

English-Language Use and Acquisition For U.S. Children

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Introduction

For many immigrants to the United States, the ability to communicate in English can be a challenge. This challenge is salient to those immigrating and to their children. How long it could potentially take these immigrant children to acquire English-language skills is examined in this research.

In Table 1, we see that the population 5 years and over and the population 5-17 years old both reported around 20 percent speaking a languages other than English at home. Of these two groups, however, the school-aged children reporting speaking English “very well” was greater than reported by the population 5 years and over (15 percent versus 11 percent). This indicates children may not have as much need for language assistance than the population as a whole but that still leave 2.5 million children aged 5 and over who had language needs.

Objective

This poster examines the patterns of English-language use by children in the United States who are either immigrants into the country or who have parents who routinely speak a language other than English at home.

Data

This poster uses data from the 2006-2008 three-year file of the American Community Survey.

During the years when the ACS was in the developmental stages (1996 through 2004), housing unit data were collected in a limited number of counties in the United States. In 2005, the Census Bureau expanded the sample size of the ACS to 3,000,000 housing unit addresses and data were collected in all 3,141 U.S. counties, American Indian and Alaska Native areas, and Native Hawaiian areas. In 2006, the ACS sample was expanded to include the population living in group quarters. The 2006 ACS data now includes both data on the housing unit and the group quarters populations. Starting in 2008, the first three-year file was released which provided data collected in the years 2005, 2006, and 2007. The 2006-2008 file, used for this poster, includes data collected in the years 2006, 2007, and 2008.

The questions on language obtained in the ACS come from a three-part question:

- a) Does this person speak a language other than English at home?
- b) What is this language?
- c) How well does this person speak English? (Very well, well, not well, not at all)

Methods

Critical dimensions of age and length of time in the country are used to graphically depict how both English use and English-speaking ability rise with increasing age and duration time in the U.S. Specific focus is given to groups who report very low levels of English use, including those who report no English-speaking ability at all. From these diagrams we expect to be able to estimate rates of ‘English integration’ for these individuals.

Our analysis will look at the population aged 5 to 21 years by how long they’ve lived in the United States. We examine these children by those speaking a language other than English at home, those speaking English less than “very well”, and those who reported not speaking any English at all.

Some important background effects that influence this process of English-speaking assimilation will be examined with regression models. The models will be used to estimate the independent effects of age and length of US residence, controlling for other family background, socioeconomic, and context effects associated with parents, such as nativity, language status, education, and income. Given the large sample size of the 2006-2008 ACS file, we should be able to estimate these effects and models independently for several of the largest non-English language groups (Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Tagalog, and Korean).

Table 1. Population 5 Years and Older by Language Use and English-Speaking Ability, 2006.

Characteristic	Number	Margin of error ¹	Percent	Margin of error ¹
Population 5 years and older	279,012,712	16,202	(X)	(X)
Spoke only English at home	224,154,288	119,111	80.3	--
Spoke a language other than English at home	54,858,424	115,079	19.7	--
Very well	30,645,713	93,168	11.0	--
Well	10,771,327	52,442	3.9	--
Not well	8,925,316	61,801	3.2	--
Not at all	4,516,068	46,567	1.6	--
Population 5-17 years old, enrolled in school²	51,273,224	29,787	(X)	(X)
Spoke only English at home	40,890,572	52,109	79.7	0.1
Spoke a language other than English at home	10,382,652	48,557	20.3	0.1
Very well	7,841,982	52,830	15.2	0.1
Well	1,703,802	22,624	3.4	--
Not well	742,483	17,964	1.5	--
Not at all	94,385	5,511	0.3	--

1. This number added to or subtracted from the estimate yields the 90-percent confidence interval around the estimate.

2. Enrolled in school are isolated to those enrolled in nursery school through 12th grade only.

-- Rounds to 0.0.

(X) Not applicable.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey.

For more information on ACS see <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/>