Immigration
RESEARCH AND POLICY BRIEF
CATO INSTITUTE
September 17, 2019 | Number 14

Immigrants Learn English

Immigrants' Language Acquisition Rates by Country of Origin and Demographics since 1900

By Michelangelo Landgrave

The ability to speak English is an important part of immigrant assimilation in the United States. In contemporary politics there is a concern that although earlier waves of immigrants learned English, newer cohorts are doing so at lower rates. This brief uses U.S. Census data to answer this concern and show that English language acquisition rates have increased over the past 100 years. About 91 percent of immigrants in the United States between 1980 and 2010 reportedly spoke English compared with 86 percent who lived here from 1900 to 1930. While immigrants with different backgrounds are more or less likely to learn English than others, our analysis unambiguously shows that today's immigrants are more likely to learn English than immigrants in the beginning of the last century.

BACKGROUND

Americans and immigrants believe that speaking English is a significant marker of American identity and intrinsically important.[1] According to a 2018 Pew Research Center poll, about 26 percent of Americans who said they frequently or sometimes come into contact with immigrants who speak little or no English say that it bothers them.[2] Other recent research found that the American public is concerned with whether immigrants are attempting to assimilate but that Americans do not demand perfect assimilation—meaning that some variance is acceptable. There is even evidence that Americans receive immigrants with an accent more fondly than immigrants without an accent.[3] Aside from its influence on natives' attitudes toward immigrants, learning English is correlated with higher educational attainment,[4] earnings,[5] social assimilation,[6] and improved mental health.[7]

The largest determinant of English language acquisition among immigrants is their age at entry, because there is a critical period in human development when the mind is best able to acquire new languages.[8] Even if humans are equally able to learn a language at any age, younger immigrants would still have a greater incentive to learn.[9] A 10-year-old immigrant can, all else constant, reasonably expect to use English longer than an 80-year-old immigrant, thus justifying the investment of time and energy to become fluent. This should be particularly pronounced among immigrants who seek to permanently reside in the United States, as proxied by naturalization and marriage with native-born Americans.

The region of immigrant origin might also impact their rate of English language acquisition. Immigrants in the latter half of the 20th century and early 21st century come mostly from Latin America and Asia, while immigrants 100 years ago came overwhelmingly from Europe.[10] The difference in region of origin between older and newer immigrant cohorts may matter because linguistic differences between English and an immigrant's native language increase the cost of learning English. On its face, a linguistic distance hypothesis is

Michelangelo Landgrave is a political science doctoral student at the University of California, Riverside.

plausible in explaining differences in English acquisition among immigrants, but it is unclear why Spanish-speaking immigrants would assimilate at a different rate than earlier Italian-speaking immigrants did because they both speak a similarly distant Romance language. A prior analysis of the 1980–1990 decennial censuses found no support for the linguistic distance hypothesis.[11]

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

This brief uses decennial U.S. Census data from the 1900–1930 and 1980–2010 censuses to compare English fluency rates for the groups of foreign-born residents in each period.[12] Those two 30-year periods are the focus of this brief because the Census either did not ask about immigrant's knowledge of English in the 1940–1970 decennial censuses or did not do so in a manner comparable with other years. English-speaking ability was reintroduced into Census surveys following 1975 amendments of the Voting Rights Act intended to safeguard non-English-speaking minorities.[13] For the 2010 Census, the American Community Survey is preferable because the 2010 decennial Census excludes several important questions regarding immigrant status.

The 1900–1930 decennial Census reported on a binary scale whether respondents knew English or not. Starting in 1980, the government altered the question to measure the level of English language proficiency on a spectrum. For comparability with prior data, we recoded the 1980–2010 responses as a binary "know English" or "don't know English." The original version of the 1980–2010 question has a three-point proficiency scale: "speaks [English] very well," "speaks [English] well," and "speaks [English] but not well." For our analysis we have combined all three responses into "know English." The three-point proficiency scale was only recorded for those who speak a non-English language at home while those who reported speaking only English do not have a recorded proficiency level. There are several concerns about the validity of the English proficiency scale, such as interviewer effects and differing reference points.[14] Although the proficiency scale has received some validation, the recoded binary form is more useful for historical comparisons.[15]

Data limitations reduce the scope of this analysis. It is impossible, for instance, to break down English acquisition by educational attainment because earlier Census data did not ask the necessary questions, but contemporary data do find that greater educational attainment is associated with higher rates of English acquisition.[16]

Table 1

Region of origin by cohort

Region	1900–1930 cohort	1980–2010 cohort
Other North America	9.07%	3.92%
Latin America and Caribbean	3.86%	45.86%
Europe	84.17%	22.44%
Asia	2.78%	25.03%
Africa	0.04%	2.18%
Oceania	0.09%	0.56%

Source: Author's analysis of U.S. Census data.

Table 2

Age at entry by cohort

Age at entry	1900–1930 cohort	1980–2010 cohort
0–5	10.13%	10.06%
6–12	11.13%	11.04%
13–18	14.48%	13.62%
19–25	23.18%	22.44%
26–39	26.84%	27.55%
40+	14.24%	15.29%

Source: Author's analysis of U.S. Census data.

Table 3

English fluency by decade; 1900–1930, 1980–2010

Year	Know English	Don't know English
1900	89.17%	10.83%
1910	77.02%	22.98%
1920	86.01%	13.99%
1930	91.48%	8.52%
1980	92.71%	7.29%
1990	91.43%	8.57%
2000	89.67%	10.33%
2010	90.98%	9.02%

Source: Author's analysis of U.S. Census data.

MIGRANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Table 1 shows the region of origin for immigrants in the different cohorts. For the 1900–1930 cohort, almost all immigrants who lived in the United States were from Europe. From 1980 to 2010, immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean comprised the largest percentage of the foreign-born population, but no region of origin approached the dominance that Europe had in the earlier cohort.

Table 4

English fluency by region of origin and cohort

Region	All	1900–1930 cohort	1980–2010 cohort
Other North America	98.90%	96.17%	99.66%
Latin America and Caribbean	83.57%	51.12%	83.90%
Europe	94.74%	88.18%	97.69%
Asia	94.80%	62.57%	95.23%
Africa	98.82%	97.66%	98.82%
Oceania	99.06%	94.18%	99.15%

Source: Author's analysis of U.S. Census data.

Table 5

English fluency by select countries of origin and cohort

Country	1900	1910	1920	1930	1980	1990	2000	2010
Mexico	34.58%	16.53%	38.72%	49.36%	77.61%	80.80%	78.92%	81.43%
China	57.83%	51.19%	66.25%	72.11%	84.85%	83.68%	86.08%	85.96%
Japan	21.65%	43.05%	54.69%	64.08%	96.67%	97.54%	98.64%	98.78%
Germany	94.82%	89.97%	95.06%	97.29%	N/A	99.83%	99.81%	99.86%
Italy	61.39%	51.47%	76.45%	85.66%	96.55%	97.31%	97.67%	98.16%
Ireland	99.52%	99.73%	98.45%	99.88%	99.97%	99.95%	99.86%	100.00%

Source: Author's analysis of U.S. Census data.

Table 6

English acquisition by age at entry and cohort

Age at entry	All	1900–1930 cohort	1980–2010 cohort
0–5	97.77%	96.76%	97.90%
6–12	96.87%	94.75%	97.14%
13–18	91.32%	91.64%	91.26%
19–25	90.14%	86.62%	90.68%
26–39	90.22%	79.13%	91.20%
40+	80.54%	64.40%	81.19%

Source: Author's analysis of U.S. Census data.

While immigrant region of origin has shifted, age has not changed nearly as much. Table 2 shows that immigrants are still predominantly of working age, 19–39 years old. Older migrants, age 40 and above, make up approximately 15 percent of the total immigrant population in both cohorts.

ENGLISH ACQUISITION

English language acquisition is stable over time across the two cohorts but is slightly higher in the modern period of 1980–2010 (Table 3). The average rate of "know English" was 91.2 percent from 1980 to 2010 compared with 86 percent from 1900 to 1930.

English language fluency differs by immigrants based on their region of origin and when they arrived. Unsurprisingly, almost all immigrants from North America, who are mostly Canadians, speak English. Without exception, English acquisition has improved among immigrants from all regions of origin from the 1900–1930 and the corresponding 1980–2010 cohorts. Immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean

Table 7

English acquisition by citizenship status and cohort

Citizenship status	All	1900–1930 cohort	1980–2010 cohort
Citizen	97.10%	96.23%	97.23%
Noncitizen	85.17%	76.44%	86.03%

Source: Author's analysis of U.S. Census data.

Table 8

English acquisition by spouse's nativity and cohort, married respondents only

Married to:	All	1900–1930 cohort	1980–2010 cohort
Immigrant	87.98%	83.74%	88.44%
Native	97.06%	91.52%	98.34%

Source: Author's analysis of U.S. Census data.

improved their English language skills by 32.78 percentage points from the earlier to the later cohort—the largest increase for any region of origin. Despite this increase over time, Latin America and Caribbean immigrants, composed primarily of Mexican immigrants, still have lower rates of English acquisition than immigrants from any other region.

Historically, Mexico, China, Japan, Germany, Italy, and Ireland sent the most immigrants in the two periods (Table 5). Of these countries, English language fluency improved the most for immigrants from Japan, with a 77.13 percentage point increase in English language acquisition between 1900 and 2010. Immigrants from Mexico and Italy made the second- and third-largest gains over the same period at 46.85 percentage points and 36.77 percentage points, respectively. Mexican immigrants have among the lowest English acquisition rates, but all immigrants from every country from 1980 and onward are speaking English at substantially higher rates than immigrants from the same country in earlier decades.

As mentioned, age at entry is the best determinant of English language acquisition among immigrants (Table 6). Ninety-seven percent of immigrants who arrived before age five know English. English acquisition rates are lowest among the oldest arrivals who were age 40 and above at entry. Except for immigrants who arrived between ages 13 and 18, English acquisition has increased among all age groups. Table 6 supports the theory that there is a nonlinear effect between the age of first exposure and successful English language acquisition that is consistent with the critical period hypothesis.

Tables 7 and 8 show that immigrants who are citizens and immigrants who marry native-born Americans are more likely to speak English. These two variables serve as proxies for an immigrant's intention for permanent settlement in the United States and their length of residency, both of which increase the utility of learning English. In all categories the newest cohort (1980–2010) of immigrants has higher English acquisition rates than the earlier cohort (1900–1930).

CONCLUSION

English language acquisition among immigrants in the 1980–2010 period is higher than in the 1900–1930 period. Without controls and by just comparing the two cohorts, modern immigrants have better English language skills than those of the past. The results are the same whether their age of arrival differs, whether they are married to native-born Americans or immigrants, or if they come from different regions of the world. Learning English is an important aspect of becoming an American. Whatever complaints American voters have about current immigrants, they typically have English language skills greater than our immigrant ancestors.

NOTES

1. Carlos Garcia and Loretta E. Bass, "American Identity and Attitudes toward English Language Policy Initiatives," *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 34, no. 1 (2007): 63; Daniel J. Hopkins, "The Upside of Accents: Language, Inter-Group Difference, and Attitudes toward Immigration," *British Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 3 (2015): 531–57; Hovannes Abramyan and Gerard Alexander, "A Distinction with a Difference: The Influence of Social Concerns and Racial Prejudice on Support for Amnesty," *The Social Science Journal* (2019); and Julie A. Dowling, Christopher G. Ellison, and David L. Leal, "Who Doesn't Value English? Debunking Myths about Mexican Immigrants' Attitudes Toward the English Language," *Social Science Quarterly* 93, no. 2 (June 2012): 356–78.

2. Pew Research Center, "Shifting Public Views on Legal Immigration into the U.S.," June 28, 2018.

3. Daniel J. Hopkins, "The Upside of Accents: Language, Inter-Group Difference, and Attitudes toward Immigration," *British Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 3 (2015): 531–57.

4. Feysa Demie and Steve Strand, "English Language Acquisition and Educational Attainment at the End of Secondary School," *Educational Studies* 32, no. 2 (2006): 215–31.

5. Francisco L. Rivera-Batiz, "English Language Proficiency and the Economic Progress of Immigrants," *Economics Letters* 34, no. 3 (1990): 295–300; and Hoyt Bleakley and Aimee Chin, "Language Skills and Earnings: Evidence from Childhood Immigrants," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 86, no. 2 (2004): 481–96.

6. Hoyt Bleakley and Aimee Chin, "Age at Arrival, English Proficiency, and Social Assimilation among U.S. Immigrants," *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 2, no. 1 (2010): 165–92.

7. Suvarna Alladi et al., "Bilingualism Delays Age at Onset of Dementia, Independent of Education and Immigration Status," *Neurology* 81, no. 22 (2013): 1938–44.

8. Wilder Penfield and Lamar Roberts, *Speech and Brain Mechanisms* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959); James Emil Flege, Grace H. Yeni-Komshian, and Serena Liu, "Age Constraints on Second-Language Acquisition," *Journal of Memory and Language* 41, no. 1 (1999): 78–104; and Kenji Hakuta, Ellen Bialystok, and Edward Wiley, "Critical Evidence: A Test of the Critical-Period Hypothesis for Second-Language Acquisition," *Psychological Science* 14, no. 1 (2003): 31–38.

9. Barry R. Chiswick and Paul W. Miller, "Negative and Positive Assimilation, Skill Transferability, and Linguistic Distance," *Journal of Human Capital* 6, no. 1 (2012): 35–55.

10. Charles B. Keely, "Effects of the Immigration Act of 1965 on Selected Population Characteristics of Immigrants to the United States," *Demography* 8, no. 2 (1971): 157–69; and Ximena Clark, Timothy J. Hatton, and Jeffrey G. Williamson, "Where Do U.S. Immigrants Come from, and Why?," National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper no. 8998, June 2002.

11. Geoffrey Carliner, "The Language Ability of U.S. Immigrants: Assimilation and Cohort Effects," *International Migration Review* 34, no. 1 (2000): 158–82.

12. Steven Ruggles et al., *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 6.0* [dataset] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2019).

13. U.S. Census Bureau, *American Community Survey: Why We Ask: Language Spoken at Home* (Washington: U.S. Department of Commerce, 2015).

14. Paul Siegel, Elizabeth Martin, and Rosalind Bruno, "Language Use and Linguistic Isolation: Historical Data and Methodological Issues," in "2000 Seminar on Integrating Federal Statistical Information and Processes," Statistical Policy Working Paper no. 32, Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology, Office of Management and Budget, Washington, April 2001, pp. 167–90.

15. Erik R. Vickstrom et al., "How Well—Still Good? Assessing the Validity of the American Community Survey English-Ability Question," Social, Economic, and Housing Statistics Division Working Paper no. 2015–18, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, October 2015.

16. Katherine Fennelly and Nicole Palasz, "English Language Proficiency of Immigrants and Refugees in the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area," *International Migration* 41, no. 5 (2003): 93–125.