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CCCC Position Statement

A statement on an education issue approved by the CCCC Executive Committee

CCCC Guideline on the National Language Policy

*Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), March 1988,
Updated 1992, Revised March 2015*

Background

The National Language Policy is a response to efforts to make English the “official” language of the United States. This policy recognizes the historical reality that, even though English has become the language of wider communication, we are a multilingual society. All people in a democratic society have the right to education, to employment, to social services, and to equal protection under the law. No one should be denied these or any civil rights because of linguistic differences. This policy enables everyone to participate in the life of this multicultural nation by ensuring continued respect both for English, our common language, and for the many other languages that contribute to our rich cultural heritage.

CCCC National Language Policy

Be it resolved that CCCC members promote the National Language Policy adopted at the Executive Committee meeting on March 16, 1988. This policy has three inseparable parts:

1. To provide resources to enable native and nonnative speakers to achieve oral and literate competence in English, the language of wider communication.
2. To support programs that assert the legitimacy of native languages and dialects and ensure that proficiency in one’s mother tongue will not be lost.
3. To foster the teaching of languages other than English so that native speakers of English can rediscover the language of their heritage or learn a second language.

Passed unanimously by both the Executive Committee and the membership at the CCCC Annual Meeting in March 1988, the National Language Policy is now the official policy of the CCCC.

Why Do We Need a National Language Policy?

Debates about declaring English the official language of the United States are centuries old. Those who established this nation opposed attempts to designate an official language in order to accommodate diverse colonizers and to maintain their declaration of freedom. However, in the nineteenth century, the government established off-reservation “boarding schools” for Native American children, forcibly removing them from their families and communities, and routinely inflicting severe abuse on Native children for speaking their languages. The explicit mission of the boarding schools was to eradicate Native cultures through forced assimilation. As a result of this U.S. educational policy, Native American languages in the United States are endangered; many are dormant.

Efforts to make English the official language surface during economic downturns or when the threat of war and/or increased immigration triggers widespread fears. During the World War I era, Nebraska passed an “English-Only” law at the height of European immigration. The most recent attempts surfaced in response to the influx of Asian and Latin American immigrants in the late twentieth century. In 1981, the late Senator S.I. Hayakawa sponsored a Constitutional amendment to make English the official language of the United States, which did not pass. In 1983, he founded “U.S. English” to promote national and statewide efforts. (Some accounts also cite John Tanton as a co-founder and driving force in that movement, which was a spinoff from the Federation for American Immigration Reform, also founded by him.) The latest federal proposal, which has been re-introduced in several sessions of Congress, is the English Language Unity Act (H.R. 997). In declaring English the official language of the U.S., this bill would remove the requirement for federal agencies to operate in languages other than English. H.R. 997 is currently before the House Judiciary Committee.

As of January 2015, twenty-eight states have declared English their sole official language. These laws declare that official government business must be conducted only in the English language; some include other restrictions, e.g., against bilingual education. Many Americans mistakenly believe that these laws give citizens the right to insist on “English-Only” everywhere. There has been an increase in the number of court cases in which parents who are not raising their child(ren) in English are threatened with loss of custody; in the re-assignment of teachers who speak accented English; and in the firing of workers who speak a language other than English on the job—including those who were hired to speak Spanish to customers and then ironically fired for speaking Spanish to each other.

Furthermore, throughout the U.S., the belief that “real” Americans speak only English has contributed to increased violence against speakers of other languages. More than 1,000 hate groups now exist in the U.S.; in 2010, the FBI reported that 67 percent of the victims of reported hate crimes were targeted because they were Latinas and Latinos.

In contrast, several states have taken stands against English language protectionism. In 1989, New Mexico, Washington, and Oregon passed “English-Plus” laws that protect the use of languages other than English and encourage the study of foreign languages. In Hawai‘i and Alaska, Native languages are co-official with English, and French has special status in Louisiana. Indigenous languages under United States occupation have a particular legal status at the federal level, in part because federally-recognized Native nations have a nation-to-nation legal relationship with the United States government. In addition, in 1990 the Native American Languages Act was signed. It includes Native Hawaiians as well as other Indigenous people of the Pacific under U.S. control.

Many civic, religious and professional organizations also have passed resolutions and issued statements opposing the English-Only movement. These include the American Civil Liberties Union, Linguistic Society of America, National Education Association, Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Modern Language Association, National Council for Black Studies, American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages, Center for Applied Linguistics, American Anthropological Association and American Psychological Association.

While the CCCC National Language Policy supports English as the language of wider communication, it protects the civil rights of speakers of all languages and language varieties, in the hope of contributing to greater linguistic, ethnic, and racial respect and justice in our multiethnic multicultural society.

What’s Wrong with English Only?

- **It’s unnecessary.**

English, the global *lingua franca* and the language of wider communication in this country, is not threatened. For two centuries, most immigrants learned English within a generation without any laws compelling them. Current immigrants are doing the same. The 2013 American Community Survey, a national survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau every year, found that 79% of the U.S. population speaks only English at home. And the majority of the 21% that speak a language other than English at home also speak English “well” or “very well.”

- **It's dangerous and unfair.**

When we pass laws that forbid health and safety information, street signs, court trials, and marriage ceremonies in languages people can understand, we deny them legal protection and social services. Further, it can deny individuals employment opportunities. U.S. workers should not be denied employment if they speak languages other than English on the job while competently performing their job duties, especially considering that approximately 61 million people in the U.S. speak a language other than English in the home.

- **It's ineffective.**

Laws making English the official language do nothing to increase the number of English classes, nor do they teach a single person English. Instead of promoting English-Only policies, Congress needs to focus on expanding adult literacy and English as a Second Language classes nationwide, since millions of non-English speakers are eager to learn English.

- **It's educationally unsound.**

English-Only opposes bilingual and similar programs that help students build on their linguistic skills. When students cannot use their strengths, they experience alienation and failure. Prohibiting or discouraging linguistic diversity limits rather than expands learning opportunities.

- **It's counterproductive.**

As members of the global community, we need more, not fewer speakers of different languages. It's shortsighted, anti-immigrant, and racist to demean and destroy the competencies of multilingual people.

- **It's oppressive and dehumanizing.**

English-Only policies both reflect and promote language prejudice. This dehumanizes people and creates a hostile climate that can, in turn, promote further violence. In a recent example, police in Alabama accosted a non-English-speaking grandfather visiting from India, scoffing at his inability to speak English and manhandling him, causing the man to become partially paralyzed and involving the FBI and Embassy of India.

- **It's unconstitutional.**

The First Amendment guarantees freedom of speech. The Fourteenth Amendment forbids abridging the privileges and immunities of naturalized citizens. English-Only policies violate these Constitutional rights, especially when the public mistakenly believes that an official English law requires that English be spoken at all times. When Filipino hospital employees are told that they cannot speak Tagalog in the lounge, or when a college employee is told he must not speak Spanish during his lunch break, they are denied freedom of speech.

Support the National Language Policy: What You Can Do

- Strive to include all citizens of all language communities in the positive development of our daily activities.
- Teach children and others—in schools, communities, and workplaces—that language differences are opportunities to learn and benefit from each other in a global society.
- Advocate education, social services, legal services, medical services, and protective signing for linguistic minorities in their own languages so that basic human rights are preserved.
- Emphasize the importance of all Americans learning second and third languages so that we can participate more effectively in worldwide activities, unify diverse U.S. communities, and enlarge our view of what is human.
- Recognize that people learning English need time and encouragement to learn, and that their ability to prosper over the long term requires facility in the dominant American language.

- Encourage immigrants to retain their first languages, to pass them on to their children, and to celebrate the life-supporting customs of their parents in the company of other Americans of differing backgrounds.
- Remain vigilant and united to protect the civil rights of all language minorities in the United States.

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