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, and Spanish.

Immigrants want to be able to use public services. Interpreters and information written 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. In many states, people can take the driver’s test in their home language. But some people want to establish English as the official language of the U.S. 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 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 make us more cohesive as a nation?

Questions for Classroom Discussion:
- Have you seen other languages used in official government signs or papers? Where have you seen these?
- Would establishing English as our official language cause any hardship?
- Where do you think xenophobia comes from? Why do you think people react that way?
- What are some things that can make a country more cohesive?
- If we constrained the use of other languages, do you think immigrants would learn English faster?
USE THE FOCUS WORDS

**specify** *(verb)* to clearly define

- **Sample Sentence:** Right now, the U.S. does not specify which languages can be used by the government.
- **Turn and Talk:** How many days in advance should teachers specify the date of an upcoming test?

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

- **Sample Sentence:** Some people want to establish English as our official language.
- **Turn and Talk:** Think of your favorite actor or actress. What film established him or her as your favorite?

**cohesive** *(adjective)* unified

- **Sample Sentence:** If English is the only official language, some argue that the country will be more cohesive.
- **Turn and Talk:** Why are some classrooms more cohesive than others?

**constrain** *(verb)* to hold back or limit

- **Sample Sentence:** Many people think that making English the official language of the U.S. would constrain the everyday use of other languages.
- **Turn and Talk:** Why do you think some middle school students feel constrained by their parents?

**xenophobia** *(noun)* a fear of foreign people

- **Sample Sentence:** During times of war, xenophobia is extremely common.
- **Turn and Talk:** What are some examples of xenophobia that you have seen on TV?
DO THE MATH

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 spoke 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. In 2000, what was the probability that a randomly selected American spoke Chinese or French at home?

About 1.4%

**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?
Ms. Kahn and her students are discussing the fact that the United States does not specify 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. It feels like xenophobia to exclude them.”

“But that is another reason to establish English as the official language. Anyone living in this country should be able to talk to others in the language that everyone else speaks. That would make us a more cohesive nation,” 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 them.”

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

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

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

19.7%

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

75.6%

If English were made the official language of the United States, should Spanish be considered as a second official language? Decide whether the data above would support your opinion.
DEBATE THE ISSUE

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

A  □ English should be the official language of the United States.

OR

B  □ The United States should not have an official language.

OR

CREATE YOUR OWN  □ __________________________
□ __________________________
□ __________________________
□ __________________________
□ __________________________

Jot down a few notes on how to support your position during a discussion or debate.

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Be a strong participant by using phrases like these:

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

“...I believe that...”

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

“I agree with you, but...”
TAKE A STAND

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

specify | establish | cohesive | constrain | xenophobia

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