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Immigrants and English

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The question of whether or not immigrants want to learn English remains a flashpoint in the immigration debate. Where some may see only a linguistic shortcoming, others interpret an inability to speak English as an unwillingness to fit into American society. Common complaints framed in the form of questions include "Why can't they speak English?" and "Why don't they learn English the way past immigrants learned it?"

As with many other issues, Americans base their conclusions about this subject largely on personal experience. Native-born people who come into contact with the many immigrants who work in restaurants, hotels, and retail, draw conclusions from these encounters about whether immigrants as a group are learning English.

To understand the subject, it is helpful to examine academic studies and census data to see how people's perceptions match up with reality. Moreover, one should review survey questions answered by immigrants, analyze data on earlier immigrants to the United States, and look at current U.S. efforts to teach English to newcomers.

> "The children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren of Latino immigrants learn English well."

DO IMMIGRANTS AND THEIR CHILDREN LEARN ENGLISH?

Do immigrants want to learn English? Confronted with phone prompts to press "1" for English or "2" for Spanish and speaking with service workers with sometimes poor English skills, many Americans believe the answer is "no." However, the data suggest otherwise.

In the 1990 census only 3 percent of immigrants in the country 30 years or more reported not speaking English well, according to the National Research Council's *The New Americans.*[1] Assimilation does occur, but it takes time. Snapshots of English language ability that include many newly arrived immigrants can create a skewed portrait that masks progress made by individual immigrants over the years.[2] Moreover, data that include illegal immigrants can also lead to a misleading impression about the progress of legal immigrants, since temporary migrants are less likely to invest the time and energy in the difficult long-term process of learning English.

The story is quite positive when it comes to the children of immigrants. According to a Pew Hispanic Center survey, 91 percent of second generation children from Hispanic immigrant families and 97 percent from the third generation said they speak English very well or pretty well.[3]

Although some people express concern that Spanish-speaking immigrants will have children and grandchildren who speak Spanish rather than English, research shows the opposite is the case. The children and grandchildren lose their parents' native tongue as they grow up. Frank Bean and Ruben Rumbaut (University of California, Irvine) and Douglas Massey (Princeton University) found that "although the generational life expectancy of Spanish is greater among Mexicans in Southern California than other groups, its demise is all but assured by the third generation."[4]

The research runs counter to the fear that immigrant parents are not encouraging their children to learn English. "Based on an analysis of language loss over the generations, the study concludes that English has never been seriously threatened as the dominant language in America, nor is it under threat today," according to Bean, Rumbaut, and Massey.[5]

THE GOOD OLD DAYS MAY NOT HAVE BEEN AS GOOD AS WE THINK

A key argument in the immigration debate is that earlier

TABLE 1
ABILITY OF HISPANIC IMMIGRANTS AND THEIR CHILDREN TO SPEAK ENGLISH WELL

Hispanic Immigrants	Ability to speak English well or pretty well
First generation	[illegible]
Second generation	[illegible]
Third generation	[illegible]

Source: Pew Hispanic Center.

waves of immigrants learned English quickly, whereas today's immigrants show little inclination to do so. Not only is that sentiment incorrect about today's newcomers, but data show that earlier immigrants were not quite the linguistic superheroes we thought.

"One myth about language and immigration in North America is that nineteenth-century immigrants typically became bilingual almost immediately after arriving, yet little systematic data has been presented for this view," write researchers Miranda E. Wilkerson (Western Illinois University) and Joseph Salmons (University of Wisconsin-Madison). "We present quantitative and qualitative evidence about Germans in Wisconsin, where, into the twentieth century, many immigrants and their descendants remained monolingual, decades after immigration had ceased. Even those who claimed to speak English often had limited command."[6]

An examination of newspapers, court records and other materials, as well census data, led Wilkerson and Salmons to conclude:

> German continued to be the primary language in numerous Wisconsin communities, and some second- and third-generation descendants of immigrants were still monolingual as adults. Understanding this history can help inform contemporary debates about language and immigration and help dismantle the myth that successful immigrant groups of yesterday owed their prosperity to an immediate, voluntary shift to English.[7]

Table 2 shows that many Germans who lived in Wisconsin, who are considered an example of "good" immigrants from the past, did not learn English even after residing in the United States for many years. Twenty-four percent of adults in Hustisford, 22 percent in Schleswig and 21 percent in Hamburg "reported being monolingual speakers of German" in the 1910 census. Wilkerson and Salmons point out why this is so striking: "This comes half a century after large-scale German immigration to many communities had ceased, with the majority of immigrants in these communities arriving before 1880."[8]

TABLE 2
PERCENTAGE OF RESIDENTS SPEAKING ONLY GERMAN: 1910 CENSUS IN WISCONSIN

Wisconsin township/ county/district	Percentage of adults speaking only German
Hustisford, Dodge	24 percent
Schleswig, Manitowoc	22 percent
Hamburg, Marathon	21 percent

Source: Miranda E. Wilkerson and Joseph Salmons, "'Good Old Immigrants of Yesteryear,' Who Didn't Learn English: Germans in Wisconsin," *American Speech 83*, no. 3 (2008): p. 268.

ADULT LANGUAGE CLASSES

As discussed earlier, the data tell us three things. First, over time the vast majority of immigrants to the United States learn English. Second, we know that the children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren of Latino immigrants learn English well, such that by the third generation an inability to communicate in Spanish becomes far more likely than an inability to speak English. Third, the data on Germans in Wisconsin demonstrate that it is untrue that earlier immigrants were linguistic titans who quickly learned English and became fully assimilated into the rest of American society.

Still, critics and supporters of immigration agree that the faster immigrants learn English the better. And immigrants and their offspring agree. "Latinos believe that English is necessary for success in the United States," notes a Pew Hispanic Center report. "Asked whether adult Latinos 'need to learn English to succeed in the

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United States, or can they succeed even if they only speak Spanish,' 89% of Hispanics in the 2002 survey said that they need to learn English. Slightly more Spanish-dominant Hispanics (92%) voiced this belief." [9]

One obstacle to learning English is the lack of available language classes for adults and the time or money to participate in language education. On an annual basis, more than a million adults are enrolled in English language classes that receive federal funding under the Adult Education State Grant Program. That number likely significantly understates the overall number of adults learning English in classrooms across America, including at the workplace or with nonprofit or for-profit entities. [10]

A July 2007 Migration Policy Institute report concluded:

> Our analysis demonstrates that the need for English language and literacy instruction by the nation's LPRs [lawful permanent residents] and unauthorized immigrants dwarfs the scale and abilities of the current service system. The extent of the disconnect between current need and available services makes plain that tinkering at the edges of the current system—whether with nominal increases in funding or continued nudges for performance improvements—will not be enough to meet the growing need for effective, high-quality instruction. [11]

There is no easy answer to how to provide more opportunity for immigrants to learn English. Given current budget problems, it is unlikely that local, state, or federal money will be increased for an issue so low in the vote-getting pecking order. Providing more educational opportunities for adult immigrants will require a combination of increased employer involvement, for-profit educational institutions, volunteer assistance, and the redirecting of charitable activity.

CONCLUSION

Worries that a large number of non-English-speaking immigrants will overwhelm Americans and the dominance of the English language in America are unfounded. Not only does the English language predominate in the United States, it is also often the most important language in traditionally non-English-speaking countries.

A description of the new book *The English Is Coming!: How One Language Is Sweeping the World*, by Leslie Dunton-Downer, notes:

> English has fast become the number one language for everything from business and science, diplomacy and education, entertainment and environmentalism to socializing and beyond—virtually any human activity unfolding on a global scale. Worldwide, nonnative speakers of English now outnumber natives three to one; and in China alone, more people use English than in the United States—a remarkable feat for a language that got its start as a mongrel tongue on an island fifteen hundred years ago. [12]

In other words, even people who never set foot inside the United States are learning English and consider it important to do so. That makes it strange to think people who live in America and stand to gain great financial and social benefits from acquiring English would have no interest in learning the language.

[1] National Research Council, *The New Americans*, advance copy (Washington: National Academy Press, May 1997), p. S-10.
[2] Julia Preston, "Latino Immigrants Children Found Grasping English," *New York Times*, November 30, 2007.
[3] Shirin Hakimzadeh and D'Vera Cohn, *English Usage among Hispanics in the United States* (Washington: Pew Hispanic Center, 2007), p. 4.
[4] "Immigration No Threat to English Use in the U.S.: Study," Reuters, September 13, 2006.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Miranda E. Wilkerson and Joseph Salmons, "'Good Old Immigrants of Yesteryear,' Who Didn't Learn English: Germans in Wisconsin," *American Speech 83*, no. 3 (2008): p. 259.
[7] Ibid., p. 259.
[8] Ibid., p. 268.
[9] Hakimzadeh and Cohn, p. 1.
[10] *English Language Learning*, GAO-09-575, July 2009, p. 16.
[11] Margie McHugh, Julia Gelatt, and Michael Fix, *Adult English Language Instruction in the United States: Determining Need and Investing Wisely* (Washington: Migration Policy Institute, July 2007), pp. 3-4.
[12] Leslie Dunton-Downer, *The English Is Coming!: How One Language Is Sweeping the World* (New York: Touchstone, 2010).