

The Six Nation Education Research Project
The United States: A Country Report

Language Education of
Language Minority Students
in the United States

Nancy H. Hornberger, Leslie Harsch, and Bruce Evans
(assisted by Melisa Cahnmann)

University of Pennsylvania

Introduction

The United States has at least three historically established patterns of language use: English monolingualism, multilingualism, and bilingualism (Haugen, 1978; Kloss, 1977; McKay, 1997; Spener, 1994). The U.S. could perhaps be best described as "a multilingual nation in which English is the dominant language" (Wiley, 1996, p. 12).

English monolingualism is well established. As reported in the 1990 Census of Population, 86 percent of the total population spoke English at home, and it can be assumed that an even greater number spoke English at school or work. Despite the lack of national language policy, English is the usual language of the public domain and is associated with political power, social status, and economic and educational advantages. Nearly all non-English speaking language groups in the U.S. undergo Anglicization at varying rates (Veltman, 1983).¹

English has never been the exclusive language of the United States.² The 14 percent of the total population that did not speak English at home

¹ According to Veltman (1983), non-English speaking immigrants will switch to English monolingualism or English bilingualism over one or two generations, sometimes slightly longer in the case of Spanish speakers. Speakers of Navajo, the largest Native American language group, are an important exception. It should be noted that English has been significantly influenced by language contact with non-English speaking groups, as studies of regional and social variation of American English reveal (Labov, 1966; Rickford, 1996; Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998).

² One popular nativist belief is that one has to give up non-English languages and other aspects of ethnic identity to become truly American. Alternating waves of nativism and toleration characterize U.S. public life; by most accounts, we are currently in a nativist phase (McKay, 1997).

in 1990 used a diverse number of languages—380 were identified. Diversity has characterized the U.S. since colonial times: Five hundred languages were spoken by the indigenous peoples encountered by colonizers (who themselves spoke Spanish, French, German, Russian, Swedish, and Dutch), and today, approximately 200 North American Indian language traditions remain.³ During the 19th century, successive waves of immigration supplied a constant minority language presence, though shifting in national origin. From 1820-1880, 10 million English and non-English speakers from northern Europe entered, and from 1880-1920, in the so-called "Great Wave," another 23 million predominantly non-English speakers from southern Europe entered (*The American Almanac*, 1993, p. 10). In the 1970's, immigration from Europe began to decrease while immigration from Asia, Latin American and Caribbean countries increased.

The U.S. environment promotes English and to a varying extent tolerates linguistic diversity. Public opinion generally favors the rapid acquisition of English by non-English language groups, because multilingualism is perceived by some "as a dangerous threat to national unity" (Conklin & Lourie, 1983, p. 157) or because English proficiency is seen by others as the key to economic well being and social integration. The U.S. context also tolerates a sidestream tradition of non-English language maintenance as an aspect of ethnic identity, sustained by ethnic community schools, ethnic periodicals, TV and radio, and religious institutions (Fishman, Nahirny, Hoffman, & Hayden, 1966/1978; Fishman, Gertner, Lowy, & Milán, 1985; Kloss, 1977). For example, Spanish-English bilingualism is an important aspect of U.S. linguistic diversity (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Zentella, 1997).⁴ From a historical perspective, the U.S. has passed through periods of tolerance and intolerance of language minorities (Crawford, 1991).

The purposes of this Phase One report are to survey U.S. linguistic diversity and language policy as they provide some of the important contexts and conditions of language education for language minority students (Part 1), and to examine the policy and processes of bilingual and English as a second language programs (Part 2), leading to a set of research questions. The research questions are framed within the context of the Six Nation Education Research Project (SNERP).⁵ We will not be discussing dialectal varieties of English or foreign language instruction to native speakers of English.

³ See Leap (1981, 1993) on indigenous American Indian and Alaska Native languages; see Fishman, Nahirny, Hoffman & Hayden (1966/1978); Ferguson & Heath (1981); Conklin & Lourie (1983); Molesky (1988) on colonial and immigrant languages.

⁴ For an overview of ethnographic work on U.S. multilingual communities, see McKay (1997, pp. 255-56).

⁵ SNERP was initiated at the Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania, in 1993, and has the overall goal of examining the relationship of educational investment and economic growth through cross-national comparison.

SIX NATIONS REPORT

A note on terminology: The following acronyms are used in the literature to refer to U.S. residents who are speakers of languages other than English: HSNEL (home speaker of non-English languages), LEP (limited English proficient), LM (language minority), speaker of LOTE (languages other than English), and ELL (English language learner). Each has a somewhat distinct context, scope and political nuance. *HSNEL* refers to people who responded "yes" to the census language question, "Does this person speak a language other than English at home?" *LEP* is a legal term intended to define the population in potential need of language education services: An LEP individual is someone who "was not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English and comes from an environment where a language other than English is dominant" (see Appendix B for the full definition). The LEP population is generally seen as a subset of *HSNEL*, although language minority advocates point out that limited English proficient people who speak only English at home are not included in the *HSNEL* count. *LEP* and *HSNEL* are terms most often used in government documents and research. In our tables based on census data and in citing specific data from documents that use these terms, we also use them because we consider this to be the most accurate way to refer to the data collected. In discussing English as a Second Language (ESL) and bilingual education, we often refer to *language minority* students. This expression is also frequently used in legislation and research to discuss the language characteristics of those from households where at least one other person speaks a language other than English. *Language minority* is appropriate as a general category because many instructional programs encompass all language minority students, not just those identified as LEP.

An increasing number of language researchers have turned away from using *HSNEL*, *LEP*, and *language minority*, considering them to be harmful because of the implied focus on language deficit. Some substitute *speakers of LOTE* for *HSNEL*, for example, emphasizing the positive value of speaking other languages, rather than grouping speakers into a category according to what they are not. In discussing census figures in Part 1, we use the term *home speakers of languages other than English* interchangeably with *home speakers of non-English languages* to refer to exactly the same population group. Another acronym, *ELL*, is used by researchers to substitute for *LEP* and *language minority*, emphasizing the positive goal of learning rather than a perceived deficiency on the part of the learner. According to LaCelle-Peterson and Rivera,

"English Language Learners" (ELLs) refers to students whose first language is not English, and encompasses both students who are just beginning to learn English (often referred to as "limited English proficient" or "LEP") and those who have already developed considerable proficiency. The term underscores the fact that, in addition to

meeting all academic challenges that face their monolingual peers, these students are mastering another language something too few monolingual English speakers are currently asked to do in U.S. schools. (1994, p. 55n)

In our discussion of bilingual and ESL language education process, we use *ELL* as the term that best reflects the students' perspective on special language education classrooms.⁶

⁶ For more detailed information on these terms and other language-related terms, see "Definition of Subject Characteristics" in Bureau of the Census (1992, pp. B-23-B-25); August & Hakuta, 1997, p. 1n; Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, Title VII, Part E, Sec. 7501 (see Appendix B); National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education (1996); *Numbers and Needs*, March 1993 (Vol. 3, no. 2). *LOTE* is used in García & Fishman (1997).