

Immigrants who live, work together less apt to learn English, study finds

April 9 2013, by Steve Leer

Adult immigrants living and working in places where they are surrounded by others who share their ethnic backgrounds are less likely to learn or be proficient in the English language, say two Purdue University researchers.

In a study of Chinese and [Mexican immigrants](#) age 25 and older who came to the United States for reasons other than attending school, Purdue agricultural economists Brigitte Waldorf and Raymond Florax and three research collaborators found that residing and working in ethnic "enclaves" made it easier for immigrants to continue speaking their native language and put off - or avoid altogether - learning English.

Failing to know English hurts an immigrant's ability to integrate into American society and could limit their occupational opportunities, Waldorf and Florax said. Integration, including the ability to speak English, is at the center of the national debate on immigration reform and "pathway to citizenship" proposals offered by President Obama and Congress.

Living and working among a diverse group of people motivates immigrants to become [English speakers](#), Waldorf and Florax said.

"In short, you can say that Chinatown, or little Italy, or any other enclave, is not very conducive to learning English," he said.

The Purdue study, "Living and Working in Ethnic Enclaves: English

Language Proficiency of Immigrants in U.S. Metropolitan Areas," measured the effects of residential and occupational segregation on immigrants' ability to speak English and the effects of living with family members who were fluent in English.

Researchers looked at U.S. Census data and previous immigrant studies to produce [English proficiency](#) snapshots of non-student Chinese and Mexicans who moved to the United States. Chinese and Mexicans are among the largest immigrant groups.

Census data indicate that while 32 percent of the U.S. population growth between 2000 and 2010 came from immigration, the proportion of English-speaking immigrants has declined from 85 percent in 1900 to 71 percent in 2010. The decline in English proficiency can be attributed, in part, to how immigrants assimilate into U.S. society when they arrive.

"In the U.S. there is basically no assistance with any sort of assimilation. Immigrants come into the country, and they are on their own," Waldorf said. "Other countries often take a much more active role in ensuring that immigrants can speak the native language, with governments offering language courses as part of the citizenship process."

Because there is no English proficiency requirement for immigrants, many who don't know the language when they arrive in the United States choose places to live and work where they feel most comfortable - places where English-speaking skills aren't necessary, the researchers said. Whether and how they learn English varies, depending on their educational level, job skills, language skills of others in their household and, sometimes, their country of origin.

The Purdue study found that immigrants with higher education levels and job skills were more likely to speak English or wanted to learn the language. Living with family members who already spoke English also

was conducive to acquiring at least conversational English skills - especially for immigrants with job skills.

The presence of English-speaking children in the household often plays out differently for Chinese and Mexican immigrants. In Chinese immigrant homes, English-speaking children usually serve as language teachers to non-English-speaking adults. In Mexican immigrant homes, children with English skills often serve as translators for adults not proficient in English.

Country of origin also is a factor, the study found. Because accommodations are made for Spanish-speaking people in most of the [United States](#), Mexican immigrants can get along easier without learning English than Chinese immigrants, who often don't enjoy those same accommodations.

Learning the English language is just as important to immigrants' economic status as it is to their ability to function in social circles, Florax said. Any immigration reform policy should be structured to meet the special needs of different [immigrant groups](#).

"There is no one-size-fits-all," Florax said.

[Immigrants](#) who integrate into American society can still hold on to their cultural traditions, Waldorf said.

"Learning English does not mean you forget your culture or your own [language](#)," she said. "You can keep your own culture and still be American. It's not one or the other."

The Purdue study will be published in an upcoming issue of *Papers of Regional Science*. The online edition is at [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/1111/\(ISSN\)1435-5957](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/1111/(ISSN)1435-5957) .

Provided by Purdue University

Citation: Immigrants who live, work together less apt to learn English, study finds (2013, April 9)
retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-04-immigrants-apt-english.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.