Immigrant Era: Focus on Assimilation

By Ester de Jong

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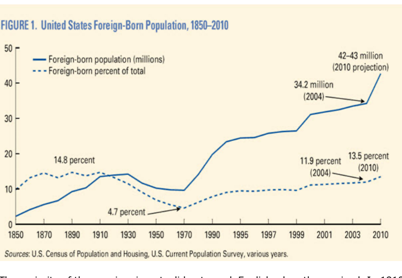
In this excerpt from *Foundations for Multlingualism in Education: from Principles to Practice* (Caslon, 2011), Ester de Jong shares an overview of the history of language policy in the United States. "Immigrant Era: Focus on Assimilation" discusses the debate around language and language instruction at the beginning of the 20th century, in the midst of unprecedented waves of immigration to the U.S.

For information about the language policies that preceded and followed this period, take a look at the following other excerpts from de Jong:

- Early Years: Tolerance and Repression
- Return to Bilingual Education
- Toward a Monolingual USA?

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a time of industrialization, urbanization, and the advent of compulsory public education, the number of immigrants arriving in the United States grew exponentially. At 14.7%, the 1910 foreign-born population is still proportionally the largest in U.S. history (see Figure 6.1). These immigrants came from more diverse and different backgrounds than the early northern European immigrants, most of whom were Anglo-Saxon and Protestant. Although previous immigrant groups continued to arrive (e.g., Swedes, Norwegians, Germans), the majority of the new immigrants came from eastern Europe (Czechs, Poles, Russian Jews) and southern Europe (Greeks, Italians). Most were Roman Catholic or Jewish and upon arrival moved into urban rather than rural areas.

Figure 6.1 Population growth in the United States, 1850-2010



The majority of the new immigrants did not speak English when they arrived. In 1910, 23% or about 3 million out of the 13 million foreign-born individuals 10 years of age or older were unable to speak English (compare with 7% in 2000). Their religious backgrounds and cultural habits were perceived as being distinctly different from those of the existing native "stock." These demographic and economic developments were subsequently joined by the threat of and entry into World War I (1914-1918); together they raised new questions about American identity.

The Americanization Movement

Americanization through legislation

The dominant response to the new diversity was to try to streamline it to promote assimilation into a view that defined American identity as English-speaking, Protestant, and Anglo-Saxon. The **Americanization movement** that emerged during these years focused assimilating the new immigrants into American society (Handlin, 1982; Hartmann, 1967; Higham, 1998; Hill, 1919). Between 1917 and 1922, more than 30 states passed Americanization laws, requiring those unable to speak or read English to attend public evening schools (Pavlenko, 2005).

This movement included proponents of **nativism** (opposition to any foreign influences) and reformers genuinely concerned with improving the impoverished health and working conditions of the new urban immigrants (Olneck, 1989). Americanization efforts focused on providing classes in English civics primarily to adult, male immigrants. In addition, groups pushed for legislation to limit immigration in general or exclude certain groups from entering the country. These included:

- Anti-Catholic laws that had been passed in the early 1880s in response to the increased presence of Irish
- The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882
- Laws restricting Japanese, passed between 1905 and 1924,
- Laws retracting Filipinos in the 1920s and 1930s (Daniels, 1990).

Legislative anti-immigrant efforts cumulated in the Immigration Act of 1924, which put quotas on the number of immigrants allowed to enter from certain (nonwestern European) countries. By basing the quotas on the 1890 census, law makers privileged immigrants from northern European countries.

Language legislation

Language became a central issue in the immigration debate, especially as World War I approached. The 1906 Nationality Act made the ability to speak English a requirement for naturalization, and the 1917 Immigration Act excluded aliens who were illiterate (in any language) from entering. In this climate, the use of languages other than English in school was un-American and undesirable. Speaking English became a condition for being a good (real) American. Several states passed legislation that prohibited the teaching of foreign languages to young children and 37 states passed laws making English the official language of the state during this period.

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Schooling for Immigrants

Educational policies directed at immigrant children during the early 1900s were primarily ones of neglect:

- Students were submersed in English-only classrooms without any accommodations.
- Newcomers were often placed in 1st grade classrooms regardless of their age, causing many early dropouts.
- Intelligence testing in English led to the disproportionate placement of immigrant children in special education classes.

In some instances, minimal accommodations were made through separate classes. Educators in New York and other major cities began to recognize that special classes were needed to help students who did not speak English. William Maxwell from the New York Board of Education argued in 1912, "It is absurd to place the boy or girl, 10 or 12 years of age, just landed from Italy, who cannot read a word in his own language or speak a word of English, in the same classroom with American boys and girls five or six years old" (quoted in Berrol, 1995, p. 49).

"Steamer" classes

New York established "C" or steamer classes for students older than 8 years who had recently arrived. Also referred to as "vestibule" classes, steamer classes, which lasted for 6 months to 1 year, segregated students from native peers and focused solely on teaching oral English skills (Berrol, 1995; Brumberg, 1986). Students were punished for using their native language. Similar classes were implemented for immigrant children in Boston and Chicago.

Schools for Mexicans

Segregated schools were the solution for the "Mexican problem" in the Southwest beginning in the early 1900s, in particular California and Texas (Gonzalez, 2001). The establishment of these Mexican schools for Spanish-speaking students had been based on the rationale that the students did not have the level of command of English needed and would hold Anglo students back and that segregation would permit more individualized instruction.

Furthermore, it was believed, "Hispanic students attended school less regularly and so disrupted classroom continuity" (Schlossman, 1983b, p. 893). Like segregated schools for African American students (and boarding schools for Native Americans), Mexican schools had fewer resources and less qualified teachers (Donato & Garcia, 1992; Donato, Mechaca, & Valencia, 1991). The schools focused on teaching English, often punished students for using any Spanish, and portrayed Mexico and the Mexican people as inferior and backward.

Limited schooling for immigrants

Many immigrant children did not finish school during this period or were allowed to graduate with only minimal skills due to a greatly reduced curriculum. While achievement patterns varied from immigrant group to immigrant group and across different cities, the typical pattern was minimal school attendance and low high school and college attendance by the majority of immigrant children. Perlmann (1990) found that 13% of 12-year-old students whose parents were foreign-born went on to high school (compared with 32% of white children of native parentage). Native-born students with English skills did much better than immigrant children in school attendance and high school graduation rates.

Poverty played a significant role in these patterns. According to Berrol (1982), "Most immigrant families, for at least two generations, needed whatever money their children could earn" (p. 38). A rapidly expanding economy that could absorb many low-skilled laborers, followed by a sharp reduction in immigration, explains the economic and social mobility that has been observed for the early 1900s rather than school success.

The myth that submersion in English and giving up cultural ties has continued, however, as part of the meta-narrative of the country's national identity. As Berrol notes, by the 1950s when black and Hispanic migrants came to New York City, "most people had forgotten… that the public schools had not been successful with most of the poor and foreign children who had come earlier" (pp. 40-41).

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Protecting languages other than English

Pluralist views were pushed far into the background during this same period. Two trends, however, that opposed the insistence on assimilationism are worth mentioning. First, the federal government changed its policy toward Native Americans, at least for a while. Ironically, whereas during the early colonial years immigrant languages were tolerated and indigenous languages rejected, this period witnessed the reverse pattern of treatment. During the 1920s and 1930s, John Collier, director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, was initiated a return to on-reservation day schools and the development of native language textbooks, promoting a greater emphasis on native cultures and languages. Funding for his efforts unfortunately ended with World War II and did not return until the 1970s.

Second, some court decisions maintained a more nuanced perspective (O'Brien, 1961). In *Meyer v. Nebraska* (1923) the Supreme Court constrained the scope of the English-only laws to those areas where the state could demonstrate a compelling interest in not allowing languages other than English to be taught. The case involved a teacher in a parochial school who was accused of teaching the Bible in German to an 8-year-old. At the time, Nebraska's English-only law forbade the use of languages other than English for children younger than 10 years of age. The Court sided with the plaintiffs because, in their judgment, the ends (teaching English) did not justify the means (restricting the parents' right to choose instruction for their children and a teacher's right to teach).

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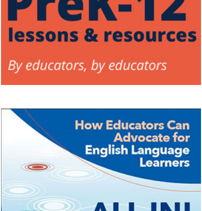

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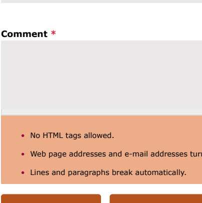

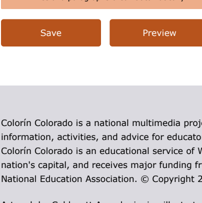

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