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# Americans Say Immigrants Should Learn English. But U.S. Policy Makes That Hard.

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"Speak English!" can be one of the cruelest things for an immigrant to hear. It can sound simultaneously like a demand for instant assimilation, an accusation of disloyalty, and a presumption of stubbornness or ignorance. In some circles, the call for immigrants to speak English has fused with a call for less immigration in general, as though language differences are themselves offensive. It's no accident that "You have to speak English!" was a Donald Trump rallying cry.

The uncomfortable reality is that learning English can, in fact, make immigrants' lives much better. Immigrants who learn English improve both their earnings and their acceptance by other Americans. Most immigrants want to learn English, and immigration advocates think it should be easier for them to do so. Unfortunately, it's extremely difficult for immigrants to find English classes that are affordable and accessible.

I know firsthand the bewilderment of living in a new culture with no language skills. A few months after my family immigrated to the United States, my mom and I sat in our apartment in Los Angeles, trying to absorb English from MTV. Madonna glided down a red staircase in the "Material Girl" music video, and we both wondered what it all meant.

In the U.S., English proficiency and earnings are tightly bound. Overall, immigrants make up a sixth of the American workforce, and immigrants who learn English earn more, mostly because they become eligible for higher-paying jobs. "Every little bit of English you learn will actually get you a better job," Amanda Bergson-Shilcock, a senior fellow at the National Skills Coalition, which advocates for vocational-skills training, told me. "Even entry-level jobs in the U.S. overwhelmingly require some level of English." (Ultimately, my mom learned English at her job at McDonald's. I learned in school.)

Rightly or wrongly, immigrants' English skills influence Americans' views of immigration. A majority of Americans believe that a person must speak English to be considered American. Though Republicans are more likely to strongly endorse this view, even majorities of first-generation immigrants and liberal Democrats believe that English fluency is necessary for

integration into American society. This isn't necessarily a measure of xenophobia; people of both parties tend to be accepting of those who speak English with an accent. Part of the explanation, says Emily Ekins, the director of polling at the Cato Institute, which recently conducted a large survey on the topic, is that people want to understand their neighbors. "You need to speak some kind of common language in order to have a deeper relationship with other people," Ekins told me. "When was the last time you had someone over to your house for dinner if you didn't both speak the same language?"

As I describe in my book, several studies show that Americans view immigrants who speak English more positively than they view immigrants who don't. So does the federal government: One of the requirements to become a U.S. citizen is to pass an English-language test, but "that fear of the English test is one of the reasons that people don't go through the naturalization process," says Cecilia Muñoz, who was the director of the White House Domestic Policy Council under President Barack Obama.

Yet the U.S. has an unusually laissez-faire attitude toward immigrant integration. Other industrialized countries do more to integrate immigrants and refugees into their society. In Sweden, foreigners get unlimited Swedish lessons at no cost; sometimes these lessons are built into job-training programs. France requires a short indoctrination session on "French values," but afterward offers 400 hours of language instruction with free child care.
Canada offers extensive free language classes to newcomers, some of which provide free child care and transportation. "Canada is starting from the premise of 'Hey, you're immigrating to Canada because you have skills? Oh, what's to stop you from using those skills in our labor market? English or French skills? Okay, how do we make sure you have English or French skills?'" Bergson-Shilcock said. The U.S., though, has no national policy aimed at helping immigrants become full-fledged Americans. "We've basically said, 'Hi, you're here. Good luck; sink or swim on your own.'"

Recent immigrants to the U.S. generally have better English skills than those who immigrated a century ago. A Mexican who immigrated in 2010 is more likely to learn English than an Italian who immigrated in 1910 was. Still, about 10 percent of working-age adults—at least 11 million people—don't speak English well. And the publicly funded adult English-education system has never been able to serve more than about 1 million of those people, according to Johan Uvin, a former official in the Obama administration's Department of Education. It takes about 350 hours of instruction to reach a functional level of language proficiency, he says, but most students spend only about 140 hours in formal English classes.

Community colleges and private instructors offer English lessons for a fee, but many English learners don't have the money for these. (Most immigrants make less than $50,000 a year, and 15 percent live in poverty.)

The options for the majority of immigrants who can't afford private classes are much more limited. "If somebody is looking for free access to English-language classes, right now the adult-education system is the primary vehicle," says Ali Noorani, the president of the National Immigration Forum. Yet this system, which is often run through local nonprofits, community colleges, and school districts, is serving less than 4 percent of the need, according to a 2018 report from the Migration Policy Institute.

Where they do exist, these classes are in short supply—many states and localities have waiting lists. In Massachusetts, 16,000 people were on the waiting list for ESL classes in 2018. “In typical years, there are as many people on [the] waitlist as there are being served in the state,” says Claudia Green, the executive director of English for New Bostonians.

In Iowa, Kirkwood Community College runs a free eight-hour-a-week English class in three different cities. Its students, many of whom come to class after long days in meatpacking plants or factories, are a “hardworking, grateful, really dedicated group,” says Stephanie Hasakis, Kirkwood’s ESL-program supervisor. Still, the program has to turn away students almost every term for lack of space. America is essentially demanding that immigrants learn English without giving them the means to do so.

Unlike some countries, the U.S. does not pay immigrants for their language-learning time, which they typically need to spend working. Even when classes are available, immigrants might not attend, because they work two or three jobs and lack transportation or child care. In Boston, Green says she’s actually seen an uptick in English-class attendance during the pandemic simply because, with virtual classes, people didn’t have to contend with commuting and child care.

A few companies, including Whole Foods, have experimented with offering their immigrant workers English classes on company time. And some states run cellphone-based English classes, which provide short taped lessons and a coach. Although these are great models, they are the exception, not the rule. “Most immigrants cannot take an English class through their employer,” said Bergson-Shilcock, with the National Skills Coalition.

To change America’s approach to teaching immigrants English, the federal government has to dump more money on the problem. But increasing the number of immigrants who learn English, and how fast they do so, may also require a cultural shift. The employers who provide English classes, Bergson-Shilcock said, see immigrant employees as assets, rather than as costs to be managed. For a more enlightened approach to English learners, Americans have to stop looking at immigrants as “a collection of deficits.”

She mentioned a recent meme that lists things that are considered “classy” when a rich person does them but “trashy” when a poor person does them. One of the most frequently mentioned examples was speaking a second language.