



## Beyond English proficiency: Rethinking immigrant integration



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 26 July 2013

Revised 5 November 2013

Accepted 19 January 2014

Available online 27 January 2014

#### Keywords:

Assimilation

Integration

Immigration

Language

Culture

English

### ABSTRACT

We develop and test a conceptual model of English language acquisition and the strength of the latter in predicting social and cultural assimilation. We present evidence that the path to English proficiency begins with exposure to English in the home country and on prior U.S. trips. English proficiency, then, has direct links to the intermediate migration outcomes of occupational status in the U.S., the amount of time in the U.S. since the most recent trip, and the co-ethnic residential context in the U.S. In turn, pre-migration characteristics and the intermediate characteristics work in tandem with English proficiency to determine social assimilation in the U.S., while cultural assimilation is primarily determined by pre-migration habits. A shift in focus to English use is desirable in studies of immigrant integration.

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## 1. Introduction

Many studies have identified English language acquisition as a critical step in the larger process of immigrant assimilation. To that end, English proficiency has long been one of the key indicators that scholars examine when gauging integration (Alba et al., 2002; Bleakley and Chin, 2010; Chiswick et al., 2004; Chiswick and Miller, 1998; Dávila and Mora, 2000; Espenshade and Fu, 1997; Espinosa and Massey, 1997; Stevens, 1991). The focus on proficiency is attributable in part to the measure's general widespread availability in multiple surveys and in the decennial census and in part to its conceptual convenience as such an indicator. At a societal level and at a policy level, however, little convincing of the importance of English for non-native speakers is required. Few people doubt its importance for success in the labor market and its criticality for full incorporation into the U.S.

English language acquisition is generally explained largely as a function of the duration of time living in the United States. While several additional factors have been found to increase the likelihood of English proficiency, this one stands out as prominent. Although most commonly predicted using this and other post-migration characteristics, English language acquisition may, in fact, begin before immigration, either through formal study in English or through informal exposure to English language media prior to departure, effects we attempt to explicitly model here.

Furthermore, among legal immigrants who are just receiving their permanent resident visas, English language learning may have occurred over the course of prior visits to the U.S. – before adjusting to permanent resident status – rather than being the result of a single concentrated visit or a function of time since entry for settlement. Massey and Malone (2002) found that two thirds of all “new” legal permanent residents have prior experience in the U.S. Accounting for this fragmented accumulation of U.S. experience is another contribution of the current study.

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Owing to a lack of data, previous work has not factored in how exposure to English before immigration affects English language ability after settlement, which may lead to biased estimates of how duration of U.S. exposure after immigration affects English ability. Logic alone suggests that factors such as prior exposure to English might be critical in determining current English language ability. In addition, although prior work has considered the relationship between English language ability and economic outcomes, little to no work has been done on how language ability is linked to broader indicators of social and cultural assimilation, again owing to a lack of appropriate data.

Our critical observation is that the ability to speak English well does not necessarily mean that it is actually *used* in the U.S. in ways that promote cultural and social integration. If current societal concerns over recent immigrants center in part on their level of integration in the U.S. and how it compares to that of previous waves of immigration (see [Card, 2005](#); [Massey, 1981](#) for examples), we argue that the often exclusive focus on English proficiency is misplaced. Clearly a non-native English speaker may develop proficiency, but this indicator alone remains silent on the question of whether the language is used in daily life. Alongside standard measures of English ability, investigators must also examine the transition to English in social and cultural settings. In this paper we therefore extend research to consider processes operating at both ends of the assimilation process, examining how pre-immigration exposure to English and other pre-immigration circumstances condition English language ability at the time permanent residence is achieved, as well as the degree to which language ability translates into the use of English for social and cultural purposes given the receipt of permanent residence.

## 2. Conceptual model

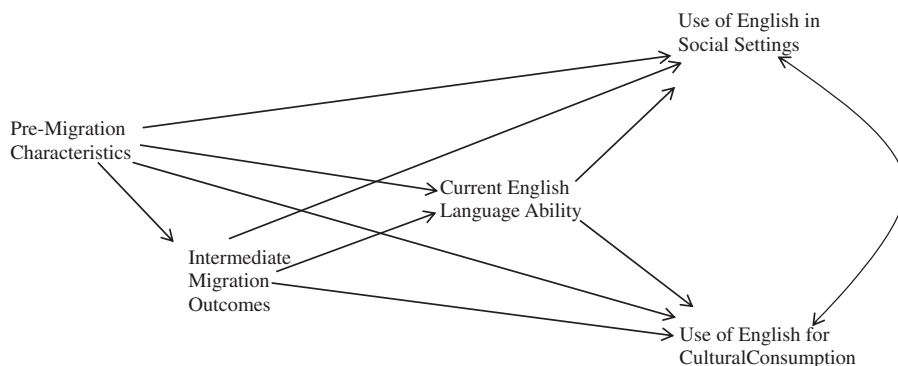
All theories of immigrant assimilation – whether classic, bumpy, segmented, or neoclassical – recognize proficiency in the language of the host country as a critical step in the process of integration among immigrants who are not themselves native speakers ([Alba and Nee, 2003](#); [Gans, 1992](#); [Gordon, 1964](#); [Portes and Zhou, 1993](#)). Proficiency is hypothesized to increase through contact with the host society and through interaction with members of the native population. Although contact and interaction are in some cases measured directly in statistical models of assimilation (e.g., [Espinosa and Massey, 1997](#)), more commonly they are proxied by years since arrival ([Grenier, 1984](#); [Stevens, 1992, 1994](#)) with arrival conceptualized as an event that occurred at a single point in time ([Redstone and Massey, 2004](#)). Years since arrival and language ability both commonly appear as predictors in models of economic assimilation ([Chiswick, 1978, 1979](#)).

Here we do not seek to question the theoretical relevance of language ability in models of assimilation, but to challenge the implicit assumption that arrival is a discrete, one-time event and that language acquisition is necessarily something that occurs only after it has occurred.

In doing so, we build on the idea that immigration is a process and not an event. Although this fact is widely recognized in studies of undocumented migration and is built into the structure of data from the Mexican Migration Project (MMP) and the Latin American Migration Project (LAMP) through the compilation of detailed migration histories ([Donato et al., 2010](#); [Durand and Massey, 2004](#)), it is not generally taken into account in general data sources such as the Census, Current Population Survey, and American Community Survey, which generally ask when an immigrant “came to the United States to stay.”

As a result, studies of undocumented migrants that use data from the MMP and LAMP typically use total time spent in the United States across multiple trips in models of assimilation, thereby accounting for learning that occurred before the last entry ([Aguilera and Massey, 2003](#); [Espinosa and Massey, 1997](#); [Phillips and Massey, 1999](#)) whereas studies of immigrants in general and legal immigrants in particular rely only on time since they arrived “to stay,” implicitly assuming immigration occurred once and any English proficiency was acquired since then. To the extent that these assumptions are incorrect, the models will be misspecified and the parameter estimates biased.

There is one source of data on legal immigrants that does not make these implicit assumptions. Indeed, the New Immigrant Survey explicitly gathered information on trips to the United States prior to receipt of legal residence and asked direct questions about exposure to in English in the home country prior to the latest arrival. In this study we are thus able to model



**Fig. 1.** Conceptual model of English language acquisition and its effects on social and cultural assimilation.

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