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## Legislate Learning English? If Only It Were So Easy

By AUSTAN GOOLSBEE

PRESIDENT BUSH'S plan to give longstanding illegal immigrants a path to citizenship would require them to learn English as a sign that they accept American culture. The conservative base of the [Republican Party](#) considers any policy that would open that path as little more than amnesty, and they consider the English requirement trivial.

In the midst of this dispute, evidence from economics suggests that for a large share of today's immigrants, this path would not be nearly as easy as either side might think. Immigrants already have a strong incentive to learn English: better English means a better job and a higher income. Not speaking English largely means being trapped in a low-paying job with no obvious means of advancement. Yet millions still do not know English. Why not?

As Hoyt Bleakley, an economist at the [University of Chicago](#) Graduate School of Business, puts it: "For someone not to speak English after being in the country for many years and in the face of the clear job market reward for learning English, is likely a sign that learning the language is very tough for them. I'm not so sure that having Congress tell them it's required will actually do anything."

The difficulties adults have with learning English are at the center of the research that Professor Bleakley has done with a fellow economist, Aimee Chin, of the [University of Houston](#), in their forthcoming Review of Economics and Statistics study "Language Skills and Earnings: Evidence from Childhood Immigrants"

[http://www.uh.edu/~achin/research/bleakley\\_chin\\_english.pdf](http://www.uh.edu/~achin/research/bleakley_chin_english.pdf)

The study's approach begins with a linguistic theory known as the critical period of second language acquisition. The idea is that a child can learn a new language as fluently as a native speaker as long as the child starts before a critical age (usually thought to be around 11 or 12). Past the critical period, it is difficult to become fluent in a new language and virtually impossible to speak without an accent.

It is a theory that can help explain why [Henry A. Kissinger](#), who immigrated to the United States at about age 14, speaks English with a German accent while his younger brother, Walter, does not. (The alternative theory, supposedly given by Walter Kissinger, was that Henry does not listen.) And it is a theory probably quite familiar to millions of Americans with residual nightmares of high school French.

Professor Bleakley and Professor Chin show rather stark evidence for this theory in the data on immigrants' job prospects. By comparing the outcomes of English-speaking and non-English-speaking immigrants who arrived in the United States around the critical period age, they document that poor English skills meant less schooling and substantially lower wages for immigrants and that these disadvantages often extended to their children, even if those children were born in the United States.

One of their simplest demonstrations of this fact compares immigrants from different islands of the Caribbean. They document that the wages and education levels of immigrants from non-English speaking islands like the Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico look similar to those of immigrants from English-speaking islands like Jamaica and Trinidad — as long as the person originally came to the United States by age 11. For those who were older when they arrived, however, immigrants from non-English-speaking islands do significantly worse, on average, than those from English-speaking ones. Non-English speakers are much more likely to drop out of school and also have significantly lower-paying jobs when working. Their findings point strongly toward language as the deciding factor, since the differences exist only after age 11.

Professor Bleakley and Professor Chin extend this initial study of immigrants by asking how immigrant parents' language skills affect their children in "What Holds Back the Second Generation? The Intergenerational Transmission of Language Human Capital Among Immigrants" (<http://www.ccis-ucsd.org/PUBLICATIONS/wrkg104.pdf>).

As a starting point, the study notes that half the students now classified as having low English proficiency were, in fact, born in the United States. They are overwhelmingly the children of non-English-speaking immigrants. So, it is natural to ask what impact parents have.

It turns out that children whose immigrant parents came to the United States when young do just about the same in school regardless of whether the parents came from English-speaking or non-English-speaking countries. But the situation is different for children whose parents were older when they arrived. The children from non-English-speaking households do much worse than English-speaking ones. They are less likely to go to preschool and much more likely to drop out of high school.

When Professor Bleakley and Professor Chin compare the overall distribution of test scores of English- and non-English-speaking families, they find that the big differences appear mainly among children with the lowest performance. The top half of students from non-English-speaking households do just about as well as the top half from English-speaking households. It seems that a child with talent can succeed no matter what the parents' skills are, as has been true for centuries in this country. But parents whose English is poor have a big negative impact on the below-average children.

Based on his research, Professor Bleakley sees some serious problems with the more extreme [immigration](#) proposals like the old Proposition 187 in California, which sought to deny a public education to the children of

illegal immigrants.

"For many children of immigrants," Professor Bleakley said, "the school system is one of the only exposures to English they will get." Kicking them out of school when they are young means they will most likely never be fluent in English.

The current dispute over immigration reform has been characterized as a battle between two messages: "Welcome to America" and "Please Go Home." Whichever message prevails in the political battle this summer, unless directed mainly at 10-year-olds, had best come with a translation.

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