

Diversity is good for your English

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New research from experts at The University of Manchester has revealed that as the country's linguistic diversity increases, speakers of other languages are also becoming more proficient in English.

Professor Yaron Matras and Deepthi Gopal say England and Wales' ethnic minorities are now much more likely to know English well.

Their proficiency in English, they add, is not necessarily lower in areas with a high concentration of speakers of other languages, such as London.

A tiny two per cent of the population cannot speak English, finds the research team in the latest of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation funded briefings for the University's Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity (CoDE).

Of those who reported a [language](#) other than English to be their 'main language', 79% said they spoke English very well or well.

The research based on 2011 Census data, also provides a fascinating picture of how Non-English languages are spread unevenly across England and Wales.

Polish, for example, is widely distributed and spoken in 95% of electoral wards in England and Wales. By contrast, Yiddish, which is our most clustered language, is found largely within Hackney and Salford.

Of the many languages other than English spoken, the largest by far is

Polish, listed as the main language by 13% of the 4.2 million people who reported a non-English language in England and Wales.

The second and third largest non-English main languages are Panjabi and Urdu at 6.6% and 6.5% respectively. 15,487 people (or 0.03%) reported British Sign Language as their main language in 2011.

Professor Matras said: "The near universality of good levels of English proficiency, shown by the census figures, is unsurprising.

"But what perhaps goes counter to some circles of opinion is that high [linguistic diversity](#) goes hand in hand with this trend.

"For many, the longer a non native English speaker lives within an environment where English is widely spoken– the proficiency with which he or she speaks it will improve.

"But the 2011 Census also shows how recent arrivals are more likely to say they can speak English well than those who arrived during earlier periods - 80% compared with 75%. English is becoming more universal."

Among Chinese speakers, who arrived after 2001, for example, 89% speak a main language other than English yet 81% of these can speak English well.

But for those who arrived before 2001, 64% speak a main language other than English, but only 68% of these can speak English well.

He added: "We should bear in mind that the Census may not always accurately reflect numbers of speakers of individual languages.

"The different ways in which people understand the census question

'What is your main language?' can lead to unexpected answers.

"Within Manchester, for example, counts of schoolchildren from the School Census suggest that the numbers of people speaking Yoruba and Lingala may be far higher."

Other findings include:

- The local authorities in which the highest percentage of non-English main language speakers reported not being able to speak English well or at all were Bolsover in Derbyshire and Boston in Lincolnshire.
- The local authority in which people reported a non-English main language most frequently (42%) was Newham, London. Even here, 9% said they could not speak English well.

More information: www.ethnicity.ac.uk/

Provided by University of Manchester

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