

Bilingualism in the US: Phases and Perceptions

The United States is often referred to as a “melting pot” of the world. According to the US Census Bureau, there are at least 350 different languages spoken in the nation, making it one of the most linguistically-diverse countries in the world.¹ While bilingualism is seen as a benefit and norm in most countries, linguistic and cultural diversity has not historically been perceived in a consistent manner in the US. Since the first influxes of immigrants in the 1700s, public attitudes and policy have fluctuated to create phases of cultural adaptation and forced assimilation, shaping foreign language education and contributing to the largely monolingual standard seen today.

Before the American Revolution, the US was initially a linguistically diverse country due to incoming waves of Dutch, French, Swedish, German, Spanish, and Russian immigrants. During this time, bilingualism was widespread and respected, largely through the implementation of schools which taught in the native language of the community.² This period of acceptance and tolerance led to debates among early leaders on the institution of an official language for the US once the country was established, which ended in the rejection of an English-only America.³

In contrast, the 19th century marked a shift toward English dominance and a waning support of bilingualism. A general attitude of “linguistic assimilation without coercion” existed then, but was met with another change towards the extreme with the establishment of

¹ Bureau, US Census, “Census Bureau Reports at Least 350 Languages Spoken in U.S. Homes.” Census.gov, December 16, 2021. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/archives/2015-pr/cb15-185.html>.

² Brisk, Maria Estela Allende, "Language policies in American education." *Journal of Education* 163, no. 1 (1981): 3-15; Brown, Brad, "The History of Bilingual Education in America." (1992).

³ Hakuta, Kenji, *Mirror of language. The debate on bilingualism*, 1986.

repressive policy against Native Americans and growing xenophobia toward non-European immigrants, reflecting increasing pressure to conform linguistically.⁴

Starting in the 1960s, another period of bilingual acceptance began due to an increased American involvement in global affairs, leading to language-learning being seen as functional.⁵ At the same time, immigration policy became more inclusive with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which abolished the previous restrictive system established in the 1920s based on race and nationality, and led to an increase in non-European languages.⁶

This pattern of change has continued into the present. Between 2020 and 2025, approximately 11 million immigrants entered the United States, the majority from Mexico.⁷ This demographic shift has been accompanied by heightened fear surrounding the public use of native languages and new immigration and deportation policy, such as in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, which reallocated spending to make ICE the highest-funded U.S. law enforcement agency.⁸ According to a recent Brookings survey, 14% of foreign-born Latinos report avoiding speaking Spanish in public because of these fears.⁹ The same social and political pressures have also affected education. Public school funding is tied to attendance or enrollment, and increased fear among immigrant communities has contributed to declining numbers of students in school. As a result, language and ESL programs are increasingly at risk of being reduced or

⁴ Ovando, Carlos J, "Bilingual education in the United States: Historical development and current issues." *Bilingual research journal* 27, no. 1 (2003): 1-24; Johnston, Guillemette. "Language Learning Under Fire: Budget Cuts, Artificial Intelligence, and the Closure of Foreign Language Departments in US Universities." *JPSE* 5 (2025): 20.

⁵ Johnston, "Language Learning Under Fire," 20.

⁶ Orchowski, Margaret Sands, *The law that changed the face of America: the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965*. Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2015.

⁷ Kramer, Stephanie, and Jeffrey S. Passel, "Key Findings about U.S. Immigrants." Pew Research Center, August 21, 2025. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/08/21/key-findings-about-us-immigrants/>.

⁸ Chappell, Bill, "How Ice Grew to Be the Highest-Funded U.S. Law Enforcement Agency." NPR, January 21, 2026. <https://www.npr.org/2026/01/21/nx-s1-5674887/ice-budget-funding-congress-trump>.

⁹ Gabriel R. Sanchez et al. "Racial Profiling by Ice Will Have a Marked Impact on Latino Communities." Brookings, October 16, 2025.

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/racial-profiling-by-ice-will-have-a-marked-impact-on-latino-communities/#:~:text=The%20broad%20parameters%20established%20for,as%20speaking%20with%20an%20accent>.

eliminated due to budget cuts as funding drops.¹⁰ Per-pupil expenditures, or the amount of money spent on one student, are highest for foreign language, music, and science programs, making them first on the chopping block, while ESL programs are facing more direct reductions with federal slashes to English Language Acquisition funding.¹¹

As seen historically, the ebbs and flows of language in the US are always changing, affecting populations of immigrants, language learners, and the general public. What will the next shift look like, and in which direction will it turn?

¹⁰ “School Enrollment Drops Amid Ice Raids, ‘We Just Don’t Know What Happened to Them.’” Los Angeles Times, November 29, 2025.

<https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-11-29/school-enrollment-plummets-laUSD-amid-trump-immigration-raids>; Commonwealth Beacon, “Immigration Enforcement and Declines in Public School Enrollment.” Commonwealth Beacon, March 16, 2026.

<https://commonwealthbeacon.org/the-codcast/immigration-enforcement-and-public-school-enrollment-tumbles/>.

¹¹ Comesanas, Katilyn, “Timely Research Evidence to Support Federal Assistance for English Learners.” Education Law Center, January 23, 2026.

<https://edlawcenter.org/timely-research-evidence-to-support-federal-assistance-for-english-learners/>.