

**CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS**

**Research Findings:** Although Skutnabb-Kangas's (2000) warning that the spread of English is the cause of linguistic "genocide" of indigenous languages may be an overstatement, nevertheless it is clear that dozens of languages are vanishing every year. Other researchers (e.g., Phillipson, 1992) place some of the blame for such attrition on worldwide English language teaching.

**Teaching Implications:** Should schools, institutes, and universities refrain from teaching English so that heritage languages and cultures can be preserved? Probably not, if Ricento (1994) and others are correct. But our zeal for spreading English needs to be accompanied by concurrent efforts to value home languages and cultures. In the United States, movements such as English Plus emphasize the benefits of bilingualism and the enriching effects of cross-cultural communication and exchange. In what way has your language learning or teaching experience valued home languages and cultures?

all (Canagarajah, 1999). We can indeed break down barriers of communication with English, but we are reminded that the two-edged sword of EIL carries with it the danger of the imperialistic destruction of a global ecology of languages and cultures.

### Language Policy and the "English Only" Debate

Yet another manifestation of the sociopolitical domain of second language acquisition is found in **language policies** around the world. Questions in this field range from the language of the education of children to the adoption of "official" status for a language (or languages) in a country. The first topic, the language of education, involves the decision by some political entity (e.g., a ministry of education, a state board of education) to offer education in a designated language or languages. Such decisions inevitably require a judgment on the part of the policy-making body on which language(s) is (are) deemed to be of value for the future generation of wage earners (and voters) in that society. We can visualize the potential twists and turns of the arguments that are mounted to justify a particular language policy for education. A tremendous clash of value systems is brought to bear on the ultimate decision: linguistic diversity, cultural pluralism, ethnicity, race, power, status, politics, economics, and the list goes on. In the final analysis, "history indicates that restricting language rights can be divisive and can lead to segregationist tendencies in a society. At the same time, such legislation rarely results in a unified society speaking solely the mandated language(s)" (Thomas, 1996, p. 129).

In the United States, one of the most misunderstood issues in the last decade of the twentieth century was the widespread move to establish English as an “official” language. Noting that the United States had never declared English to be official, proponents of “**English only**” ballots across many states argued that an official English policy was needed to unify the country and end decades-long debates over bilingual education. The campaigns to pass such ballots, heavily funded by well-heeled right-wing organizations, painted a picture of the unity and harmony of people communicating in a common tongue. What those campaigns did not reveal was the covert agenda of the ultimate devaluing of minority languages and cultures. (See Crawford, 1998; Thomas, 1996; Tollefson, 1995; Auerbach, 1995, for further information.) In related legislative debates across the United States, bilingual education was singled out by the same groups as a waste of time and money. In 1998, for example, in the state of California, a well-financed campaign to severely restrict bilingual education programs managed to seduce the public by promoting myths and misunderstandings about language acquisition and multilingualism (Scovel, 1999). Once again, those who end up suffering from such moves toward “English only” are the already disenfranchised minority cultures.

## LANGUAGE, THOUGHT, AND CULTURE

No discussion about cultural variables in second language acquisition is complete without some treatment of the relationship between language and thought. We saw in the case of first language acquisition that cognitive development and linguistic development go hand in hand, each interacting with and shaping the other. It is commonly observed that the manner in which an idea or “fact” is stated affects the way we conceptualize the idea. On the other hand, many of our ideas, issues, inventions, and discoveries create the need for new words. Can we tease this interaction apart?

### Framing Our Conceptual Universe

Words shape our lives. The advertising world is a prime example of the use of language to shape, persuade, and dissuade. “Weasel words” tend to glorify very ordinary products into those that are “unsurpassed,” “ultimate,” “supercharged,” and “the right choice.” In the case of food that has been sapped of most of its nutrients by the manufacturing process, we are told that these products are now “enriched” and “fortified.” A foreigner in the United States once remarked that in the United States there are no “small” eggs, only “medium,” “large,” “extra large,” and “jumbo.”

Euphemisms abound in American culture where certain thoughts are taboo or certain words connote something less than desirable. We are persuaded by industry, for example, that “receiving waters” are the lakes or rivers into which industrial wastes are dumped and that “assimilative capacity” refers to how much of the waste can be dumped into the river before it starts to show. Garbage collectors are “sanitary