

No Compre ndo

Barbara Mujiea

The following essay appeared on the op-ed page of *The New York Times*. The author, a professor of Spanish at Georgetown University, uses her professional expertise and her personal experience to take a stand on a controversial issue, one that continues to raise very strong feelings in our society.

1 Last spring, my niece phoned me in tears. She was graduating from high school and had to make a decision. An outstanding soccer player, she was offered athletic scholarships by several colleges. So why was she crying?

2 My niece came to the United States from South America as a child. Although she had received good grades in her schools in Miami, she spoke English with a heavy accent and her comprehension and writing skills were deficient. She was afraid that once she left the Miami environment she would feel uncomfortable and, worse still, have difficulty keeping up with class work.

3 Programs that keep foreign-born children in Spanish-language classrooms for years are only part of the problem. During a visit to my niece's former school, I observed that all business, not just teaching, was conducted in Spanish. In the office, secretaries spoke to the administrators and the children in Spanish. Announcements over the public-address system were made in an English so fractured that it was almost incomprehensible.

4 I asked my niece's mother, why, after years in public schools, her daughter had poor English skills. "It's the whole environment," she replied. "All kinds of services are available in Spanish or Spanglish. Sports and after-school activities are conducted in Spanglish. That's what the kids hear on the radio and in the street."

5 Until recently, immigrants made learning English a priority. But even when they didn't learn English themselves, their children grew up speaking it. Thousands of first-generation Americans still strive to learn English, but others face reduced educational and career opportunities because they have not mastered this basic skill they need to get ahead.

6 According to the 1990 census, 40 percent of the Hispanics born in the U.S. do not graduate from high school, and the Department of Education says that a lack of proficiency in English is an important factor in the dropout rate.

7 People and agencies that favor providing services only in foreign languages want to help people who do not speak English, but they may be doing them a disservice by condemning them to a linguistic ghetto from which they can not easily escape.

8 And my niece? She turned down all of her scholarship opportunities, deciding instead to attend a small college in Miami, where she will never have to put her English to the test.

Questions for Critical Thinking

1. Which role gives Barbara Mujica more authority on this subject: her position as a professor of Spanish, or the fact that she has a niece with some unhappy educational experiences?
2. In paragraph 5, the author refers to mastering English as a basic skill needed "to get ahead." In your opinion, how important is it for speakers of other languages to know English when they live in this country? Is it possible to survive and "get ahead" in the United States without learning English?
3. Based on your own experience, or what you know of the experiences of others, what is a successful bilingual program? What are some of the mistakes bilingual programs make?
4. In paragraph 7, the author refers to people who live and work in languages other than English as being condemned to "a linguistic ghetto." Do you agree that providing services to people in their native languages keeps them from full participation in this society?
5. To what extent do any of the arguments for or against bilingual education depend on how old a person is when placed in a bilingual program?
6. Why is English the most important international language in the world today?

Writing in Response

1. Some people advocate legislation that would make English the official language of this country. Should this indeed become law? Considering the fact that so many languages are used in the United States, should any language be the official language of our country?
2. Write an essay in which you give examples of situations you have observed in which one person does not understand the language another person speaks.
3. Agree or disagree with the following statement: *Parents of schoolchildren should have the right to make the decision as to whether or not their children should be in bilingual education.*