

Beyond proficiency: How early English exposure influences non-native speakers

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Non-native speakers exposed to English before moving to America are more likely to use the language in their daily lives in the United States, according to a report led by Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs.

Such early exposure – through newspapers, books, TV and classes as well as traveling – may help determine an immigrant's socioeconomic mobility, as English proficiency is strongly tied to cultural and social assimilation. The report, featured in the journal *Social Science Research*, is one of the first to examine English proficiency among immigrants before moving to the United States.

"English-language ability is one of the most important determinants of socioeconomic mobility in the United States, with strong effects on employment, earnings and occupational status," said lead author Douglas Massey, the Henry G. Bryant Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. "For immigrants relocating to the United States, English usage is paramount to their cultural and social assimilation."

Massey and his collaborators – Ilana Redstone Akresh from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Reanne Frank from The Ohio State University – used data collected by the New Immigrant Survey, a nationally representative sample of non-native speakers who were granted legal permanent residency in the United States between May and November 2003. Before immigrants can apply for U.S.

citizenships, they must be permanent U.S. residents for at least five years.

To determine the influence of early English exposure, the researchers analyzed a set of pre-migration behaviors including trips to the U.S. before moving, how often the respondents consumed English media like newspapers or TV and whether the respondents were educated using English. To measure social assimilation, the researchers evaluated the participants' responses to a series of questions in which they were asked to list the languages they use at work, with friends and at home.

Massey and his collaborators ran a series of mathematical regressions to see whether any patterns or relationships emerged. Overall, they find that English proficiency is not rare – nearly 50 percent of respondents are proficient. However, the odds of using English at work, with friends or at home in the United States are nearly three times greater for those who speak it well or very well compared with those who do not. Likewise, those who consumed English-language media abroad were about 30 percent more likely to use English at home once living in the United States, and those who took courses in English abroad were around 10 percent more likely to speak English here.

Still, Massey and his colleagues stress that English proficiency does not necessarily translate into social, economic or cultural integration or assimilation. They find that language assimilation is partially contingent on occupational achievements, and the use of English socially is very much predicted by the status and duration of one's current job in the United States.

"Because of globalization, even if one is proficient in English, that doesn't mean that he or she necessarily uses it for integration into American social networks and institutions or for cultural compensation," Massey said. "It is entirely possible to work in a foreign-language

environment, interact with same-language foreigners and consume foreign-language media while making sparing use of English."

Overall, the researchers argue that by studying English proficiency after an immigrant settles in the United States, social scientists are missing the bigger picture.

"We live in a globalized world in which non-native speakers are increasingly exposed to English at home, school and through prior visits to English-speaking countries, so language assimilation does not begin with the moment of arrival for permanent U.S. residence," Massey said. "Scholars need to take prior English experience into account with regards to their thinking and modeling."

"In terms of policy, it's important to remember that there is not much policy makers can do to steer people into one language or another. People will speak whatever languages they see as useful in their daily lives," said Massey. "In the end, the vast majority of immigrants learn English – at least at some level – and virtually all of their children who group up in the United States become English dominant."

More information: The paper, "Beyond English proficiency: Rethinking immigrant integration," first appeared online Jan. 27 in the journal *Social Science Research*. The story will also appear in print in the May 2014 issue.

Provided by Princeton University

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