

Text: The Selective Celebration of Bilingualism

By The Asian American Education Project

“English-Only” sentiments grew to become more prevalent and popular around the 1900s as the United States entered various international conflicts and wars. Speaking English was viewed as a marker of loyalty and patriotism. This left very little room for other languages to be seen or considered in a positive light. Then, as the United States became more globally connected, especially to Asia, speaking Asian languages (in addition to other foreign languages) was viewed as a benefit.

Tertiary Source:

Globalization and technological connectivity helped shift bilingualism from being seen as primarily a **deficit** to being an **asset**. As more people interacted with others in different parts of the world, knowing more than one language was encouraged and seen as a positive, even competitive, trait. Yet, even this acceptance and valuing of bilingualism is **conditional**, as English-Only attitudes still persist.

In the 21st century, families and schools began actively investing in the teaching of foreign languages, other than English. In some ways, knowing how to speak more than one language became a status symbol, especially among the upper classes. Being able to speak English in addition to another language gave people a societal edge. Bilingualism was considered a desirable skill for college admissions. In addition, it became a marketable job skill.

This recent shift in viewing bilingualism as an asset is a significant change from past attitudes. Instead of looking down upon and banning the use of languages other than English, being able to speak certain foreign languages became an advantage over people who only spoke English.

When teaching foreign languages to native English speakers, the most common in U.S. public schools are Spanish, French and German. In the past, learning an Asian language was seen as foreign and disloyal due to anti-Asian sentiments. However, after World War II, schools began to invest in and offer language programs for English-speakers such as Mandarin Chinese and Japanese. (Today, Asian languages such as Tagalog and Vietnamese are also taught depending on the needs of the population.) These Asian languages were offered because of the surge of interest in them due to their respective nation’s growing importance in the economic sector and global politics.

For example, Japanese language instruction in the United States increased after World War II. This was a time when Japan experienced an **economic**

Glossary:

Globalization: the development of an increasingly integrated global economy marked by free trade, free flow of capital, and tapping of cheaper foreign labor markets

Deficit: a lack or impairment in ability

Asset: something that is useful or of value

Conditional: made or granted on certain terms

boom and became the second largest economy in the world. In order to stay competitive, the United States increased funding to teach Japanese.

In another example, Mandarin language instruction in the United States increased when China experienced an economic boom in what is known as the “opening of China.” (In China, this period is referred to as “reform and opening-up.”) Starting in the late 1970s, China opened up its economy to foreign businesses seeking to invest there.

In the case of Japanese and Mandarin, the teaching of these languages in the United States was driven by **profit**. The emphasis on technological advances and global connectivity since the end of the 20th century helped turn these previously-dismissed languages into important assets.

In this light, many white Americans saw learning an Asian language as a critical and strategic decision. For Asian Americans, learning an Asian language was generally more about cultural **preservation** and language **retention**. Even before U.S. public schools offered Asian languages, Asian American families joined together to create heritage language programs for their children. They taught classes after school or over the weekend. (Many of these programs are commonly taught on Saturday mornings.) These heritage language programs leased spaces in churches and school buildings. These programs were self-funded and were not financially supported by the government.

While studying a foreign language is considered an enrichment for English-fluent students, English Language Learners who already speak a “foreign” language and are learning English as a second language are considered to be deficient. Their foreign language ability is seen as something that needs to be overcome instead of as a positive trait. This view is not an accident, but rather a product of bilingual education’s history in the United States.

As English-Only sentiments rose in the 1900s, states began mandating English as the sole language of instruction, banning foreign language instruction which extended even to private schools in some cases. By 1923, thirty-four states – 70% of the states in the United States – had banned foreign language instruction to some degree. That same year, the landmark case *Meyer v. Nebraska* (1923) was decided by the Supreme Court. The case involved a German teacher, Robert Meyer (1878-?), who had been arrested and fined for teaching in German at a **parochial** school. At the time, Nebraska had outlawed instruction in any language other than English for students before the 9th grade in any school in the state. The Supreme Court ruled that Nebraska’s law prohibiting non-English instruction was unconstitutional as it violated the

Economic Boom: a period of rapid growth and prosperity

Profit: a financial gain

Preservation: the action of saving something

Retention: the action of keeping something

Parochial: of or relating to a church or church community

liberty that's protected by the **Due Process** Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

While the *Meyer v. Nebraska* (1923) ruling removed bans on instruction in languages other than English, this didn't exactly result in a strong cultural or political shift toward accepting bilingual education or bilingualism. Often, the focus of bilingual programs is to ensure English **proficiency** while not focusing on the retention of heritage languages.

Meanwhile, foreign language programs and biliteracy have increasingly been encouraged for native English speakers as bilingualism or multilingualism is seen as a positive trait that will open up greater social and economic opportunities for students in their future. This suggests then that learning a foreign language is only seen as an asset for English-proficient students, and that U.S. foreign language instruction still values and prioritizes English above all other languages.

While learning a new language is treated as an asset for students who speak English as their first language, knowing a different language has not been equally celebrated for English Language Learners. As schools invest in foreign language courses for English-speakers to take as graduation requirements or as electives, the needs of English Language Learners are still often overlooked.

Additionally, it's important to consider which languages are considered assets and which are not. In the last few decades, languages from East Asia have been considered beneficial for career advancement. Yet, despite many information technology jobs being based in South Asia, South Asian languages aren't taught. Many of the languages that are now considered trendy assets are actually the very languages that English Language Learners already know, including Mandarin, Japanese, Arabic, and Spanish.

Due Process:

citizens have the right to be treated fairly and that all legal matters need to be resolved according to established rules

Proficiency: being skilled or competent

Bibliography:

- Anderson, Melinda D. "The Costs of English-Only Education." *The Atlantic*, 02 November 2015, www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/11/the-costs-of-english-only-education/413494/.
- Crawford, James. "Bilingual Education Traces Its U.S. Roots to the Colonial Era." *EducationWeek*, 01 April 1987, www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/bilingual-education-traces-its-u-s-roots-to-the-colonial-era/1987/04.
- Hieu, Joseph. "A Study of Parental Interviews on Bilingual Programs for Vietnamese Students." *Loyola University Chicago*, 1997, https://ecommons.luc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5285&context=luc_theses.
- Kopel, David. "Meyer v. Nebraska: As told by the lawyer who won it." *The Washington Post*, 04 February 2016, washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2016/02/04/meyer-v-nebraska-as-told-by-the-lawyer-who-won-it/.
- Mitchell, Corey. "'English-Only' Laws in Education on Verge of Extinction." *EducationWeek*, 23 October 2019, www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/english-only-laws-in-education-on-verge-of-extinction/2019/10.