

Join the national conversation!

SHOULD ENGLISH BE THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE OF THE UNITED STATES?

Word Generation - Unit 2.1 |

Focus Words

specify | establish | cohesive | constrain | xenophobia



WEEKLY PASSAGE

If you ride the bus through an American city, you will hear many languages spoken. Many new immigrants have come to the U.S., speaking languages like Vietnamese, Russian, Spanish, and Creole.

Immigrants want to be able to use public services. Interpreters and written information in different languages help them use hospitals, libraries, and schools. If immigrants go to court, they want to understand what is being said. When new citizens vote, they want to be able to read the voting ballot.

Right now, the U.S. does not **specify** what languages can be used by the government. For example in many states, people can take the driver's test in their home language. But some people want to **establish** English as our official language. If English is the only official language, they say the country will be more unified or **cohesive**. Using other languages in schools, courts, and city hospitals would be **constrained** by law. Immigrants would

need to learn English right away or miss out on services.

Other people say this is just **xenophobia**, a fear of foreign people. Immigrants are learning English as fast as they can. They deserve services and information in the language they know.

What do you think? Should immigrants be provided government services in their home language? Or do you think making English the official language of the United States will help us come together?

Should English be the official language of the United States?

FOCUS WORDS OF THE WEEK

specify : (verb) to clearly define

FORMS:

EXAMPLES OF USE:

NOTES:

establish : (verb) to cause to be recognized and accepted

FORMS:

EXAMPLES OF USE:

NOTES:

cohesive : (adjective) unified

FORMS:

EXAMPLES OF USE:

NOTES:

constrain : (verb) to hold back

FORMS:

EXAMPLES OF USE:

NOTES:

xenophobia : (noun) a fear of foreign people

FORMS:

EXAMPLES OF USE:

NOTES:

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PROBLEM OF THE WEEK

Immigrant families around the world face many difficulties. They face **xenophobia** as well as day-to-day struggles with things from buying food to making friends. Using their first language at home helps families be **cohesive**. It helps them stay connected to their roots. **Establishing** English as the official language of the U.S. would not legally **constrain** the everyday use of other languages. However, some people think that having an official language would decrease the use of other languages, even in people's homes. The 2000 United States census asked people to **specify** which language they speak at home.

Option 1: The most common non-English language spoken at home in the U.S. is Spanish. The 2000 U.S. Census counted 262,375,152 U.S. residents. Of these, 28,101,052 spoke Spanish at home. What percent of Americans speak Spanish at home?

- A) about 10.7%
- B) about 28.2%
- C) about 32.6%
- D) about 45.1%

Option 2: The second and third most popular non-English languages spoken at home in the U.S. are Chinese and French. Of the 262,375,152 people counted on the 2000 Census, 2,022,143 spoke Chinese, and 1,643,838 spoke French. If an American is selected at random, what is the probability that he or she speaks Chinese or French at home?

 **Discussion Question:** Most people who want English **established** as the official language say that they are not **xenophobic**, they just want to preserve America's national culture. **Specifying** a national language will give Americans more incentive to speak fluent English. How can we be a **cohesive** nation, they ask, if we can't talk to our neighbors? However, learning a new language is difficult, and takes time. Have you ever been in a place where people used a language you couldn't understand? Did it **constrain** your behavior? Did it prevent you from doing things? Why or why not?

Should English be the official language of the United States?



THINKING SCIENTIFICALLY

Ms. Kahn and her students are discussing the fact that the United States does not have an official language.

“The official language of a country should be the language that most people speak,” says Ricky. “And most people in the United States speak English, so it should be the official language.”

“That’s true,” says Sasha, “but I have many friends that speak another language at home with their parents because their parents speak little to no English.”

“But that is another reason to have the only official language be English. Anyone living in this country should be able to talk to others in the language that everyone else speaks,” Ricky argued.

“Those are both good points,” says Ms. Kahn. “The U.S. Census is a great resource that collects data on the languages that people speak, and how well they speak it.”

➔ Ms. Kahn located information from U.S. Census Bureau’s 2007 American Community Survey and projected it on the screen.

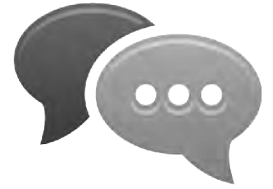
Characteristic	Total People	English-speaking ability			
		Very well	Well	Not well	Not at all
Population (5 years and older)	280,950,438				
I. Spoke only English at home	223,505,953				
II. Spoke a language other than English at home	55,444,485	30,975,474	10,962,722	9,011,298	4,494,991
a. Spanish or Spanish Creole	34,547,077	18,179,530	6,322,170	6,344,110	3,701,267
b. Other Indo-European Languages	10,320,730	6,936,808	2,018,148	1,072,025	293,749
c. Asian and Pacific Island languages	8,316,426	4,274,794	2,176,180	1,412,264	453,188
d. Other languages	2,260,252	1,584,342	442,224	182,899	46,787

What percentage of the population speaks a language other than English at home?

Of the people that speak a language other than English at home, what is the percentage of people that speak English “Very well” or “Well”?

If English were made the official language of the United States, should Spanish be considered as a second official language? Think about your opinion on that question, then decide whether the data above would be helpful to you as you express your opinion.

Should English be the official language of the United States?



DEBATING THE ISSUE

Get ready...

Pick one of these positions (or create your own).

A English should be the official language of the United States. This will make us a more cohesive nation would be helpful to everyone. No other languages should be used for government services.

B The United States should not have an official language. Having one would take away people's rights to free speech.

C Children in U.S. schools should be required to learn English, but adult immigrants should only learn English if they choose to do so.

D Making English the official language of the U.S. is a good idea, but people should still receive government services in their home language if they do not know English.

E _____

Get set...

Be ready to provide evidence to back up your position during your class discussion or debate. Jot down a few quick notes:

GO!

Be a strong participant by using phrases like these.

I believe that...

I agree with you, but...

You make a good point, but have you considered...

Can you show me evidence in the text that...

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WRITE ABOUT IT

Support your position with clear reasons and specific examples.
Try to use relevant words from the Word Generation list in your response.

Focus Words

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