UNIT 2.11

specify | establish | cohesive | constrain | xenophobia

This week's issue:

SHOULD ENGLISH BE THE OFFICIAL LANGUAGE OF THE UNITED STATES?

If you ride the bus through an American city, you will hear many languages spoken. Many new immigrants have come to the U.S., speaking languages like Vietnamese, Russian, and Spanish.

Immigrants want to be able to use public services. Interpreters and information written in different languages help them use hospitals, libraries, and schools. If immigrants go to court, they want to understand what is being said. When new citizens vote, they want to be able to read the voting ballot.

Right now, the U.S. does not **specify** what languages can be used by the government. In many states, people can take the driver's test in their home language. But some people want to **establish** English as the official language of the U.S. If English is the only official language, they say the country will be more unified, or **cohesive**. Using other languages in schools, courts, and city hospitals would be **constrained** by law. Immigrants would need to learn English or miss out on services.

Other people say this is just **xenophobia**, a fear of foreign people. Immigrants are learning English as fast as they can. They deserve services and information in the language they know.

What do you think? Should immigrants be provided government services in their home language? Or do you think making English the official language of the United States will make us more cohesive as a nation?

Questions for Classroom Discussion:

- Have you seen other languages used in official government signs or papers? Where have you seen these?
- Would establishing English as our official language cause any hardship?
- Where do you think xenophobia comes from? Why do you think people react that way?
- What are some things that can make a country more cohesive?
- If we constrained the use of other languages, do you think immigrants would learn English faster?

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USE THE FOCUS WORDS

specify *(verb)* to clearly define

Sample Sentence: Right now, the U.S. does not **specify** which languages can be used by the government.

Turn and Talk: How many days in advance should teachers **specify** the date of an upcoming test?

establish *(verb)* to cause to be recognized and accepted

Sample Sentence: Some people want to **establish** English as our official language.

Turn and Talk: Think of your favorite actor or actress. What film **established** him or her as your favorite?

cohesive *(adjective)* unified

Sample Sentence: If English is the only official language, some argue that the country will be more **cohesive**.

Turn and Talk: Why are some classrooms more **cohesive** than others?

constrain *(verb)* to hold back or limit

Sample Sentence: Many people think that making English the official language of the U.S. would **constrain** the everyday use of other languages.

Turn and Talk: Why do you think some middle school students feel **constrained** by their parents?

xenophobia *(noun)* a fear of foreign people

Sample Sentence: During times of war, **xenophobia** is extremely common.

Turn and Talk: What are some examples of **xenophobia** that you have seen on TV?

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DO THE MATH

Immigrant families around the world face many difficulties. They face **xenophobia** as well as day-to-day struggles with things from buying food to making friends. Using their first language at home helps families be **cohesive**. It helps them stay connected to their roots. **Establishing** English as the official language of the U.S. would not legally **constrain** the everyday use of other languages. However, some people think that having an official language would decrease the use of other languages, even in people's homes. The 2000 United States Census asked people to **specify** which language they speak at home.

Option 1: The most common non-English language spoken at home in the U.S. is Spanish. The 2000 U.S. Census counted 262,375,152 U.S. residents. Of these, 28,101,052 spoke Spanish at home. What percent of Americans spoke Spanish at home?

A. about 10.7%
B. about 28.2%
C. about 32.6%
D. about 45.1%

Option 2: The second and third most popular non-English languages spoken at home in the U.S. are Chinese and French. Of the 262,375,152 people counted on the 2000 Census, 2,022,143 spoke Chinese, and 1,643,838 spoke French. In 2000, what was the probability that a randomly selected American spoke Chinese or French at home?

About 1.4%

Discussion Question: Most people who want English **established** as the official language say that they are not xenophobic; they just want to preserve America's national culture. **Specifying** a national language will give Americans more incentive to speak fluent English. How can we be a **cohesive** nation, they ask, if we can't talk to our neighbors? However, learning a new language is difficult, and takes time. Have you ever been in a place where people used a language you couldn't understand? Did it **constrain** your behavior? Did it prevent you from doing things? Why or why not?

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THINK SCIENTIFICALLY

Ms. Kahn and her students are discussing the fact that the United States does not **specify** an official language.

"The official language of a country should be the language that most people speak," says Ricky. "And most people in the United States speak English, so it should be the official language."

"That's true," says Sasha, "but I have many friends that speak another language at home with their parents because their parents speak little to no English. It feels like **xenophobia** to exclude them."

"But that is another reason to **establish** English as the official language. Anyone living in this country should be able to talk to others in the language that everyone else speaks. That would make us a more **cohesive** nation," Ricky argued.

"Those are both good points," says Ms. Kahn. "The U.S. Census is a great resource that collects data on the languages that people speak, and how well they speak them."

Ms. Kahn located information from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2007 American Community Survey and projected it on the screen.

	Total people	English-speaking ability			
		Very well	Well	Not well	Not at all
Population (5 years and older)	280,950,438				
I. Spoke only English at home	223,505,953				
II. Spoke a language other than English at home	55,444,485	30,975,474	10,962,722	9,011,298	4,494,991
a. Spanish or Spanish Creole	34,547,077	18,179,530	6,322,170	6,344,110	3,701,267
b. Other Indo-European languages	10,320,730	6,936,808	2,018,148	1,072,025	293,749
c. Asian and Pacific Island languages	8,316,426	4,274,794	2,176,180	1,412,264	453,188
d. Other languages	2,260,252	1,584,342	442,224	182,899	46,787

What percentage of the population spoke a language other than English at home?

19.7%

Of the people that spoke a language other than English at home, what was the percentage of people that spoke English "Very well" or "Well"?

75.6%

If English were made the official language of the United States, should Spanish be considered as a second official language? Decide whether the data above would support your opinion.

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DEBATE THE ISSUE

Pick one of these positions (or create your own).

A

☐ English should be the official language of the United States.

OR

B

☐ The United States should not have an official language.

OR

CREATE YOUR OWN

☐ _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Jot down a few notes on how to support your position during a discussion or debate.

_____

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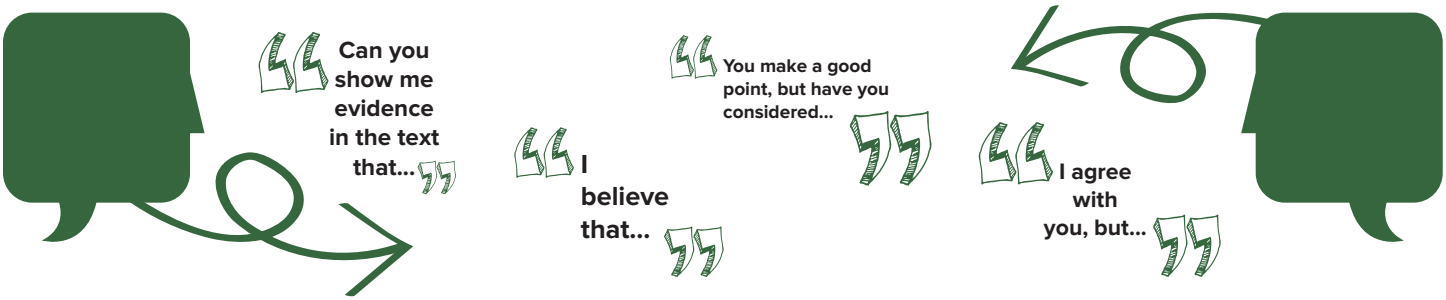
Be a strong participant by using phrases like these:



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TAKE A STAND

Support your position with clear reasons and specific examples. Try to use relevant words from the Word Generation list in your response.

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