

## WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Write an essay supporting an amendment to the U.S. Constitution making English the official language.
2. Write an essay opposing an amendment to the U.S. Constitution making English the official language.
3. A national language is the language of public discourse, control, and power. Do you think that English instruction for minority children should be left to chance or be approached through early and intensive instruction in school? Write a paper in which you explore your thoughts on this question. Consider in your discussion the effects of home language and culture on pride.
4. One argument against bilingual education is that language-minority children cannot be separated from language-majority speakers if they are to have the maximum opportunity for second-language learning and for integration into the life of the school and community. Write a paper in which you take a stand for or against this argument.
5. One argument for bilingual education is that mother-tongue instruction makes possible the recognition and perpetuation of the values of the mother country. Furthermore, immigrant children maintain a pride and identity in their home culture. Write a paper in which you explore your feelings on this probilingual stand.
6. Another argument against bilingual education is that most proponent demands come not from migrant children but from their parents and immigrant organizations with a vested interest in holding back the assimilation of the children. Write a paper in which you explore your own views on this argument.
7. Contact some local schools and ask what bilingual programs they have. If possible, interview some teachers familiar with the programs and write a report evaluating the effectiveness of such programs.
8. Write an interior monologue of a 7-year-old non-English-speaking child entering an all-English kindergarten.
9. Take another look at Maxine Hong Kingston's "The Language of Silence" (page 43). Now try writing a dialogue between Ms. Kingston and Mr. Hayakawa on the subject of bilingual education.

## VIVA BILINGUALISM

James Fallows

In 1981, the late Republican Senator from California, S. I. Hayakawa, proposed a constitutional amendment stating that English should be made the official language of the United States. Known as the English Languages Amendment (ELA), the resolution forbade the federal government or any state from making or enforcing any law that required the use of any language other than English. Among other restrictions, the ELA meant that voting ballots could be printed only in English; that bilingual education would be limited to "transitional status"; and that standards for measuring English-language proficiency for prospective citizens would be tightened.

Although no action was ever taken on the proposed amendment, the ELA reopened the debate on naming English as the official language. With mounting support from the advocacy group U.S. English, the English-only movement led 23 states to pass resolutions making English their official language. Another 20 are considering similar measures.

In August 1996, the issue once again entered the federal arena when the House voted to declare English the official language of the United States government. Dubbed the "English Empowerment Act of 1996," the bill would put an end to the current practice of printing some publications and documents in languages other than English to help those for whom English is a second language. Although the measure is still pending in the Senate, the Federal government has once again been thrust into a debate that pits America's traditions of cultural diversity against unity of language.

In the essay below James Fallows offers some arguments against the English-only movement and some of the fears that inspired it. Drawing from his own experience while living in Japan, Fallows sees nothing wrong with bilingualism. On the contrary, he claims that individuals and America as a whole stand to benefit from bilingualism. James Fallows is the Washington editor of the *Atlantic*. This article first appeared in *The New Republic* in 1986.

- 1 In his classic work of crackpot anthropology, *The Japanese Brain*, Dr. Tadanobu Tsunoda told his Japanese readers not to feel bad about their difficulties learning other languages, especially English. "Isn't it remarkable," he

- said (I am paraphrasing), "that whenever you meet someone who speaks English really well, he turns out to be a drip?"
- 2 The Japanese have their own reasons for seeking such reassurance. Their students learn English exactly the way Americans (used to) learn Latin: through long, boring analyses of antique written passages. Not surprisingly, most of them feel about as comfortable making English conversation as I would if Julius Caesar strolled up for a chat. The few Japanese who do speak good English have generally lived overseas—and to that extent have become less Japanese and, by local standards, more like drips.
  - 3 Still, for all the peculiar Japaneseness of his sentiment, the spirit of Dr. Tsunoda is alive in America today. It is reflected in the general disdain for bilingualism and bilingual education, and in campaigns like the one on California's ballot last week, sponsored by the group called U.S. English, to declare that English is America's "official" language.
  - 4 Yes, yes, everyone needs to learn English. America doesn't want to become Quebec. We have enough other forces pulling us apart that we don't want linguistic divisions too. But is there any reason to get so worked up about today's Spanish-speaking immigrants, even if they keep learning Spanish while in school? I will confess that I once shared U.S. English-type fears about Spanish language separatism. But having spent a long time reporting among immigrants and seeing how much their children wanted to learn English, I'm not worried anymore. And, having been out of the country most of this year, I've come to think that the whole American language scare rests on two bogus and amazingly parochial assumptions.
  - 5 The first is a view of bilingualism as a kind of polygamy. That is, according to Western standards it just doesn't work to have two wives. The partners in a marriage require a certain exclusive commitment from each other. If a man gives it to one wife, there's not enough left over to give to someone else. Similarly with language: there's only so much room in a person's brain, and if he speaks one language—let us say Spanish—really well, he'll be all filled up and won't learn English. And if his brain were not a problem, his heart would be, since he can be truly loyal to only one language. I'm burlesquing the argument a little, but not much. Why would anyone worry about students taking "maintenance" course in Spanish, if not for the fear that Spanish would somehow use up the mental and emotional space English should fill?
  - 6 In the American context, it's easy to see why people might feel this way. Ninety-nine percent of all Americans can happily live their lives speaking and thinking about no language but English. Foreign-language education has been falling off, and except in unusual circumstances—wars, mainly—it has never had much practical reinforcement anyway. When we come across people in the United States who obviously know a foreign language, the main signal is usually that their English is so poor.
  - 7 But suppose that mastering a second language is less like having two wives than like having two children. Maybe there's not really a limit in the brain or heart, and spreading attention among several languages—like

- spreading love among several children—may actually enrich everyone involved. Without going through all the linguistic arguments showing that bilingualism is possible and natural (one impressive recent summary was *Mirror of Language* by Kenji Hakuta, published this year) I will merely say that after about five seconds of talking with someone who really is bilingual, the two-child, rather than two-wife, view comes to make much more sense.
- 8 Everyone has heard about the Scandinavians and Swiss, who grow up in a big swirl of languages and can talk easily to anyone they meet. Their example may seem too high-toned to be persuasive in connection with today's Spanish-speaking immigrants, so consider the more down-to-earth illustrations of multilingualism to be found all over Asia.
  - 9 Seven years ago, the government of Singapore launched a "Speak Mandarin!" campaign, designed to supplant various southern Chinese dialects with Mandarin. (This is roughly similar to a "Speak Like Prince Charles!" campaign being launched in West Virginia.) Since then, competence in Mandarin has gone up—and so has the mastery of English. At the beginning of the Speak Mandarin campaign, the pass rate for O-level (high school) exams in English was 41 percent. Now it's 61 percent. During the same period, the O-level pass rate for Mandarin went from 84 percent to 92 percent. The children managed to get better at both languages at once.
  - 10 Just north of Singapore is Malaysia, another one-time British colony whose main political problem is managing relations among three distinct ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese, and Indians. Each of the groups speaks a different language at home—Malay for the Malays, Cantonese or Hokkien for the Chinese, Tamil for the Indians. But if you put any two Malaysians together in a room, it's almost certain that they'll be able to speak to each other, in either Malay or English, since most people are bilingual and many speak three or more languages. (The Chinese generally speak one or two Chinese dialects, plus English and/or Malay. The Indians speak English or Malay on top of Tamil, and many or most Malays speak English.) Neither Tamil nor the Chinese dialects travel well outside the ethnic group, and Malay doesn't travel anywhere else but Indonesia, so most Malaysians have a strong incentive to learn another language.
  - 11 I should emphasize that I'm talking about people who in no way fit modern America's idea of a rarefied intellectual elite. They are wizened Chinese shopkeepers, unschooled Indian night guards, grubby Malay food hawkers, in addition to more polished characters who've traveled around the world. Yet somehow they all find room in their brains for more than one language at a time. Is it so implausible that Americans can do the same?
  - 12 The second antibilingual assumption, rarely stated but clearly there, is that English is some kind of fragile blossom, about to be blown apart by harsh blasts from the Spanish-speaking world. Come on! Never before in world history has a language been as dominant as English is now. In every corner of the world, people realize that their chances to play on the big stage—to make money, have choices, travel—depend on learning English. They don't always

succeed, but more and more of them try. In Malaysia, in South China, even in linguophobic Japan, my family's main problem as we travel has been coping with people who spring from behind almost every lamppost and tofu stand, eager to practice the English they've picked up from the shortwave radio. Malaysia ships out tens of thousands of young people each year for studies in the United States, Australia, and England. Guess what language they have to learn before they go.

- 13 It may seem that modern America shamelessly coddles its immigrants, with all those Spanish-speaking street signs and TV broadcasts and "maintenance" courses, which together reduce the incentive to learn English. Well, I've spent most of this year in a position similar to the immigrants', and it's not as comfortable or satisfactory as it may look. Japan makes many more accommodations to the English language than America does to Spanish. Tokyo has four English-language daily newspapers—more than most American cities—plus several magazines. The major train and subway routes have English signs, most big-city restaurants have English menus, all major hotels have English-speaking staff. Students applying for university admission must pass tests in (written) English. Most shopkeepers, policemen, and passersby can make sense of written-down English messages. Even the Shinkansen, or bullet train, makes its announcements in both Japanese and English—which is comparable to the Eastern shuttle giving each "Please have your fares ready" message in Spanish as well as English. The nighttime TV news broadcasts now come in a bilingual version—you push a button on your set to switch from Japanese to English. It is as if the "CBS Evening News" could be simultaneously heard in Spanish.
- 14 Does all of this reduce the incentive to learn Japanese, or the feeling of being left out if you don't? Hah! Even though Japanese society is vastly more permeated by English than American society is by Spanish, each day brings ten thousand reminders of what you're missing if you don't know the language. You can't read the mainstream newspapers, can't follow most shows on TV, can't communicate above the "please-give-me-a-ticket-to-Kyoto" level. Without learning the language, you could never hope to win a place as anything but a fringe figure. Some adults nonetheless live out a ghettoized, English-only existence, because Japanese is no cinch, but foreign children raised in Japan pick up the language as the only way to participate.
- 15 The incentives for America's newcomers to learn English are never stronger. How are an immigrant's children going to go to any college, get any kind of white-collar job, live anything but a straitened, ghetto existence unless they speak English? What are the SATs, Bruce Springsteen songs, and the David Letterman show going to be in Spanish—or Korean, or Tagalog? If Malaysians and rural Chinese can see that English is their route to a wider world, are Guatemalans and Cubans who've made it to America so much more obtuse? And if they keep up their Spanish at the same time, even through the dreaded "maintenance" courses, why don't we count that as a good thing? It's good for

them, in making their lives richer and their minds more flexible, and it's good for the country, in enlarging its ability to deal with the rest of the world.

- 16 The adult immigrants themselves don't usually succeed in learning English, any more than my wife and I have become fluent in Japanese. But that has been true of America's immigrants for two hundred years. (The main exception were the Eastern European Jewish immigrants of the early twentieth century, who moved into English faster than Italians, Germans, Poles, or today's Latin Americans.) The Cubans' and Mexicans' children are the ones who learn, as previous immigrants' children have. When someone can find large numbers of children who are being raised in America but don't see English as a necessity, then I'll start to worry.
- 17 We don't want to become Quebec—and we're not about to. Quebec, Belgium, Sri Lanka, and other places with language problems have old, settled groups who've lived alongside each other, in mutual dislike, for many years—not new groups of immigrants continually being absorbed. We don't need to declare English our official language, because it already is that—as no one knows better than the immigrants and their children. Anywhere else in the world, people would laugh at the idea that English is in any way imperiled. Let's calm down and enjoy the joke too.

#### TOPICAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. According to Fallows, what are the positive aspects of being bilingual? Do you agree that the United States should continue to allow for bilingual ballots, signs, newspapers, and schools? Explain your answer.
2. In his essay, S. I. Hayakawa pointed to Belgium and Canada as countries where bilingualism has caused "chronic instability" and costly and confusing bureaucratic problems. How does Fallows address these arguments in his own piece? Did you find his position compelling? Why or why not?
3. Fallows says he has come to believe that the "whole American language scare rests on two bogus and amazingly parochial assumptions." What are the two assumptions? Do you agree that these are important issues in the debate about bilingualism in America?
4. Fallows cites Asia as a place hospitable to bilingualism by necessity. Do you think that concessions to language minorities in America such as bilingual ballots, court translators, health-care workers, and so on, encourage or discourage social separation? Would you resent voting ballots being printed in two or more languages? How about street signs? Explain.
5. Fallows notes that some adults in Japan manage to survive without learning the language, living out a "ghettoized, English-only existence." In light of its growing multiculturalism, how has America been ghettoized by language? Do you see this as problematic? Explain.
6. In his concluding paragraph, Fallows emphasizes the difference between the United States, with its new groups of immigrants who are continually "absorbed," and Belgium, Canada, and other places with their different language

groups who live side by side in mutual dislike. In your observation, are immigrants being "absorbed," into American life? Is such assimilation (of cultural as well as language differences) a desirable goal? Why or why not?

7. "When someone can find large numbers of children who are being raised in America but don't see English as a necessity, then I'll start to worry." Explain this potential worry of Fallows. Do you agree that children are important indicators of cultural participation? Explain.

### RHETORICAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. Reread Fallows piece, noting those arguments that are based on his own personal experience. Do you feel that these arguments strengthen his overall conclusion? Why or why not?
2. Examine Fallow's analogy of language as wife and language as children (paragraphs 5-7). Does this analogy work well in the piece? Are the arguments based on these analogies (which lead to the conclusion that all people can "find room in their brains for more than one language at a time") relevant to the opposition view, as set forth by S. I. Hayakawa? Why or why not?
3. Does Fallows successfully address the opposing view in his article? Can you think of any significant counterarguments that he does not face? If so, what are they?
4. Describe Fallows's tone. Is it a successful choice for this piece? Explain.
5. Reread the article, looking for places where Fallows uses humor in his arguments. Is his use of humor successful? Does it strengthen his final conclusion in any way? Why or why not?

### WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

1. Write an essay in which you argue about whether concessions to language minority groups such as bilingual education, ballots, health workers, court translators, and so on, encourage or discourage separatism and social disunity. You may base your argument on your own experience, library research, or field work in which you enter bilingual communities and workplaces and conduct interviews.
2. Have you ever been in a place where you did not speak the language? Write an essay reflecting on your experience there. In what ways did your lack of knowledge affect your experience? How does this experience help to shape your views regarding the debate about bilingualism in the United States.
3. Write an essay in which you consider the reasons why Japan offers the aid it does to persons who don't speak Japanese. Are the English-only speakers in Japan comparable to those non-English-speaking residents of the United States? If not, is the difference relevant to the argument? Why or why not?
4. Write a research paper in which you gather information about bilingualism in your state. What is the demographic profile of your state's foreign language population? How does your state provide for such nonnative speakers in terms of education and social policy?

5. How would you vote if there were a resolution to make your community officially bilingually—say, English and Spanish? Write a paper explaining the reasoning behind your vote.
6. Write a research paper based on a city that is known to be bilingual or to have bilingual sections: Santa Fe, Los Angeles, New York City, Quebec. What is the status of bilingual education in that city? How has the question been dealt with? If there is a form of bilingual education, how does it work? You might use relevant newspapers or books about the locale in question to focus your research.