to state whether they spoke English “Very Well,” “Well,” “Not Well,” or “Not at All.”

Immigration activists may: (1) urge their constituents to overstate their English skills so as to justify the vast sums spent on ESL-type programs, or (2) ask that they understate their language skills to promote additional bilingual interventions in schools or the workplace. Census makes no effort to verify responses.

In any event, the increase in the official count of foreign-language speakers between 2000 and 2012 more than offset the reported decline in their LI share, resulting in bumping up the fraction of the total U.S. population classified as LI.

Spanish speakers accounted for 65 percent of the LI population in 2012. Asian language speakers were a distant second at 18.3 percent. Indo-European language speakers accounted for only 12.4 percent of all LI persons.

California is the most LI intensive state, with exactly 10.0 percent (!) of its population so classified by the 2010 Census. New York (8.2 percent) was the second-most LI intensive state.

At the other extreme is West Virginia, only 0.4 percent LI in 2010 — double the 0.2 percent rate of 2000.

In 2010 25.2 million foreign-language speakers spoke English less than “very well” according to the Census Bureau. This is 11 million more than the LI population, the difference reflecting those who do not speak well themselves but live in households where someone does.

From 2000 to 2010 the number of foreign language speakers who speak English less than “very well” increased by 18.3 percent. As a percent of U.S. population, they rose from 8.1 percent to 8.7 percent.

Native-born persons accounted for 18.7 percent of all foreign-language speakers who spoke English less than “very well” in 2010 — down from 26.3 percent in 2000. In absolute numbers, native born who speak English less than “very well” declined by about 900,000, or by 16 percent, between 2000 and 2010.

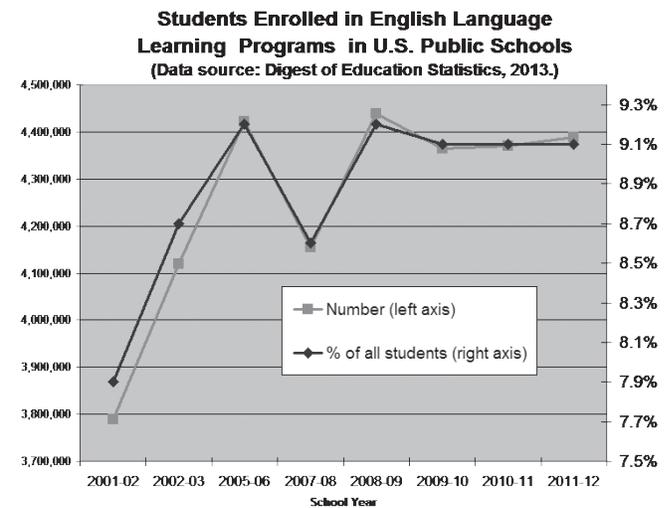
Remember: this does not include Americans who may speak English poorly but are not eligible for language funds earmarked for immigrants and their children.

The fiscal impact

The influx of non-English speakers to the U.S. has invariably increased the number of foreign-born public school students who struggle with English. A publication entitled “The Condition of Education 2005” from the National Center for Education Statistics reported that 3.7 million, or 9 percent of students in pre-K through

12th grade, spoke a foreign language at home in 1979, and more than a third of them “spoke English with difficulty.”⁵ By 2001 the number of such students rose to 9 million, or 19 percent of the public school population, of whom 2.4 million spoke English with difficulty.

The federal government requires public schools to include English as a Second Language (ESL) or Bilingual Education (BE) programs in their curriculum to accommodate the needs of non-English-speaking students, regardless of their legal status. The number and share of public school students participating in these programs has risen significantly over the past decade:



In the 2011–12 school year (latest available data) approximately 4.4 million, or 9.1 percent, of public school students participated in English Language Learning (ELL) programs.⁶ This represents an increase of 600,000 in English Language Learners since the 2001–02 school year. More importantly, the share of students enrolled in ELL programs grew from 7.9 percent to 9.1 percent over this period.

As you might expect, the fiscal burden is not distributed evenly. In eight states, Alaska, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, and Texas, 10.0 percent or more of public school students were English Language Learners in 2011–12. California was the highest, with ELL students accounting for a whopping 23.2 percent of enrollment. In fourteen states ELL enrollments ranged between 6.0 percent and 9.9 percent of total public school enrollments. These states were Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Virginia, and Washington. The ELL percentage was between 3.0 percent and 5.9 percent in 15 states and was less than 3.0 percent in 13 states, with West Virginia having the lowest percentage — 0.7 percent.

Similarly, ELL students accounted for 16.7 percent of enrollment in large city school districts, 9.0 percent

of enrollment in suburban schools, and 3.9 percent in rural areas.

ELL classes are significantly more expensive than mainstream English classes. Personnel costs include specialized teachers who supplement instruction provided by the mainstream English teacher and professional development to strengthen the skills of teachers working with ELLs. These require additional school district outlays.

The Rand Corporation conducted the best analysis of the cost differential between ELL and non-ELL programs in the early 1980s. After conducting case studies of ELL-type programs, the Rand researchers found that per pupil costs varied with the type of instructional delivery model that was being used in local school districts. “Pull-out programs” that required the hiring of extra teachers to deliver supplemental instruction to ELLs were the most expensive. On the other hand, programs that used self-contained classrooms where one teacher provided bilingual instruction were less expensive.

The Rand study found that the added costs for language assistance instruction ranged from \$100 to \$500 per pupil.⁷ In addition to personnel expenses, the researchers also noted that other costs should be taken into consideration in computing add-on bilingual education costs. These included program administration, staff development (which can add significant costs), and other functions such as student identification and assessment.

The total additional per pupil costs for language assistance instruction was estimated to be in the range of \$200 to \$700 in 1981 dollars — equivalent to \$510 to \$1,770 in 2012 dollars. Using the average of the latter two amounts — \$1,140 — as our estimate of per pupil cost, the added cost of providing English Language Learning instruction to the 4.4 million students enrolled in those programs would equal an about \$5.0 billion (\$1,140 x 4.4 million).

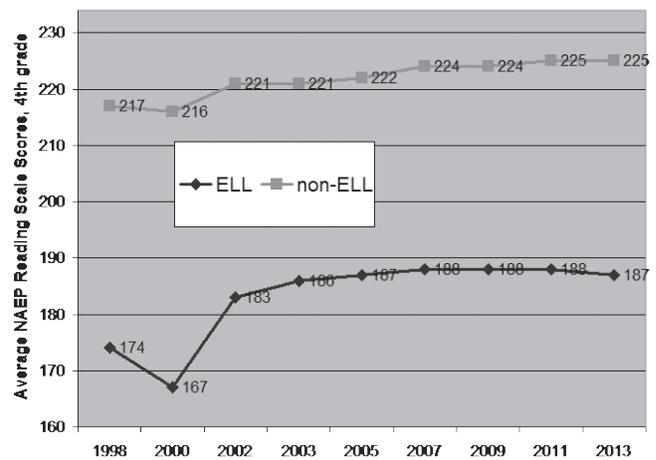
This enormous expense might be justified if it produced results. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that ELL programs have narrowed the achievement gap between ELL students and students who are not enrolled in these programs. In 2011, and all previous assessment years since 2002, average reading scores for non-ELL 4th and 8th graders were higher than their ELL peers’ scores. More importantly, the test score gap between non-ELL and ELL students did not shrink.

In 2011 the achievement gap between non-ELL and ELL students was 36 points at the 4th-grade level and 44 points at the 8th-grade level. At grade 4, the test score gap was not measurably different from that of any assessment year since 2002.

New York City, arguably the most ELL-intensive urban school district in the nation, is a poster child for

Average Reading Scores for Students in English Learning Programs v. All Others, 1998-2013

(Data Source: Digest of Education Statistics, 2012 and 2014)



ELL program failure. More than 83 percent of New York City students who entered bilingual or English as a Second Language (ESL) programs in ninth grade did not have a firm enough grasp of English to test out of those programs four years later. More than 16 percent of all New York City students do not become fluent enough for mainstream classes after nine years.⁸

The New York City Board of Education found that, in the class of 2001, nearly one-third of English Language Learners (ELLs) dropped out within four years, while less than 30 percent graduated during that span.⁹

In California, statistics from the state office of bilingual education showed that a quarter of all public school students — well over one million students — were classified as not knowing English. Of those students, only five to six percent learned English every year. This implies a 95 percent failure rate — i.e., 95 percent of immigrants who start a given school year not knowing English were still classified as not knowing English at the end of that school year.¹⁰

In retrospect, the failure of ELL programs to achieve their stated goals was inevitable. The programs were intended to help immigrant children learn English so they could do regular schoolwork with their English-speaking classmates. In practice, many ELL programs became more concerned with teaching the native language and celebrating the ethnic culture of immigrant families than with teaching English.

Immigrant parents themselves object to these misguided priorities. Even leaders of La Raza, a Latino advocacy group generally supportive of ELL programs, have acknowledged that the system of bilingual education has been a disaster in California and elsewhere in the United States.¹¹ Meanwhile, native-born parents see the billions poured into ELL programs as resources that should have been used to improve the ability of their English-speaking children to read and write English.

Polls show that “the man in the street” — that quintessentially average person who does not have a personal stake in either side of the language issue — has a strong view on what should be done. The question newspaper polls in California asked during the height of the state’s Bilingual Education initiative was neutrally phrased: “There is a proposal to require all public school instruction to be conducted in English, and for children not fluent in English to be placed in a one-year intensive English immersion program. Do you support it or do you oppose it?”

Between 70 and 80 percent of those polled supported English language immersion.¹²

Unfortunately, the calculus of modern politics enables a tiny minority of people to block change desired by the vast majority if they — the tiny minority — feel very strongly about it. By the time the failure of ELL programs became widely known, a powerful, albeit small, special interest group of ELL teachers, administrators, textbook publishers, bureaucrats, and academic theorists, was in place. They protected their turf from efforts to cut or eliminate the ELL industry.

The people behind ELL education are not teacher union activists, Latino politicians, Hispanic immigrants, or the society at large. They are a small number of ethnic activists who designed these programs and the ELL industry. For them, maintaining ethnic identity and immigrant languages is more important than assimilation into America. ■

Endnotes

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