

On the Fence/Sobre el Muro: Attitudes toward English Language Legislation

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The official status of English in the United States has been debated for over a century. In the mid-1800s there were laws restricting language rights, mostly as a response to the large number of Chinese working in the West. In the late 19th/early 20th century, the arrival of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe induced an Americanization campaign. Many Americans believed that these new arrivals were different from the earlier northern European immigrants, who had assimilated easily (Crawford, 1990). During World War I, anti-German sentiment resulted in attempts to prohibit the German language from being taught in schools and even being spoken in public or on the telephone (Crawford, 1990; Schiffman, 1996). By the 1920s, the Americanization movement had resulted in restrictive immigration and language laws, including the passage of legislation in 15 states making English the sole language of instruction in schools (Citrin, Reingold, & Green, 1990). In more recent years, the movement to establish English as the official language of the U.S. government has failed. However, special interest groups promoting English language legislation (ELL), such as U.S. English and English First, have had more success at the state level.

In this paper, we detail a study conducted in Corpus Christi, Texas, which investigated predictors of attitudes towards ELL. This study closely replicates an earlier study by Schatz, Sullivan, Flanigan, and Black (2002), which examined the intersection of ELL position (support or opposition) and possible predictor variables (ethnicity, age, language background, political ideology, national attachment, and concern about the use of Spanish in the U.S.). To help situate our current study, we first provide some background on the ELL debate.

1 The Language Debate

The move to make English the official language of the U.S. government has been opposed by a number of organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Linguistics Society of America (LSA), National Council of Teachers of English

(NCTE), National Educational Association (NEA), the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), and Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Among their most prominent concerns is that organizations such as U.S. English are motivated less by political idealism and more by emotional, racist agendas (Baron, 2005).

One of the most vocal and active proponents of ELL is U.S. English. It has lobbied for the passage of federal legislation to make English the official language since 1983. According to U.S. English, the diversity of languages spoken by American citizens makes it crucial to have one language as a means of national communication. The organization argues that enforcing English as a common language will promote unity, cut costs and dependence on multiple-language documents, stop language-stratification leading to a welfare state, and provide better communication among all citizens (U.S. English, 2008). Its efforts to pass English language legislation are often seen as divisive and disenfranchising rather than unifying and inclusive (see Crawford, 2008, for discussion of ELL and related topics).

1.1 ELL Efforts at the National Level

On May 12, 2009, U.S. Senator Inhofe from Oklahoma introduced the National Language Act of 2009 and the English Language Unity Act of 2009. The National Language Act would declare English as the United States government's official language, and the English Language Unity Act would extend the law to enforce the use of English at all official functions and testing for naturalization (Congressional Desk, 2009). Tom Price (R-GA) has introduced H.R. 1588, the Common Sense English Act (English First, 2009), which would open the door to discrimination against anyone who speaks another language in the work place. Despite multiple attempts to pass legislation at the national level, to date no bill has been passed into federal law. At the state level, proponents of ELL have been more successful.

1.2 ELL Efforts at the State Level

As of 2009, 30 states have official English legislation (English First, 2009). Texas, a border state with a large Mexican American population, has no official language, although a July 2008 Zogby International Poll reports that 78% of Texas residents support English legislation and only 20% of Texan oppose it (U.S. English, 2008). During the 2007 legislative session in Texas, Representative Bill Zedler authored and introduced House Joint Resolution 83 and House Bill 2205, both of which sought to designate English as the official language of Texas. Though the bills were not passed before the expiration of the 2007 session, advocates suggest that they will reintroduce the legislation in 2009 (U.S. English, 2008).

1.3 ELL Efforts at the Local Level

Local municipalities have implemented language laws along with other restrictions to rid themselves of what they view as immigrant undesirables (Romero, 2008). A case in point is Farmers Branch, Texas, which came into the spotlight for voting to prevent illegal immigrants the right to rent apartments in 2007 (Sandoval, 2008). The Farmers Branch Ordinance was largely modeled on one passed in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, the first city to implement a rental ban on illegal immigrants (Sandoval, 2007). The rental ban came soon

after Farmers Branch declared English as the official language of the city (Sandoval, 2006). A similar resolution was passed in Oak Point, Texas in 2007 (Jones, 2007).

Many towns have passed English language resolutions rather than implement new laws or make changes to charters to avoid court challenges. However, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) Foundation of Texas have challenged and blocked the implementation of language restrictions through court orders. While Oak Point has “revisited” their immigration laws, Farmers Branch has spent \$1.6 million to fight for their right to restrict immigration and language (Wolinsky, 2009). This exemplifies how exclusionary ordinances and language restrictions reflect anti-immigrant stances, particularly if those immigrants are from Mexico.

2 Two Earlier Studies on Attitudes toward ELL

Much research has been conducted over the past decade that has examined ELL ideologies. However, for this paper, we will focus on two studies conducted by Sullivan and Schatz (see, Schatz, Sullivan, Flanigan, and Black, 2002, for a review of previous research). Sullivan and Schatz (1999) and Schatz et al. (2002) examined ELL positions as well as rationales for those positions. Conducted at a South Texas university, Sullivan and Schatz’s study (1999) analyzed respondents’ reasons for supporting or opposing a law making English the official language of the U.S. government. The researchers categorized the responses to establish pro- and anti-ELL categories (see Appendix). They further sought to determine differences in ELL attitudes based on European American and Hispanic ethnicity.

The Schatz et al. study (2002) investigated two possible predictors of ELL attitudes not found in the Sullivan and Schatz (1999) study. It examined the relationship between ELL attitudes and national attachment (e.g., “How important is it to you that the United States flag be treated with honor and respect?”) and political ideology. The 2002 study also examined the relationship of location and ELL attitudes. The study was conducted in three different geographical locations—South Texas, Colorado, and Ohio—to determine whether the presence of immigrants and Hispanics would increase pro-ELL attitudes, as a backlash against Hispanics.

The results of Schatz et al. (2002) replicated findings of the Sullivan and Schatz (1999) study, i.e., that European American, monolingual, and conservative respondents were more likely to support ELL. Further, the study’s findings supported the backlash hypothesis, i.e., areas with a higher percent of Hispanics had higher support of ELL, a finding relevant to our present study because of the reemergence of national ELL agendas in relationship to immigration reform policies and border initiatives. The national attachment items from the 2002 study will be discussed below in relation to the present study.

3 Overview of Present Research

Our study was conducted in Corpus Christi, Texas (pop. approximately 282,000), a South Texas city on the gulf coast, approximately two hours north of the Mexico border. The population includes roughly 58% Hispanics and 42% “not Hispanic or Latino.” We sought two main goals in the study: (a) to test whether the relationship between position

on ELL and demographic variables (ethnicity, language background, age, sex, and political ideology) and national attachment replicates Schatz et al. (2002); and (b) to investigate the intersection of attitudes toward bilingual education and the Mexico/U.S. border fence with ELL position.

The study replicated the Schatz et al. (2002) questionnaire for purposes of comparison, with the addition of two new items that investigated support for bilingual education and support for the building of a Mexico/U.S. fence. Based upon previous research findings, we predicted pro-ELL attitudes to be linked to European American ethnicity, monolingual English language background, and political conservatism. Because of the restrictions of language rights as evidenced in the number of states with (or pending) ELL legislation, we expected support for bilingual education to be related to anti-ELL position. We felt that the inclusion of this item would provide another indicator of language attitudes, and we predicted resistance to a bilingual nation by pro-ELL respondents. Because of the security concerns initiated by the events of 9/11 and the crisis rhetoric surrounding threat of terrorism, we hypothesized that we would find stronger pro-ELL attitudes now than found in 1999, and that those pro-ELL respondents would support the building of a border fence.

4 Method

4.1 Respondents

Three hundred and sixty-three students at Texas A & M University-Corpus Christi, a Hispanic-serving institution in South Texas, completed a survey during a regular class period. One hundred and fifty-five (42.7%) identified themselves as European American (EA), 139 (38.3%) as Hispanic, 12 (3.3%) as African American, 10 (2.8%) as Asian American, 3 (0.8%) as Native American, and 44 (12.1%) either identified as “Other” or did not complete the survey. Only the surveys of EA and Hispanic respondents were examined in this study ($n = 294$). One hundred and forty respondents were male (47.6%) and 152 female (51.7%) (two did not respond). One hundred and ninety-five (66.3%) respondents claimed a monolingual English language background, 89 (30.3%) a bilingual English-Spanish background, and 10 (3.4%) “Other” (generally, some level of proficiency in a language besides Spanish). The mean age was 20.14 years old.

4.2 Materials & Procedure

The survey, entitled “Language Legislation Survey,” was modeled after the Schatz et al. (2002) survey (with the addition of 2 items discussed above). The administrator of the questionnaire was the same female who administered the questionnaire in the two earlier studies. She read a statement from the questionnaire that provided the respondents with the general purpose of the study (to measure attitudes about ELL).

First, respondents indicated whether or not they were aware of the existence of ELL. Then they indicated if they favored, opposed, or were unsure of their feelings about ELL. Respondents in support of ELL were directed to page 2 (8 pro-ELL statements based on the categories generated by Sullivan & Schatz, 1999; see Appendix); if opposed, respondents were directed to page 3 (7 anti-ELL statements by Sullivan & Schatz, 1999); and if unsure, they were asked to complete page 4 (the last page which all respondents completed).

Respondents who supported ELL evaluated the 8 statements using a 5-point scale ranging from not at all important (1) to very important (5) to judge the degree of importance they placed on each statement, e.g., “Speaking English is part of what it means to be an American,” “Immigrants are not assimilating enough and should not be able to take advantage of Americans.” Upon completion of page 2, respondents were asked to complete page 4.

Opponents of ELL rated 7 statements, using a 5-point scale to determine the level of importance they placed on each item in their decision to oppose ELL, e.g., “Bilingualism is important because it enhances knowledge and opportunities,” “Language legislation is racist and promotes discrimination against minorities.” Upon completion of page 3, respondents were asked to complete page 4.

On page 4, respondents provided demographic information, including age, sex, ethnicity/race, level of identification with racial/ethnic group, education level, language background, and political ideology. After identifying ethnicity/race, respondents then indicated how strongly they identified as a member of that group (not at all (1) to very strongly (5)). The respondents then answered four questions that investigated national attachment (“How would you characterize your feelings of patriotism toward the US”—from not at all patriotic (1) to very patriotic (5); How important is it to you that the United States flag be treated with honor and respect?”—from not at all important (1) to very important (5); “How important is it to you that American social and political systems improve people’s everyday lives?”—from not at all important (1) to very important; and “How strongly do you identify yourself as an American?”—from not at all (1) to very strongly (5)). They were then asked about their concern over the use of Spanish in the U.S.—not at all concerned (1) to very concerned (5); their strength of support for bilingual education—not strongly at all (1) to very strongly (5); and, their strength of support for the building a fence on the border of Mexico and the United States—not strongly at all (1) to very strongly (5).

5 Results

5.1 Demographic Variables as Predictors of Position on English Language Legislation

Seventy percent of the respondents claimed not to be aware of ELL; however Chi-square analyses indicated that awareness was unrelated to ELL support. Chi-square and Analysis of Variance procedures were used to examine differences in respondents’ positions on ELL as a function of the individual demographic/background variables included in the study. As we predicted, European Americans were more likely to favor ELL (64.5% favor, 16.8% oppose, 18.7% unsure) than were Hispanics (34.5% favor, 32.4% oppose, 33.1% unsure), $X^2(df = 2) = p < .000$, and monolingual respondents were more likely to favor ELL (55.9% support, 16.9% oppose, 27.2% unsure) than were bilingual respondents (39.4% support, 38.4% oppose, 22.2% unsure), $X^2(df = 2) = p < .000$. Those in favor of the legislation were also more conservative ($M = 3.16$, on a 5-point scale from very liberal (1) to very conservative (5)) than were those opposed ($M = 2.60$) or unsure ($M = 2.91$), $F(2, 290) = 6.4, p = .002$. Respondents’ sex, age, and level of education were unrelated to ELL support.

5.2 Ethnic Identification as Predictors of Position on English Language Legislation

We expected the strength of ethnic identification to be positively related to ELL support for European Americans but negatively related to ELL support for Hispanics. In order to test this prediction, bivariate correlations between degree of ethnic identification and ELL attitudes were computed separately for European American and Hispanic samples. As expected, strength of ethnic identification was positively correlated with support for ELL among European Americans ($r = .44, p < .001$) but negatively correlated with support for ELL among Hispanics ($r = -.22, p < .01$). Thus, the more strongly European American respondents identified with their ethnic background, the stronger their support for ELL; whereas the more strongly Hispanic respondents identified with their ethnic background, the stronger their opposition to ELL.

5.3 National Attachment as Predictors of Position on English Language Legislation

We computed bivariate correlations between scores on the four national attachment items and ELL position (where 1 = oppose, 2 = unsure, and 3 = favor). As expected, ELL support was positively correlated with strength of American identification (AmID) ($r = .17, p < .01$), feelings of U. S. patriotism (PAT) ($r = .26, p = .000$), and attachment to the flag (FLAG) ($r = .25, p = .000$). We found no correlation between the belief in the need for the American social and political systems (SYS) to improve lives and ELL position.

5.4 Concern about Spanish use as Predictor of Position on English Language Legislation

Respondents were asked to indicate how concerned they were about Spanish being used in the U.S. instead of English. We found a positive correlation between support for ELL and concern about the use of Spanish (CONCERN) ($r = .51, p = .000$).

5.5 Bilingual Education as Predictor of Position on English Language Legislation

Our first new item tested the relationship between the support for making U.S. children bilingual (BI-L) and ELL through bivariate correlations and found a negative correlation between the support of bilingual education and support of ELL ($r = -.234, p = .000$), i.e., the stronger the support for bilingual education, the weaker the support for ELL.

5.6 Building a Mexico/U.S. Fence as Predictor of Position on English Language Legislation

The second question we added to the original survey asked the respondents' strength of support for building a fence along the Mexico/U.S. border (FENCE). Bivariate correlations show a positive correlation between the support of building a fence and the support of ELL ($r = .4, p = .000$).

5.7 Regression Analysis

To test for the unique contribution of each predictor to ELL position, ethnicity (Hispanic, European American), language background (English monolingual, Spanish-English bilingual), political ideology, AmID, PAT, FLAG, SYS, CONCERN, BI-L, and FENCE were entered into a logistic regression (coded 1=FOR, 2=AGAINST ELL). We

found that CONCERN ($p=.000$) and FENCE ($p=.01$) predicted support of ELL, i.e., they emerged as the 2 significant predictors of ELL position.

5.8 Analysis of Reasons for Position on ELL

We provide below a brief review of our findings on the reasons for support of and opposition to ELL, which are based on the strength of importance that respondents gave each statement. (See categories in Appendix from which statements are derived).

For the pro-ELL reasons, rankings of categories by Hispanics and European Americans are similar except for *Majority Language* (EA—ranked 2nd, Hispanic—ranked 5th) and *International Language* (EA—5th, Hispanic—2nd), which reversed positions in terms of mean importance ratings. The following provides the ranking of the reasons for ELL support by Hispanics, from the most important to the least important: 1) Communication, 2) *International language*, 3) When in Rome, 4) National Unity, 5) *Majority Language*, 6) America=English, 7) Hostility to Foreign Influences, 8) Expense/Logistics. The following provides the ranking of the reasons for ELL support by European Americans: 1) Communication, 2) *Majority Language*, 3) When in Rome, 4) National Unity, 5) *International Language*, 6) America=English, 7) Hostility to Foreign Influences, 8) Expense/Logistics

For the anti-ELL category reasons, there are no significant differences between Hispanics' and EAs' rankings of importance for their reasons to oppose ELL. The following shows the ranking of anti-ELL reasons: 1) Bilingualism is Important, 2) Freedom/Rights, 3) Cultural Preservation, 4) Disadvantage/Difficulty, 5) Melting Pot/Diversity, 6) Prejudice/Discrimination, and 7) Unnecessary/Ineffective.

6 Discussion

We found the differences in ELL positions between our study and the 1999 study by Sullivan & Schatz (1999) intriguing. The 1999 study indicates that only 16% of Hispanics supported ELL, whereas the current study shows that 34.5% of Hispanics now support ELL. Support by EAs has increased only slightly, from 62% (1999) to 65% (2008). Perhaps we should not be so surprised by the increased numbers of Hispanics with pro-ELL attitudes. As discussed above, past concerns over immigration often have resulted in language restrictions (e.g., forbidding the use of German in public during WWI in parts of the country; language restrictions in Farmers Branch, Texas in 2009). Today the call for language restrictions has been repackaged in the nation's response to 9/11 and the perceived threat of terrorism. The constant rhetoric concerning the need to protect our country from foreigners appears to be effective.

Consistent with the 1999 and 2002 studies, we found that Hispanic ethnicity, a bilingual language background, and political liberalism were linked to opposition to ELL. However, a logistic regression shows that two items, CONCERN and FENCE, independently predict ELL position. Supporters of ELL often claim that their intentions are pro-immigrant, even though U.S. English has been tied to immigrant restriction in the past. The concern of ELL supporters over the use of Spanish and their support of the building of a border fence between Mexico and the United States indicates a negative disposition toward our southern neighbor, and possibly a concomitant dislike of

Americans who are of Mexican heritage and who speak Spanish. Language attitudes and exclusionary practices appear to reflect anti-Hispanic stances.

Also of interest are the responses of Hispanics who support ELL. We decided to examine their responses more closely on the two new items that we added to the questionnaire—support for bilingual education and support for the building of a fence—both issues that should resonate with south Texas Hispanics. Within this group of *pro*-ELL respondents, there was a significant difference ($p=.001$) between *pro*-ELL Hispanics' support of making American children bilingual ($M = 4.25$ [on a 5-point scale with 1 = not strongly at all and 5 = very strongly]) and *pro*-ELL EAs' support ($M = 3.57$). While not as strong in their support of bilingual education as Hispanics who oppose ELL ($M = 4.33$), we see some support of bilingualism. Within the group who oppose ELL, we found no significant difference in the strength of support of bilingual education based on ethnicity.

Pro-ELL Hispanics' responses to the support for the building of a border fence show that they again differed significantly from those of the EAs who support ELL. EAs ($M = 3.30$, on a 5-point scale) show stronger support for the fence than Hispanics ($M = 2.40$) who support ELL. So, while these *pro*-ELL Hispanics are more likely to support a border fence than respondents who oppose ELL, they do not do so at the same level as the EA *pro*-ELL respondents. For the respondents who oppose ELL, we found no significant difference in the support of the fence based on ethnicity ($M = 1.93$).

One of the interesting findings of the rankings of *pro*-ELL categories is that Hispanics appear to have a more global perspective of English as shown by *International Language* being ranked the second highest reason for their support of ELL, compared with the EAs' focus on the local, i.e. the ranking of *Majority Language* as second most important reason for supporting ELL (*Communication* was first for both groups).

This research supports Hernandez-Chavez's (1994) claim that ELL is a linguistic backlash that "is not tied exclusively, or even mainly, to language rights themselves. Rather it is linked to a much wider and varied set of domestic and international conditions that have created resentment and fear..." (p. 231). Concern for human rights and its relationship to linguistic rights (as evidenced by ELL position) appears to be extremely complex and worthy of further investigation.

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Appendix

Pro-ELL and anti-ELL categories and their descriptions (Sullivan & Schatz, 1999)

Pro ELL

Communication: English will allow people to communicate better.

Majority Language: English is the language spoken in the US.

When in Rome...: You should learn the language of the country you want to live in/visit.

America=English: The English language is part of being American.

Hostility to Foreign Influences: Foreigners take advantage of Americans.

National Unity: One language helps to unify a people.

Expense/Logistics: Bilingual forms/facilities are expensive.

International Language: English is an important world language.

Anti ELL

Freedom/Rights: America has a tradition of freedom of speech.

Melting Pot/Diversity: The US is made up of people from many different cultures.

Disadvantage/Difficulty: Non-English speakers would be at a disadvantage.

Bilingualism is Important: Bilingualism should be seen as an asset.

Cultural Preservation: Language is an integral part of one's culture/heritage.

Prejudice/Discrimination: This legislation would discriminate and alienate.

Unnecessary/Ineffective: Why bother? Legislating language will not make a difference.