

English-Only Policy as Language Pressure

Dwi Wulandari

Fakultas Sastra, Universitas Diponegoro

Abstrak

Kebijaksanaan untuk memakai bahasa Inggris saja di Amerika Serikat menuai banyak kontroversi. Dengan tujuan untuk menyatukan bangsa, kebijaksanaan ini diterapkan di sekolah, dengan berbagai program yang mengharuskan para imigran untuk bisa menguasai bahasa Inggris dengan cepat sehingga mereka bisa mempelajari ilmu-ilmu lainnya sebagaimana yang dipelajari oleh siswa yang berbahasa ibu bahasa Inggris. Namun pada kenyataannya, kebijaksanaan ini justru memberikan masalah bagi siswa imigran karena mereka mendapat sikap negatif dan pada akhirnya memicu konflik identitas bagi mereka dan menghilangkan warisan bahasa mereka. Kebijaksanaan ini juga menyebabkan penutur bahasa Inggris tidak sensitif bahkan meremehkan budaya lain sehingga mereka kehilangan kesempatan untuk mempelajarinya. Ada tiga hal yang menyebabkan kebijaksanaan tersebut tetap diterapkan meskipun telah menimbulkan masalah; salah pengertian terhadap bilingual education, peranan mass media yang cenderung membela kebijaksanaan ini, dan adanya keinginan dari penguasa untuk mempertahankan status kekuasaannya dengan mempertahankan status bahasa Inggris.

Keywords: : politik Bahasa Inggris, penindasan bahasa, diskriminasi, penguasa, pendidikan dwibahasa.

1. Introduction

English-only policy is a topic of debate and controversy throughout decades. For the opponents, English-only policy creates discrimination, false judgment of people's ability, and leading to subjective attitude rather than unifying the nation. This paper seeks to answer the questions of whether English-only policy has negative effects and therefore seeks whether the opponents have the reasonable argument. This paper will also view the fact that is going on at present and find the reasons for that. For that matter, the discussion of this paper will start by giving the definition of English-only policy, the reasons behind its implementation, and how the policy is implemented. The next discussion will cover the effects of English-only policy for both, non English

and English speakers. As the fact shows that English-only policy is implemented, the final discussion will cover the reason why the English-only policy is finally implemented despite the opposed bilingual education.

2. The English-Only Policy

The idea of the English-only policy is to make English the official language of the United States. The necessity for having English as an official language has been argued since the nineteenth century, when Noah Webster promoted the idea that national purpose is served by uniformity (Baron, 1990). This suggests that the US needs to have one, uniform thing for achieving national purpose. As the US has one flag, one nation, it supposes to have one language as well, as a tool for unification and a symbol of liberty and justice for all. Hence, having an official language policy is viewed as in any way will not harm the freedom in the US.

However, the idea of having one official language was not established legally and was not widely implemented as well. Language other than English such as German was still used in schools and work place prior to the World War I. By 1923, however, the government banned the use of German language in German school. At the same time, 34 states had English-only legislation, although this legislation remained unconstitutional. The legislation of English-only policy was based on Roosevelt's speech on the use of one language, the language of the Declaration of Independence (Flores and Murillo, 2001). He went further saying that "We cannot tolerate any attempt to oppose or supplant the language and culture that has come down to us from the builders of this Republic...." Whoever he meant by "we", he made a clear statement that the non English speakers were viewed as the threat for opposing the English language, and it was not only the language that was feared to influence the mainstream but also the culture carried by the language.

It is unreasonable actually to fear other languages as a threat for existing language and culture, because American is always multicultural and English has been used for more than two hundred years without having the rule of speaking it as an official language. However, the raising immigration from the Third World countries and the economic condition arouse the sentiment towards the immigrants. This is the reason for promoting modern English-only movement in 1980s. Within 1970 and 1990, Hispanic immigrant population grew by 141 percent, while the US population only grew by 20 percent (Schmid, 2000). For this reason, Spanish speakers are mostly the target of the English-only movement which emerged as an amendment in 1981 by Senator Hayakawa (Baron, 1990). The Hispanic immigrants who are likely to live in the same areas build a speaking community other than English. This is particularly the reason for fearing that the Hispanic population will not assimilate into English, and therefore will be the difficult subjects for Americanism.

According to Sinsheimer (2005), the English-only movement has two forms: the symbolic and its implication. As symbolic, English is used as the official language of the state. Its implication means that English as symbolic has an implication to enforce the English-only law. At some point, it is the enforcement of the English-only that results in the controversy of justice and equality. Because of having the implication of enforcement, there is a compelled need for everybody in the US to be able to speak English, as the ability to speak English determines the acceptance of work and the amount of the wage (Schmidt, 2002). As the consequences, there arises a need for teaching English for non English speakers so that they can acquire proficiency as quickly as possible. For this reason, the English language is imposed in public schools, and becomes part of the education topic.

3. The Effect of English-Only Policy for Non-English Speakers

The most obvious effect of the implementation of the English-only policy can be seen in schools. Schools are a lot harder than work place. Although the workers are also compelled to use English in work place, certain jobs, such as plantations or construction may require less proficiency to speak English, because they do not necessarily interact with customers. As long as they are able to understand or have somebody to interpret what the supervisor is saying, they can survive in work place. In contrast, children in schools have to struggle not only to learn the language of instruction; English, but also to learn other academic lessons. Their problem becomes higher as their ability to thrive in school, and to have academic knowledge is mostly determined by their ability to acquire English.

Because of the necessity for the second language learners to acquire English as early as they began schooling, education policy provides certain treatment that is intended to help the learners to easily acquire the language. To make the treatment easier, at least on the behalf of the policy holders, these learners are labeled with certain terms. The most widely used term is Limited English Proficiency (LEP) (in Freeman and Freeman, 2000). Some other terms are English Language Learner (ELL), Bilingual Learner, Second Language Learner, and Language other than English. Except for LEP, these terms mark learners with certain labels but do not really define their language ability or their identity. Even when the term does define their ability, the term usually has negative connotation, such as LEP, mentally retarded (in Baron, 1990), or having linguistic deviance (in Hartman, 2003).

The negative connotation suggested by these terms affects the perception of learning both from the teachers and the learners themselves. These labels generally create prejudice toward the labeled students and this may result in underestimating students' academic performance. Commins (1989) states that often times, the curriculum provides little opportunity for

teachers to get to know their students and also little time to deal with their real problems. As non English speakers, the learners' problem is not only their ability to acquire English as it can be seen in school, but also problem which involves many factors outside the language. When a learner comes to learning, he or she brings his or her personality, culture, and background life and knowledge. Many situations occur in their life outside the school that influences their academic performance. And teachers are mostly unable to acknowledge these situations. Hence, teachers make assumption about student's home life and language use and relate it with their ability in school (Commins, 1989). Finding that some problems of their students' academic achievement are connected with their less ability in English, teachers may develop negative attitude toward these students.

LEP students, or whatever the terms are, are affected by teachers' attitudes. When learners are exposed to negative attitudes they will perform accordingly. If teachers have a perception that LEP students will fail academically because of their limited English proficiency, learners will fail eventually. Flores and Murillo (2001) give an explanation for such case. They mention that when the teacher has negative attitude, either by devaluing their students' native language or underestimating their students' academic learning, they will perform the teaching in such a way that it is difficult to conceal their attitude. Though they may not deliberately say their assumption, how they teach these particular students shows how they underestimate their ability to learn. Valdes (1998) illustrates that in English as Second Language (ESL) class - additional class that is prepared for students whose native languages are not English, and it is intended to help them learn English faster - some teachers are reluctant to have interactive class for communicative purposes. Instead, even for the 6 graders, these teachers prefer "hearing silence," no group activities, and students working on their working sheet with silly exercises such as coloring pictures. If learners spend most of their time learning English in such activities, how will they be able to communicate in English?

On learners' side, additionally, teacher negative attitude shows these non English speakers that their native language is devalued in school, and this makes their self-worth plummeted (Flores and Murillo, 2001). They develop an idea that English is the best language and that their language is not as good as English, that is why they are not allowed to speak in their native language. The devaluation of their native language lead to the devaluation of their culture and identity, as language is a part of culture and a way of expressing identity. Lacking of pride of their identity, soon they loose their self-esteem. Without self-esteem, it will be difficult for these learners to build their motivation to learn.

Government intervention in providing treatment for these labeled learners is not always a best-solution program either. Although it is impossible to find the absolute right program due to the numerous complicated problems, most of the programs are implemented based on trial and error programs (Freeman and Freeman, 2000). Education policy keeps changing the program without really considering how learners progress in a particular program. Bianco (2004) notes the Bilingual Education Act was abolished with Proposition 227 with the reason that rather than transiting the discharge of children's native languages, bilingual education maintains minority children's languages. No Child Left Behind policy then is implemented to replace bilingual education. This policy is "against the use of minority languages in teaching, and involves only the temporary use of the native language for continuing their general learning while they acquire English" (Bianco, 2004: p. 18). As it is impossible to absolutely avoid the use of learners' native language, especially when the learners do not speak English at all, the transitional bilingual education is implemented. This program, however, does not aim to achieve bilingualism but to teach English more effectively. It is argued then, that in transitional program, learners spend too much time in their native language, thus an alternative program called Structured English immersion is applied to replace the transitional program. Learners in this program are intended to acquire English no longer than 12 months. What is common from all these programs is that although they seem to provide support for learners who do not speak English, the purpose and the application are directed to the acquisition of English immediately without considering the other issues that may impact the learners personally.

How learners survive academically is beyond what these programs can answer. Having English-only achievement as the goal, these programs are powerless in supporting learners in all their learning life experience. Because of the English-only goal also, learners are perceived in two unfortunate conditions. When they fail academically; it is considered as a common case because they are already labeled as limited learners. Teachers may have had negative attitude toward them hence unconsciously expecting this failure. Their inability to keep up with the core content of knowledge is judged as related to their bilingual environment and their home life (Flores and Murillo, 2001). Little responsibility has been put for school and language program's roles in mediating these learners to succeed academically.

Likewise, even when they are successful and able to enter the regular classes, -where they can join other learners whose native language is English - the teacher offers very little help (Valdes, 1998). It takes more than good grades to show the school system that these particular students are achieving what they are supposed to learn, and therefore should have the same opportunity for higher education. Their ESL certificate or the like is rarely

adequate to enter community college (Valdes, 1998; Hartman, 2003). Putting it this way, it also becomes impossible to provide them with equal opportunity in the work force. How would they compete to get the opportunity if they have already been denied to have an access to that opportunity?

Another important issue in the implementation of the English-only policy is problems with learners' self-identity. Wright (2004) reports that ELL students in his study underwent weaker native language skills, but not yet a full mastery of English either. Hence, they came up as persons in between. They were no longer able to recognize themselves within their native language, but they did not see themselves as one of those English speakers either. In addition, these students experienced difficulties at home, at work, and problems with their self-identity as a consequence of English-only policy. Wright's study finding shows that "English-only programs fail to meet the linguistic and cultural needs of the ELL students and may lead to negative consequences for students in their adult lives" (2004: p 19). Thus, the English-only policy does not only add to the difficulty of learning the new language, but also affect their self-identity even when they are not in school anymore.

In the long run, English-only policy is the reason for losing the language heritage of the immigrants. Portes (2002) mentions that it only takes three generations to have a complete transition from the native language to English. With the English-only enforcement, the process may be accelerated, because the immigrant children are forced to follow the school instructions. This means that they will try even harder to assimilate in English and neglect their native language. As language represents culture, when they lose their native language, they may lose their culture too. On the other hand, while they finally acquire the new language, they are not always able to acquire the new culture. Furthermore, learning other's culture may result in more conflict than learning the language alone. Consequently, this transition makes the learners experience problems in defining their self-identity.

The loss of their native language also creates parent-children relationship problems. Portes (2002) says that the loss of children native language decreases communication between immigrant youths and their parents, as the parents usually remain foreign monolinguals. The decrease communication leads to higher conflict and powerless parent to better guide their children. This may be one of the reasons that many immigrant children are involved in gangs or other criminal activities.

4. The Effect of English-Only Policy for English Speakers

The enforcement of English-Only policy sends a message to all children that minority languages have less value than English as tools of learning. This message "equally deprives mainstream children of the opportunity to experience the cultural diversity in this country, and robs every child of the

chance to learn the full potential of human possibilities" (Heath, 1985: p 257). Because of the less value perceived for the other languages than English, those languages are not considered as the integral part of American society. Not only children, but also adult may perceive the similar opinion about other language and culture. Knowing the fact that it is their language and culture that is highly valued and everybody else are learning their language, the English speakers are reluctant to even know other cultures. For this reason, they become less aware of the multicultural world and may develop xenophobia, the phobic fear of the strangers (Buckley and William, 2001).

Schmidt (2002) explains that official English advocates are persistent in claiming that their program of linguistic assimilation is inclusive and egalitarian, leading to the belief that it is only by able to communicate in English the prosperity of immigrants can be elevated (in Hartman, 2003). Having this belief, English speakers may develop insensitiveness toward English learners. Believing that it is the best thing to do, they will not pay attention to the difficulties that encounter the learning progress. Teachers and peers who are native English speakers may unconsciously act cruelly toward the immigrants students. The immigrant students may be treated as object of the learning rather than partner in learning, because the English speakers do not feel the need to learn anything from the immigrants.

Because of the privileges and the comfort they have enjoyed for being able to speak English as their native language, the English speakers may develop tendency for keeping the mainstream power, so that their language may never be replaced by other languages. Although probably not every English speaker has this thought, there is always a tendency for this idea. The nationalism slogans, the segregation of students are the evidence that there is always a need to keep the power.

5. Why Does the English-Only Win?

Although it is clear that the implementation of the English-only policy brings more negative effects for both non English and English speakers, the policy is implemented anyway, and taking over bilingual education. There are three reasons that I believe related to the implementation of English-only policy inspite of the effects. The first reason is the wrong impression of bilingual education. Since the beginning of bilingual education program, some arguments have been opposed. Schmid (2000) states that there is a constant belief, that throughout the history, immigrants assimilated into English even though their native languages were protected. Hence, bilingual education is considered not necessary. In addition, Baron (1990) cites that in 1920 some legislators felt that foreign language learning that was taught within normal school day would put students at a risk of confusion and academic failure. Similarly, psychologists Goodenough (in Baron, 1990) argued that the leading cause of

mental retardation was the use of a foreign language in the home. The same argument was stated by Madorah Smith in 1930 who declared that "an important factor in the retardation of speech is the attempt to make use of two languages" (in Portes, 2002: p 13). Although those studies were supported by poor evidence, the result in promoting the false belief of bilingualism is widely spread already.

It is also believed that bilingual education and the use of non English languages stimulate demographic and cultural change (Schmid, 2000). By having bilingual education, many immigrants are believed not to be able to assimilate to the English language. Their persistence to keep their language and culture will stimulate the cultural change. For this reason, there may be a demographic change too, as people may prefer to stay in the neighborhood which advocates the same language and the same culture. If this happens, people may be more segregated and it will be more difficult to unify them.

According to Fishman (1988), the English-only believers feel that the bilingual education sends the wrong message to the world that it is not necessary to learn English to live and prosper in the US. This message is feared to have an implication of increasing immigration from the Third World countries. During the economic crisis in 1930s the increase of immigrants may be related to many sentiments of rivalry and the fear of having less opportunities to get better life, if they have to share the existing opportunities with the immigrant, who are getting larger in the numbers.

Bilingual education is also feared to change attitudes toward racial and ethnic assimilation. For hundred of years, American society is considered the melting pot of various cultures which blend together. Racial and ethnic assimilation is considered as a must process for unifying the nation. With bilingual education, it is feared that some cultures will stay unassimilated but are able to enjoy similar privileges. This condition will change people's attitudes of the necessity for assimilation.

The second reason that makes English-only policy win is the role of mass media. According to Valdez (1979), media coverage on bilingual education debate has been very sparse and uneven. The most attention to the subject is mostly given by political commentators, columnist, and the like. Consequently, bilingual education is viewed mostly as a political view of dividing the nation and the wrong impression toward bilingual education is even increased and widely spread. Very little coverage is given by education researchers or education columnists. Within the education society, the research shows that the most effective way for bilingual students to develop both academic concepts and English language proficiency is through their native language (Freeman and Freeman, 2000). However, most of this research is not published, even buried by negative publicity of bilingual education. The absence of education researchers in the debate over bilingual education stigmatized the negative

situation associated with bilingual education. Therefore, mass media has created an opinion that “bilingual education has come to symbolize both the waves of immigration and the social and economic problems that communities perceive as resulting from that immigration” (Freeman and Freeman, 2000).

The third reason is the mainstream power to construct public opinion and to act upon bilingual education. Viewing themselves as having the responsibility to keep the nation unity, the mainstream power has access to protect their privileges. Barker and Giles (2004) say that language becomes a focal point for dispute when the dominant group feels the sense of insecurity because of the increased vitality of other ethnic and social group. As has been mentioned, the Hispanic population that grew 141% may threaten the vitality of the English language. Hence, the mainstream power feels the needs to keep the vitality of English language and culture. The language vitality can be controlled within three areas, namely demographic salience control, status control, and institutional control (Barker and Giles, 2004). How the mainstream power controlled language vitality can be seen in California State. Proposition 187 which attempted to stop public benefits for illegal immigrants are made to control the numbers of increasing immigrants, in other words, it refers to demographic control. Proposition 63 which introduced official English are voted to raise the status of English legally. In a way they get a status control for using English as the only language that is officially accepted. And proposition 227 which banned bilingual education is a way for controlling education institutional to maintain the power of English. It is in California State that has highest Hispanic population; one third of the population (Schmid, 2000). Therefore, the possibility of the mainstream power being threatened by other language is also higher in California State.

How the mainstream power eradicates bilingual education is sometimes based on personal judgment. Buckley and William (2001) report that the decision made by Drake University President to drop foreign language program in the University is based on his own belief that learning foreign language should not be done in the US. Instead, it should be pursued in where the language is spoken. The same case is reported by Hartman (2003), that Economist Galloway, testifying before the Senate, claiming the legislation of English-only policy by citing that higher poverty rates are among those who do not speak English. This argument lacks enough evidence, actually, because he does not measure other factors that may relate to the poverty. Nevertheless, because they have power, they have the ability to set up the rules, no matter how flaw is the facts that they argue in providing reasons for deciding the rules.

6. Conclusion

Although it has fancy purpose, the English-only policy creates many problems of injustice and unequal rights for the citizen. Education is the very first institution that reveals the pressure of language toward the English non speakers. Crawford (2000) even suggests that English-only policy is the manifestation of American paranoia. It is true that this movement is the on going debate and that different condition may influence the way people look at this matter. However, what it seems obvious at present is that English-only movement is not achieving its initial goal: i.e. to unify the nation. Instead, it creates many prejudices, and narrow minded toward bilingualism. For non English speakers, the effects are even more severe. They are not just likely to lose the change to get better life, but also to lose the life that they have already had.

References

- Barker, V. & Giles, H. (2004). English only policies Perceived Support and Social Limitation. *Language and Communication*. 24, 77- 96
- Baron, D. (1990). *The English-Only Question: An official Language for Americans?* New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bianco, J.L. (2004) Uncle Sam and Mr. Unz English Today. *English Today*. 20, 16 -22
- Buckley Jr. & William, F. (2001). Xenophobia in Iowa. *National Review*. 53, p.63
- Crawford, J. (2000). *Anatomy of the English-only Movement*. [ourworld.compuserve.com/ homepages/JWCRAWFORD/anatomy](http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/JWCRAWFORD/anatomy).
- Commins, N. (1989). Language and Affect: Bilingual Students at Home and at School. *Language Arts*. 66, 29-43
- Fishman, J.A. (1988). English-only: Its Ghosts, Myths, and Dangers. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*. 74, 125-140
- Flores, S. Y. & Murillo, E.G.Jr. (2001) Power, Language and Ideology: Historical and Contemporary Notes on the Dismantling of Bilingual Education. *The Urban Review*. 33, 183-206
- Freeman, D. & Freeman, Y. (2000). *Between Worlds: Access to Second Language Acquisition*. Portsmouth: Heinemann

- Hartman, A. (2003). Language as Oppression: The English-only Movement in the United States. *Socialism and Democracy*. 17, p. 187
- Heath, S.B. (1985). Language Policies: Patterns of Retention and Maintenance. In *Mexican-Americans in Comparative Perspective*. Conner (ed.) 257-282. Washington: Urban Institute Press.
- Portes, A. (2002). English-only Triumph, but the Costs are High. *Context*. 1, 10-15
- Schmid, C. L. (2000). *The Politics of Language: Conflict, Identity, and Cultural Pluralism in Comparative Perspective*.
- Schmidt, R. (2002). Racialization and Language Policy: the case of the USA. *Multilingua* 21, 141-161
- Shea, P. (2005) The Use of Technology for Second Language Learning and Teaching in Zhao, Y. (ed.). *Research in Technology and Second Language Learning*. Connecticut: Information Age Publishing. p. 225-245
- Sinsheimer, A. (2005). English Only and Our Struggle to Understand the Concept of Language. *Language Communication*. 25, 61 -80
- Valdes, G. (1998). The World Outside and Inside School: Language and Immigrant Children. *Educational Research*. 27, 4-28
- Valdez, A. (1979). The Role of the Mass media in the Public Debate over Bilingual Education in the United States. In *Bilingual Education and Public Policy in the United States*. Padilla (ed.) 175-202. Michigan: Eastern Michigan University Press.
- Wright, W.E. (2004). What English-only Really Means: A Study of the Implementation of California Language Policy with Cambodian American Students. *Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*. 7, 1-24