The Challenge of Many Languages When many different languages are spoken within one country, there are often political and social consequences. In the United States, for example, English has remained the primary language over a long period of time. Immigrants to the United States have historically been required to learn English in order to participate in society. In the past, schools offered classes only in English. Similarly, television programs were almost always in English. And, of course, work for the government and business also required English. The English-only policy was not without social consequences, however. For example, children of immigrants, who were born in the United States and grew up speaking mostly English outside the home, often lost their ability to speak the language of their parents fluently. In their eagerness to become more "American," people lost sight of the fact that being able to speak two languages well is actually a very valuable skill. In recent years in the United States, there has been a change in the English-only pattern. Now, throughout the country, there are many people for whom English is not the primary language. As a result, teaching staffs are multilingual. In addition, government offices provide services to non-English speakers. Even cable television has entertainment and news programming in Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, and so on. In some countries, political agreements recognize the role of multiple languages in the government and educational systems. Canada has two official languages: English and French. Belgium uses three: French, German, and Flemish. In Singapore, English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil are all official languages. India has more than a dozen. When India was established in 1948, one of the major problems concerned a national language. Although Hindi was spoken by the largest number of people, the majority of people did not speak it. India’s solution was to identify sixteen national languages. The constitution permitted government, schools, and commerce to operate in any of them. However, even that solution has not eased the concerns of non-Hindi speakers. In the mid-1950s, there was political agitation to redraw boundaries based on the languages in particular regions. Even now, political upheavals occur in India over language issues. Language is an important part of most people’s identities. Therefore, a great deal of emotion is attached to political choices about language. Political solutions to a diversity of languages require a delicate balance. It is not easy to preserve harmony among different groups. 2. 3. 4 5. Source: Passage adapted from Lustig, Myron W. and Jolene Koester. Intercultural Competence.