

Migration Patterns and English Language Proficiency among First Generation Migrants to the U.S.

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Description of the Topic

Migrants to the US may follow one of several paths to arrival. Some migrants come directly to the US and do not subsequently migrate out of the country, others migrate to one or more intermediary countries before arriving in the US, and others migrate to the US, return to their home countries, then reenter the US again and may repeat this process several times. Migrants following these different paths may be incorporated into the US in different ways and may have different means and incentives to learn English. This research will seek to understand how these various patterns of migration interact with acquisition of English.

Theoretical Focus

The literature on theories of why and how immigrants learn English can be broken down into four main veins: psycholinguistic constraints on second (or higher order) language acquisition, economic incentives to learn English, acculturation, and assimilation. The literature on psycholinguistic determinants focuses on the mental ability of humans to learn a new language after childhood. This literature draws heavily from the field of linguistics to understand how the brain learns languages and what increases or decreases mental capabilities to do so (Chiswick and Miller 2001; Stevens 1999). The economic literature focuses on the monetary incentives to learn English. This literature focuses on potential employment and economic gains to learning the dominant language of the United States (Waldinger and Lichter 2003; Chiswick and Miller 1998; Borjas 1994; Mirowsky and Ross 1984). The acculturation literature discusses the role of learning English as part of an immigrant's identity. An immigrant can choose to identify primarily with co-ethnics, or over time an immigrant may identify more strongly as American or otherwise with a hyphenated identity (Padilla and Perez 2003; Zhou 1997; Young and Gardner 1990; Stevens and Swicegood 1987; Schumann 1986). Learning English plays a role in how an immigrant understands their place in American society, and in turn how an immigrant views their role in American society may influence whether (and to what extent) an immigrant learns English. The assimilation literature investigates the role of language in immigrants joining the mainstream US culture. English is seen as a central element in the American mainstream, and so learning English greatly facilitates an immigrant's journey to becoming a part of this mainstream (Alba and Nee 2003; Bean and Stevens 2003; Chiswick and Miller 2001; Stevens 1999; Alba and Nee 1997; Espenshade and Fu 1997; Stevens 1994; Veltman 1988; Stevens and Swicegood 1987; Grenier 1984).

We are currently unaware of research that has investigated the role of migration patterns in acquiring English language proficiency. This research will further the conversation of the determinants of English language learning among migrants by filling a research gap. While much has been written on the topic of English language acquisition among migrants, this research will approach the topic from a new perspective.

Data and Methods

The New Immigrant Survey is a longitudinal study of legal first generation migrants to the US. It uses a nationally representative sample of migrants. We use data from the first complete wave conducted between 2003 and 2004. The complete sample from this wave contains 8,573 adults. Data is available for all international migrations undertaken by participants up through the date of the survey, recorded by the month and year of migration for each country. These migrations are self-reported from the migrants' memory. Participants also self-report oral and aural proficiency in English on a scale of 1-4, 1 representing understanding or speaking English "very well" and 4 representing "not at all".

Using migration history data, three categories were constructed: direct migration (84.5%), transit or step migration (10.9%), and return migration (4.6%). 715 cases were removed from the data because they did not list the United States in the migration history. Preliminary crosstabulations and multinomial logit models indicate that the distribution of migration pattern is non-random by country of origin. Maps are presented displaying migration pattern prevalence by country of origin. We use ordinal logistic modeling to predict the language skills of migrants in each category to see how the categories correlate with language acquisition and language proficiency.

Expected Findings

We expect to find statistically significant differences in English language proficiency between these groups, when controlling for SES, country of origin, age, sex, and other control variables. Most research has focused on variables such as length of time in the US, linguistic similarities between migrants' native language and English, age at migration, economic incentives, and acculturation and assimilation as means and drivers to learn English. We are unaware of research that has used migration patterns to investigate English language proficiency differences between migrants. This research will help to understand why and how migrants learn English to varying degrees of proficiency.

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