

你能读懂我吗?: THE KEY TO



Ashley Keller

She/Her
Sophomore
Nursing

Ever since the United States of America was founded, we have believed that we are the best country in the world and English is the best language in the world. This sentiment was shown early on when Americans brought enslaved people to the U.S. and made them change their African names and learn English—ridding them of their culture. Now, as immigrants from all over the world arrive here, the seemingly unsaid expectation of them is to speak and understand English perfectly.

This foolish entitlement stems from the theory of American exceptionalism. If Americans are all about freedom and justice for all, then why do we seem to exclude languages other than English?

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, about one in five people speak a language other than English at home. Although this phenomenon is commonplace, it is not uncommon for bilingual people to be judged and stereotyped for having an accent or not speaking English perfectly. Americans make many assumptions about the social class, intelligence and intentions of those who speak English as a second language. Largely due to stereotypes perpetuated in the media, monolingual Americans are conditioned to think in this way about bilingual people.

According to Anabel Gonzalez, an English as a Second Language (ESL) educator, a common stereotype is that all people who have English as a second language are poor or uneducated. This is not true because there are so many people from different countries that speak different languages in America with varying social classes. Many people also think that all ESL speakers are immigrants, undocumented or not “natural” citizens of the U.S. This is also not true, because many citizens learn another language as their first language if they grew up with the language at home. The stereotype that all ESL speakers are immigrants because of poverty and the need for refuge in America is offensive because many times, immigrants come to America

because of a job relocation or promotion, meaning they are educated and economically well-off already.

One of the most common and harmful assumptions about bilingual people is that they are not as intelligent as someone who speaks English fluently, according to Gonzalez. Although it may take time to improve proficiency in English, their intelligence is simply not diminished because they speak another language. In fact, learning an entirely new language is very academically challenging; criticism of ESL speakers is ironic because most monolingual English speakers are not fluent in another language, do not even try to learn a language at all or speak English imperfectly themselves.

Although there are varying reasons different ethnic groups are discriminated against based on their language, the cause is just the same. For example, many Latinos are discriminated against for not knowing English perfectly, and a lot of the discrimination comes from racist stereotypes Americans have against Latinos. Recently these stereotypes have been brought back to the spotlight during Donald Trump’s presidency, in order to defend his building of the wall to block people from coming over from Mexico. These racist sentiments have been displayed in the news very frequently, according to NBC News contributor Amanda Machado, with coverage of Latinos being kicked out of public places, threatened to have immigration and customs enforcement called on them or physically hurt for speaking Spanish in public. This is disappointing, for a country which was founded by immigrants. We, as the American people, should be utterly ashamed that those living in our country receive this kind of foul treatment for just existing here.

Additionally, American tragedies have caused racist sentiments against those who speak other languages in the United States, specifically Middle Eastern and Asian populations in America. Since 9/11, Middle Eastern citizens of the U.S. have been unfairly discriminated against and characterized as terrorists, simply for saying something in Arabic. If there was more knowledge in America about how terrorist groups form and their origins, there would not be so much speculation that every Middle Eastern person in America is a threat. It is truly sad how these people have felt forced to hide their culture, customs, religion and language

CONNECTION IS LANGUAGE

in the country they live in, just to avoid getting punished or hurt.

A quote from The Guardian writer Sinan Antoon displays this fear in reality: “On 6 April, Khairuldeen Makhzoomi... was removed, interrogated and searched by the FBI... he was forced to find another flight. Why? Because another passenger heard him speak Arabic. ‘Inshallah,’ which means ‘God willing,’ an expression used by all native speakers of Arabic irrespective of religious affiliation.” The Constitutional right to religious expression seems to waver on the basis of language.

Recently Asian Americans have been discriminated against due to the fact that the first COVID-19 cases started in Wuhan, China. Though Chinese and Chinese American people are not to blame for this virus, they have been facing punishment and persecution for, according to The New York Times, just being Asian or speaking in Mandarin, Cantonese or other dialects in the United States. These examples prove that we need to do better as a country to respect other cultures and languages, and educate ourselves before coming to conclusions.

The prevalence of foreign languages and ethnic diversity is rapidly growing in the United States, so how do we as Americans let go of our bias and privilege as native English speakers? First, we should try to learn another language. It is taught frequently in elementary, middle and high schools, but there are many problems with foreign language programs. For example, according to Catherine Snow, professor of education at Harvard University, a recent report from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences “calls for more attention to language teaching in the U.S. The report notes that U.S. students have much less access to foreign language instruction than students in other economically developed countries, and that Americans are thus much less likely to be bi- or multilingual.” This is a huge problem in America because if more Americans knew more than just English, we would be more connected to others and respectful of one another.

Language programs in schools need native speakers that are teaching these classes. A majority of current teachers are not native speakers of the language they are teaching, according to El Pais writer Pilar Álvarez, and personally I do not think it is right to be teaching another

language if you do not understand and portray its cultural aspect. I have been taking Spanish classes since I was in middle school, and the first Hispanic teacher that I have ever had was in my second year of college. Children should not have to miss the opportunity of having an authentic language learning experience, wherein a native speaker controls the narrative. Personally, I feel that if students learned more about the culture and customs around each language, they would be more passionate about learning the language and continuing their studies.

There are many reasons to learn another language. First, you are able to connect and communicate with so many more people in the world, which is a crucial part of the human experience. Next, it is a challenge for your brain to learn another language, and it is proven that your cognitive skills improve from doing so, according to the Lead With Languages campaign.

Additionally, you will be a delightful and respectful traveler. Many Americans travel to foreign countries expecting that the people there will understand English. This is a very ignorant thing to do because it perpetuates the notion that people should adhere to our customs and language, even in their own country. This happens often enough that when college students study abroad, they go to a country for a whole semester and can get away with not learning a single word of the language spoken in that country. That is truly disrespectful and ignorant, which is why learning at least a little bit of a language before you go is so important.

Finally, and most importantly, learning a second language gives you perspective. While learning the language and struggling, you can imagine how hard it would be to be in a circumstance where it is vital to learn a second language quickly in order to integrate into another culture. I feel that if more Americans learn another language there will be a better respect and understanding of what so many people have had to go through, and we will appreciate our privilege and freedoms that we have as Americans. This is our time to break down barriers and build bridges between languages and cultures.