

Laarbi Ben Mhidi University

Department of English

Module: History and Civilisation of the English Language

Level: First Year Students

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Lecture 2: Cultural Diversity in the U.S.

A Nation of Immigrants

Between 1821 and 1997, about 64 million immigrants came to the U.S.A. It was the largest migration the human race had ever known. What caused it? In his book *A Nation of Immigrants*, John F. Kennedy (later the nation's thirty-fifth president) explained: Three strong forces—religious persecution, political oppression, and economic hardship—provided the chief motives for the mass migrations to our shores. My great-grandfather had been one of those immigrants, a farmer who left Ireland during the potato famine in the 1840s.

Immigration before Independence

The earliest immigrants to the area now known as the U.S. were probably the Native Americans (or American Indians). They came to the Western Hemisphere from Asia about 15,000 years ago or perhaps even earlier. By the fifteenth century, there were 15 million to 20 million Native Americans in the Americas. Perhaps as many as 700,000 were living within the present limits of the U.S. when Christopher Columbus reached the Western Hemisphere in 1492. During the 1500s, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and English explorers visited the New World. The Spanish founded the first European settlements in the area that is now the U.S. The first permanent British colony within present-day U.S. territory was established in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, by 104 British colonists. In 1620, a second British colony, consisting of 102 people, was

founded in Plymouth, Massachusetts.

In 1790, the white population of the 13 original colonies totaled slightly more than 3 million. About 75% of these first Americans were of mostly British ancestry; the rest Dutch, French, Swiss, and Spanish. The British gave the new nation its language, laws, and philosophy of government.

Check your comprehension.

Why is English, rather than French or Spanish, the major language of the U.S.?

Immigration since 1920

During World War I, immigration declined due to traveling difficulties. After the war, Europeans once again began crowding aboard ships to the U.S. But American industry no longer needed them. During the 1920s, Congress passed the first quota law, limiting the total number of immigrants allowed and the number allowed from each country.

From 1930 to 1945, legal limits and the Second World War kept immigration to a minimum. When the war ended, immigration rose sharply because entrance was allowed to millions of people left homeless by the war. Special legislation admitted large numbers of displaced persons, refugees, orphans, and war brides.

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During the last half of the twentieth century, the United States lifted immigration restrictions from time to time to take in refugees and ease suffering in other parts of the world. In the late 1950s, thousands of Hungarians were admitted. In the early 1960s, because of the Cuban revolution, more than 150,000 Cubans entered the U.S. To relieve crowded conditions in Hong Kong, several thousand nonquota Chinese were also permitted entry. In 1979, the U.S.

admitted more than 20,000 Vietnamese refugees per month. In the late 1970s and 1980s, hundreds of thousands of Russians (mostly Jews) were also allowed to enter.

At the present time, immigration is permitted according to various categories. Immediate relatives of U.S. citizens may come in without numerical limit. The number of immigrants who are sponsored by family members living in the U.S. is limited to about 225,000 per year, and there are limits on how many visas can be issued per country. A significant number of people are allowed to immigrate because they have occupational skills needed in the U.S. The immigration laws are very complex. Someone wanting to immigrate should talk to an immigration lawyer or with the local office of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).

Immigration restrictions may seem cruel to those who are living in difficult circumstances elsewhere, but they became necessary because, in the twentieth century, the U.S. population grew at a very rapid rate. By 1920, the population had reached 100 million. Fifty years later, it had doubled. A higher birthrate, lower infant mortality, and longer life expectancy all combined to cause this population explosion. Today, many Americans are having smaller families. However, the population is continuing to grow, so limits on immigration are likely to continue.

Looking back over some 200 years of immigration, which nations have sent the most people? The ten largest ancestry groups of today's Americans are (in decreasing order of size) German, Irish, English, African, Italian, Mexican, French, Polish, Native American, and Dutch.

Check your comprehension.

Why does the U.S. need immigration restrictions?

today:

- **About 10% of the U.S. population is foreign-born.**
- **Most foreign-born residents are Hispanics or Asian/Pacific Islanders.**
- **About 7 million (28%) of today's foreign-born residents come from Mexico. That's the largest foreign-born population from a single country in U.S. history.**
- **The five states with the largest foreign-born populations are California, New York, Florida, New Jersey, and Texas. California is home to about one-third of**

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- **How are immigrants doing in this "land of opportunity"?**

In 1996, the poverty rate for foreign-born citizens was 10%. That figure was lower than the poverty rate for American-born citizens, which was almost 13%. However, foreign-born

noncitizens had a poverty rate of almost 27%. Countries of Birth of U.S. Foreign-Born Population (1997)
 Mexico: 7,017,000 Vietnam: 770,000 El Salvador: 607,000 Philippines: 1,132,000 India: 748,000
 United Kingdom: 606,000 China: 1,107,000 Former Soviet Union: 734,000 Korea: 591,000
 Cuba: 913,000 Dominican Republic: 632,000 Germany: 542,000

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Check your comprehension.

Where have most of today's foreign-born U.S. residents come from?

The Hispanic Population

About 35 million people living in the U.S. (about 2.5% of the population) belong to a Spanish-speaking ethnic group. More than half of them are foreign-born. Native speakers of Spanish are called Hispanics (or Latinos). Hispanics form the second-largest cultural minority in the U.S., after the nation's 36 million non-Hispanic African-Americans. The Hispanic population is younger than the national average, and its birth rate is higher. It is the most rapidly growing minority group in the country. Hispanics are expected to be the country's largest ethnic minority by the year 2005. For this large Spanish-

speaking population, the U.S. now has Spanish radio and TV stations as well as Spanish newspapers, magazines, signs, and directions in many places.

Almost three-fourths of the nation's Hispanics live in five states:

California, Texas, New York, Florida, and Illinois. The three largest Hispanic groups in the U.S. are Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans. Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans (those born in the U.S.) total about 13 million.

Mexicans have an important place in American history. They helped establish Los Angeles and many other settlements in the Southwest that later became major American cities. Also, they taught important methods of farming, mining, and ranching to Americans who settled in the West. When the Mexican-American War ended in 1848, the peace treaty gave the U.S. more than 525,000 square miles of territory in the Southwest. Mexicans living in this area were granted U.S. citizenship. Because of these Mexican-Americans, California, New Mexico, and Colorado were permitted to enter the union as bilingual states.

The island of Puerto Rico is located about 1,000 miles southeast of Florida. In 1878, during the brief Spanish-American War, the U.S. won Puerto Rico (along with Guam and the Philippine Islands) from Spain. Puerto Rico has remained part of the U.S. ever since. Puerto Ricans are American citizens, but, if

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they live in Puerto Rico, they don't vote in U.S. elections. They can travel to and from the nation's mainland without immigration restrictions. About 3 million Puerto Ricans live on the mainland, the majority in or near New York City.

Puerto Rico has what is called commonwealth status with the U.S.

government. It receives protection and assistance from the federal government

but has some local authority over its internal affairs. Among Puerto Ricans, there is disagreement about political goals for the island. Some are satisfied with the commonwealth status, some advocate statehood, and others want the island to become independent.

Cuban immigrants and their children make up the third largest group of Hispanics. About 1 million Cubans now live in the U.S. Most came as exiles during or after 1959, when Fidel Castro took over and the country became communist. Most Cubans in the U.S. live in southern Florida, Puerto Rico, New York City, and New Jersey. Many of these immigrants are well-educated with backgrounds in professions or business. As a result, they have a higher standard of living in the U.S. than many other Hispanics.

The influence of the Hispanic culture is felt and enjoyed by the rest of American society. Hispanic food is eagerly consumed everywhere. Nachos (corn chips with hot cheese on top) are about as popular as hot dogs in American ballparks. In supermarkets, salsa (a spicy sauce) sells almost as well as ketchup. Hispanic singers are very popular among younger Americans, as are Spanish dances such as the merengue, tango, samba, and - of course - salsa.

Check your comprehension.

What historical events caused the U.S. to acquire a large Spanish-speaking population? Name at least three.

Illegal Aliens

Illegal aliens are people living in the U.S. without proper authorization.

Many enter the country by sneaking across the border. Others come on temporary student or visitor visas and do not leave when their visas expire.

Most illegal aliens want to stay in the U.S. because employment opportunities are so much greater than in their native countries. Since illegal aliens try hard not to be discovered by the government, it's impossible to get an accurate count

of them. Census Bureau estimates set the number at about 6 million.

In 1986, the U.S. government adopted a new law affecting illegal aliens. It was designed to accomplish two main goals: (1) to allow illegal aliens who had been living in the country since January 1982 to gain legal status if they applied by May 4, 1988, and (2) to discourage others from coming into or staying in the country illegally by making it difficult for them to find employment. The law prohibits American employers from hiring illegals and provides for severe penalties-fines and even imprisonment-if they do so. Under the 1996 law, more than 1 million illegal aliens applied to become legal residents. But this law has also forced employers to check on all prospective employees to be sure that they are allowed to work in the U.S.

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Check your comprehension.

Why has it become more difficult for an illegal alien to get a job?

The Many Contributions of Immigrants

The wide variety of immigrant groups in the U.S. has given the nation great diversity in its industrial development. Germans, Scandinavians, and Poles share the credit for turning millions of acres of wilderness into farmland.

Scandinavians and Canadians helped to develop the lumber industry. The Swedes built the first log cabins. The Swiss brought clock-making and cheese-making skills. The English were experienced in the handling of horses, cattle, and sheep. The Greeks, Italians, Portuguese, and Spanish grew citrus fruits and grapes. Italians started the wine industry. Chinese and Irish laborers built the first railroad that spanned the nation.

In addition to their skills, immigrants brought their political and social

theories, religions, academic traditions, holidays, festivals, sports, arts, hobbies, and foods. The Germans introduced the Christmas tree, kindergarten, and the symphony orchestra. The Dutch brought ice-skating, bowling, golf, and the art of growing tulips. The French taught Americans elegant European cooking and dancing. Italians brought their talents in painting, sculpture, and architecture. The Irish established the Catholic Church as an English-speaking institution, introduced parochial schools, and built many Catholic colleges.

The American diet has also been delightfully affected by various immigrant groups. The Dutch taught Americans to make waffles and doughnuts. The Germans brought hamburgers and sausages. Italians introduced pizza, spaghetti, minestrone, and ravioli. Americans also enjoy Swiss cheeses and fondue, Irish stew, Chinese chow mein, Indian curries, Russian caviar, Middle Eastern shish kebab, Danish pastry, French chocolate mousse, and Turkish coffee.

The U.S. has often been called a melting pot because immigrants from all over have become part of this one nation and have shared a common culture and a common loyalty. But this doesn't mean that immigrants forget their past. On the contrary, immigrants from the same country tend to create their own neighborhoods and establish their native religious and cultural institutions. Most immigrant parents try to teach their children the language, traditions, religious customs, and moral outlook that is their heritage. Many cities and communities have ethnic festivals (featuring ethnic food, songs, dances, stories, and arts and crafts) to bring together people who share a common heritage. Some festivals are sponsored by one group (for example, people of Greek, Irish, or Polish descent). Others include people from dozens of different cultures. These events remind Americans that the nation is not really a melting pot at all. In fact, people now prefer to call it a salad bowl. Why? In a salad, many different elements are

combined into a whole, but each ingredient also retains its individual identity.

That is what happens to immigrants when they become American citizens.

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In spite of the nation's immigrant tradition, it still isn't easy being a newcomer to the U.S. Often, there is family conflict because parents hold onto "old-country" ways while their children become Americanized. For many adult immigrants, learning English is a very difficult task. Finding a good job in this highly technological nation is another challenge. Nevertheless, most immigrants love their adopted land and live happily in it. The U.S. has given many people a sense of hope and safety that they never had before. In return, immigrants have enriched their adopted land with their skills, talents, ideas, and hard work. The U.S. is a strong and prosperous country largely because it is a nation of **immigrants.**

AFTER YOU READ

1. Getting the message

A. On each blank line, write the letter of the phrase that correctly completes each sentence.

1. John F. Kennedy wrote A Nation of Immigrants _____

a. after he became president

b. before he became president

2. Americans speak English because _____.

a. the first Europeans to explore the area were English

b. the majority of the American colonists were English

3. The U.S. today has _____.

a. more Hispanics than African-Americans

b. more African-Americans than Hispanics

4. Puerto Rico is _____ .

a. an American state

b. a U.S. commonwealth

5. The U.S. is compared to a salad bowl because _____

a. immigrants tend to forget their past

b. immigrants tend to keep many traditions from their native country