Published in final edited form as:

Soc Sci Res. 2014 May ; 45: 200–210. doi:10.1016/j.ssresearch.2014.01.005.

Beyond English Proficiency: Rethinking Immigrant Integration

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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.

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, Logan, Lutz, and Stults 2002; Bleakley and Chin 2010; Chiswick, Lee, and Miller 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

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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.

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.

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, Hiskey, Durand, and Massey 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 legal immigration to the U.S.—and assimilation itself—as the result of processes that began long before the receipt of a green card, recognizing that admission to legal permanent residence is but one link in a chain of migratory events.

As shown in Figure 1, we conceptualize the process of legal immigration as one in which pre-migration traits influence whether and how people migrate to the U.S. which, in turn, influence key migratory outcomes that are determined prior to receipt of the green card. The key pre-migration characteristics include human capital variables such as education, occupational skill, taking a class where English was the language of instruction, and English language media use in the home country. In our estimated models we also introduce controls for demographic and background characteristics, region of origin, *and religious affiliation, each on its own constituting a factor that might conceivably affect both language ability and the accumulation of U.S. experience prior to legalization.

According to our model, these pre-migration characteristics determine intermediate migratory outcomes, three of which play crucial roles in mediating the linguistic abilities of permanent residents: time in the U.S. since last U.S. entry, exposure to co-native-language speakers at the place of settlement, and occupational status in the United States. Pre-migration characteristics, along with the extent and status of prior U.S. experience, in turn, are tied to English language ability both directly and indirectly through these intermediate outcomes. We posit that English language ability is a critical link (though not necessarily *the* most critical indicator) in the process of social and cultural assimilation, determining along with other predetermined variables, the actual use of English in different U.S. social settings and for cultural consumption after receipt of permanent residence. Put differently, English language ability is a necessary though not sufficient condition for social and cultural assimilation, which may depend on other factors as well, as shown in Figure 1.

In general, we expect human capital variables to be positively linked to English language ability and to the later use of English for social and cultural purposes. We remain cognizant, of course, that outcomes may be segmented, not only according to the human capital that migrants bring with them, but according to their various social characteristics. Because of the potential stratifying conditions that these characteristics create, we include in our models

the indicators mentioned earlier: region of origin and religion, along with individual characteristics such as skin color, and elements of the context of reception such as the relative number of same-language speakers at the place of destination (which is also an intermediate migratory outcome).

PREVIOUS WORK

As stated earlier, few people would argue that English ability is unnecessary for full integration into mainstream U.S. society, as its absence obviously constitutes a barrier to socializing with native-born citizens and to consuming American culture. If English proficiency necessarily led to broader integration and assimilation, however, we would expect that virtually all immigrants who are proficient in English would use the language in most contexts. Nearly universal usage is clearly not the case, for in our data (described below) 36 percent of English-proficient respondents report not using any English at home and 20 percent report not using it with friends.

As noted earlier, both classical and segmented assimilation theory (Alba and Nee 2003; Gordon 1964; Portes and Rumbaut 2006) as well as human capital theory (Chiswick and Miller 2007; Grenier 1982) view language acquisition use as a key step in the process of immigrant adaptation and integration. Studies indicate that English proficiency and use are determined by individual level as well as contextual factors (Jasso and Rosenzweig 1989). The number of co-ethnic group members in the community, for example, is inversely linked to both outcomes: the more opportunities there are to speak one's native language, the lower the odds of becoming proficient in and using English. We take this evidence into account when executing our empirical strategy. In what follows, we briefly highlight some of the work done in earlier studies.

In their 1997 analysis, Espenshade and Fu examine the predictors of English proficiency among immigrants using data from the Current Population Survey. They consider both pre-migration and post-migration characteristics and find that education, age at migration, and long-term attachment to the U.S. strongly predict English language ability (Espenshade and Fu 1997). In their study of documented and undocumented migrants, Espinosa and Massey (1997) use data from the Mexican Migration Project to show that English proficiency is determined by time spent in the U.S., education level, and having children in U.S. schools, even after accounting for selective emigration by less proficient English speakers. Thomas (2010) examines English proficiency among the children of African immigrants using 2000 census data and finds that children's fluency is predicted by having more English-proficient siblings in the household and by the mother's (but not the father's) English ability. Hwang and Xi (2008) likewise use 2000 decennial census data to show that immigrants' English fluency is inversely related to group size and directly related to linguistic heterogeneity at the place of destination. In their study of 2000 census data, Bleakley and Chin (2010) use an instrumental variables approach to show that English proficiency is, in turn, linked to lower fertility, a higher likelihood of divorce, and a higher likelihood of intermarriage.

In her study, Stevens (1992) uses the 1976 Survey of Income and Education to show that the use of English is largely a function of the resources, opportunities, and incentives to acquire and use English, particularly with respect to the demographic context of the immigrant's place of residence. Akresh (2006) used data from the New Immigrant Survey to examine English language use in four social contexts and found that use in each context increases with time spent in the U.S., though her equations did not control for English proficiency, which we propose to do here. Another study examining English use at home, carried out by Alba et al. (2002) considered change across generations and confirmed a three-generation model of the transition to English dominance.

Moving beyond linguistic assimilation, the literature on economic, social, and cultural assimilation is too vast to review in its entirety (see Massey 1981; Waters and Jimenez 2005 for reviews). Suffice to say that time in the U.S. has been shown to predict virtually every type of behavioral change that researchers have considered as indicative of assimilation, including language use, employment, occupational status, earnings, dietary habits, smoking, and religious activity (Acevedo-Garcia, Pan, Jun, Osypuk, and Emmons 2005; Akresh 2007, 2008; Connor 2009; Duleep and Regets 1997).

DATA AND METHODS

We use data from the New Immigrant Survey (NIS), a representative sample of immigrants who were granted legal permanent residency between May and November of 2003, which yielded 8,573 respondents over the age of 18. Interviews were done in the respondent's language of choice and were carried out as soon as possible after legal permanent residence was granted. The survey response rate was approximately 69 percent and (Jasso, Massey, Rosenzweig, and Smith *In Press*) respondents come from virtually every county in the world. They include individuals who adjusted their status while in the U.S. as well as those who were brand new arrivals, generating substantial variation with respect both to time spent in the U.S. and English language ability.

Given that our research question focuses on English proficiency and use, we restrict the sample to non-native English speakers. We define native English speakers as those who reported English as a language they spoke at home at age 10 (the best available indicator from the NIS). We further restrict our sample to respondents who were interviewed in the U.S. (a small number had already returned to their counties of origin and were interviewed by phone). These two criteria led to the exclusion of 1,362 and 320 observations, respectively. Another 1,031 cases were lost owing to missing information on one or more of the variables, leaving an analytic sample of 5,860 individuals.

Our measure of English proficiency is based on the respondent's self-reported speaking ability (1=well or very well, relative to not well or not at all). Our pre-migration characteristics include the following variables: age at the time of most recent U.S. trip, marital status (1=married) at the time of last trip, years of U.S. experience prior to the most recent trip, years of education acquired abroad, whether the respondent had any classes where English was the language of instruction in the home country, whether the respondent consumed any English language media in the home country (see below for full English language media description), the occupational prestige of the last job held abroad (defined below), and an indicator for whether the respondent is missing information on their last job held abroad, essentially functioning as a control for people who were not in the labor force at that time.

Our demographic and background controls include an interviewer-assessed measure of skin color (ranging from 1–10, lightest to darkest; respondents with no skin color assessment were assigned a zero), an indicator for respondents who were missing skin color information (1=missing, most often resulting from a phone interview where the interviewer was unable to make an assessment), indicators for religious preference, and indicators for region of origin. For religious preference, we capture Catholic, Protestant (reference), Orthodox Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, No Religion, and Other. We include religion as a control because those who profess faiths that are outside the Judeo-Christian tradition tend to worship and socialize in congregations dominated by co-nationals, thus limiting exposure to English-speaking natives. For region of origin, we measure Mexico, Western Europe (reference: includes Australia, New Zealand, and Canada), Latin America and the Caribbean, Eastern Europe and the former USSR, Asia, the Indian subcontinent and the

Middle East, and Africa on the theory that some origin groups may be more prone to within-group interaction than others. Finally, we include an indicator for whether the individual had made any previous trip to the U.S. without a valid visa to control for whether pre-immigration experiences were in undocumented status.

We define the following intermediate migration characteristics: U.S. experience (in years) since the most recent trip to the U.S., the number of co-native-language speakers in the county of the respondent's residence in the U.S., duration in current job, and the occupational status in the U.S. Occupational status, or prestige, is measured using the International Socioeconomic Index (ISEI), an internationally standardized measure of occupational status (Ganzeboom, De Graaf, and Treiman 1992; Ganzeboom and Treiman 1996). It is a continuous measure ranging from 16 (e.g., domestic helpers) to 90 (e.g., judges). Last occupation abroad (mentioned above) is defined using the same index. Respondents without an occupation reported have a value of zero. We also measure the length of time the individual has been in their current U.S. job. We expect this to be of import particularly in the prediction of English use at work. Our expectation is that, the longer the individual has been in their current job, the more likely it is that they will speak English at that job.

In our analysis we seek to move beyond English proficiency to consider the actual use of English in different social circumstances that immigrants encounter in the United States. Our measures of such social assimilation come from a series of questions in which respondents were asked to list the language(s) they use at work, with friends, and at home. We distinguish between any English use and no English use (1=any use). This is due to the fact that the order in which the languages were listed was not meaningful (i.e., they were not listed in order of importance or frequency), prohibiting identification of a dominant language in each context.

Assimilation is not only indicated by the use of English in social situations, but also by the consumption of American culture. Our operationalization of cultural assimilation is based on survey questions eliciting responses on the frequency with which respondents consume various U.S. cultural products---frequency of reading English language newspapers, hours spent listening to English language radio, frequency of watching English language DVDs, frequency of watching English language movies, and hours watching English language television. For each of these five measures, the interviewer first inquired about consumption patterns prior to coming to the U.S., specifically referring to the year before the respondent left their last foreign residence to come to the U.S. This initial question was immediately followed by another to elicit information on current consumption. For general questions on frequency, respondents could choose between every day (4), a few times a week (3), once a week (2), less than once a week (1), or never (0).

For questions asking for a response in hours, five categories were created to correspond to those just described: 0=zero hours, 1=1–3 hours, 2=4–7 hours, 3=8–10 hours, and 4=more than 10. Each respondent was randomly assigned one pathway of questions, creating five non-overlapping groups of responses. Analyses (not shown here) indicate that the randomization was done appropriately and none of the groups significantly differs from another group on various descriptive statistics. In the present analysis, when consumption of English media in home country is used as an explanatory variable and when consumption of English media in the U.S. is modeled as an outcome variable, the responses to the five pathways are combined to permit a pooled analysis. Whichever response was applicable for each respondent's pathway was used.

Our analysis consists of a set of equations derived from the model shown in Figure 1. These were estimated using ordinary least squares (OLS) or logistic regression, depending on whether the outcome was continuous or dichotomous. For heuristic purposes, we present the results in the form of figures that display the standardized coefficients associated with each independent variable. For the ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions, a one standard deviation increase in the explanatory variable is associated with a change in the dependent variable equivalent to the value of the standardized coefficient. For the logistic regressions, results are displayed as the standardized factor change coefficients, or the change in the odds of the outcome associated with a one standard deviation increase in the explanatory variable. The purpose of this presentation is to make the covariates comparable within and across specifications without the confounding associated with variation in units.

Beginning with Figure 2, we predict self-reported English proficiency at the time of the survey with a logistic regression (1=speaks English well or very well). This is modeled as a function of pre-migration characteristics, demographic/background characteristics, and current characteristics. Figure 3 presents results from logistic regressions predicting our social assimilation measures; with three separate bars for each covariate indicating English use at work, with friends, and at home, respectively. These specifications incorporate all of the covariates in Figure 1 with the addition of English proficiency. Finally, Figure 4 brings the cultural assimilation measures together into a pooled specification predicting the use of any English media (includes reading English newspapers, listening to English radio, watching English DVDs, see English movies or watching English TV). This final figure also includes all of the covariates in Figure 3.

ASSIMILATION BEGINS AT HOME

Means and standard deviations for the main variables in the analysis are displayed in Table 1. In the interest of space, we discuss here only the patterns on the dependent variables. First, we note that English proficiency is neither a rare nor a universal characteristic of our sample: 48 percent have this ability. The average years in the U.S. accumulated prior to the most recent trip is 0.151 or just under two months. This figure is clearly driven by a preponderance of zeroes – if the zeroes are withheld, that mean is 2.846 years ($n=311$). Our respondents live in counties with an average of 351 thousand co-native language speakers and an average population size of 2.7 million. The average occupational prestige of respondents' last job abroad was approximately 29, while the average current occupational prestige is 26, reflecting a well-known pattern of downward occupational mobility after relocation.

Our measures of social assimilation, English use in various contexts, have frequencies that are generally similar to one another, with the lowest percentage reporting English use at home (40 percent) and the highest percentage reporting English use at work (65 percent); English use with friends falls in the middle with about 46 percent. Lastly, in our measures of cultural assimilation, we note that respondents watch an average of slightly more than one hour per day of TV in English and they listen to the radio in English about 5.5 hours per week. With respect to the three other frequencies, seeing movies occurs with the lowest frequency (occurring less than once per week), followed by reading newspapers in English (occurring almost once per week), and being led by watching DVDs in English (slightly over once per week).

Figure 2 shows factor change coefficients for pre-migration characteristics and prior migratory outcomes on the odds of speaking English well or very well. Statistically insignificant effects appear as 1.0; only significant effects are shown. As can be seen, the largest standardized effects are for indicators of the pre-migration measures of human

capital, such as occupational status in the home country, consumption of English media in the home country, years of education abroad, and having taken classes in English prior to departure. We also observe strong region of origin effects, with immigrants from places outside of Western Europe being much less likely to speak English well. Intermediate migratory outcomes are also important—namely the status of the current job, the number of years since last entry, and the share of co-native language speakers in the county of destination.

In order to examine the degree of bias introduced into the usual estimates of how time since arrival influences English language ability we re-ran the prediction equation after removing pre-migration characteristics, which are generally unobserved in datasets used to study immigrant assimilation, such as the Census and CPS. When this is done, the unstandardized logit coefficient for years since latest entry rises from 0.0629 (see Appendix) to 0.0733, an increase of 16.5%, suggesting that a portion of what is customarily observed as language assimilation resulting from exposure to the host country is actually attributable to experiences, education, and exposure accrued prior to immigration. As we argued, parameters from models estimated using standard datasets are thus likely to be biased by model misspecification, specifically the inability to control for pre-migration characteristics.

Separate analyses (results not shown but available upon request) demonstrate that intermediate migration outcomes variables are themselves influenced by pre-migration characteristics, e.g. human capital attainments prior to the receipt of permanent residence are generally linked to a higher status job (an intermediate migration outcome) which is in turn associated with a higher likelihood of speaking English well or very well. These results are broadly consistent with our conceptual model (Figure 1) and suggest that the acquisition of English language fluency indeed begins before initial departure and is conditioned by experiences in the U.S. prior to the acquisition of legal status.

LANGUAGE ABILITY AND USE OF ENGLISH SOCIALLY

Figure 3 shows the effect of one standard deviation increase in the independent variables on the odds that an immigrant reported using English in three separate settings—at work, with friends and at home. For each explanatory variable listed on the left, there are corresponding bars for each statistically significant covariate. A variable could thus have a maximum of three bars associated with it (one for each outcome). Statistically insignificant effects appear as 1.0. Not surprisingly, English ability is by far the strongest determinant of English use in any of the three settings.

As can be seen, the odds of using English at work, with friends, or at home are nearly three times greater for those who speak it well or very well compared with those who do not. The likelihood of using English in any of the three social settings is also determined by pre-migration characteristics. Holding constant linguistic ability, the odds of using of English at work, with friends, or at home are significantly greater for those who consumed English media in the home country, those who took classes in English abroad and those with higher levels of U.S. experience prior to the latest entry. In addition to the foregoing positive effects, each standard deviation increase in the log of the share of co-native speakers is associated with a reduction in the odds of using English of around 30 percent, regardless of the social setting.

Other factors, both pre-migration characteristics and those that describe life in the U.S., operate differently depending on the social setting in question. In the realm of employment, the most important factor conditioning the use of English beyond ability concerns the status of the current occupation. Each one standard deviation increase in occupational prestige is associated with a 1.9 factor higher odds of using English at work. The odds of using English

at work also increase with time spent in the current occupation and with time since last entry, with the odds going up by a factor of around 1.2 per one standard deviation increase in each case. In terms of pre-migration characteristics, the odds of speaking English at work rose 1.4 times with each standard deviation increase (five years) in foreign education.

Turning to the likelihood of using English with friends, we observe patterns similar to those discussed for work, including usage being predicted by the prestige of the U.S. occupation, duration in that occupation, and time since last entry, although the effect sizes are considerably smaller than those observed in the realm of work. Looking at the pre-migration characteristics, the use of English with friends is the only social setting in which the prestige level of the last job abroad significantly increased the likelihood of English use.

Arguably, the use of English at home would suggest a rather high degree of assimilation. Not surprisingly, given the likely separation for many respondents between work and home life, U.S. occupational status, job tenure, and U.S. experience since last entry have no significant effects on the use of English at home. Those who consumed English language media abroad were about 30 percent more likely to use English at home and those who took courses in English abroad were around 10 percent more likely to do so.

In general, then, the use of English for social purposes is most strongly tied to English language ability, as one would expect, but it also depends on other factors. The odds of using English in social situations are generally greater for those who hold high status U.S. jobs of long duration and they rise with years of U.S. experience before and after the latest arrival and with years of education abroad. Those who consumed English language media in the home country and took English language classes abroad were more likely to use English socially, whereas residence in a county with a larger share of co-native speakers reduced the odds of doing so across all three settings.

LANGUAGE ABILITY AND CULTURAL CONSUMPTION

Figure 4 shows the standardized OLS coefficients of independent variables in the prediction of the frequency with which respondents reported engaging any English media. As one would expect, English language ability has a strong and significant effect, with the frequency score being 0.14 standard deviations greater for those who speak English well or very well. However, unlike the case with the social outcomes considered in the last section, language ability is not the largest effect in the model. Immigrants who reported consuming English media in their home country displayed increased odds of using English media in the U.S. by around 42 percent, whereas English language ability raises them only by around 14 percent. Unlike most assimilation outcomes, the consumption of English media in the U.S. is not related to the duration of time spent in the U.S. before or after the latest arrival, or to the status of the U.S. occupation. The frequency is negatively related to age at last entry and is lower among immigrants from the Indian subcontinent but higher for immigrants from Eastern Europe. In general, we conclude that the use of English media in the U.S. is less an indicator of cultural assimilation than a reflection of pre-migration characteristics and the continuation of habits acquired before moving to the U.S. Of course, the latter could be a type of cultural assimilation that begins prior to migration and continues once in the U.S.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we developed a conceptual model that moved beyond prior work on linguistic assimilation, which has focused almost exclusively on proficiency at the time of the survey and which itself is modeled as a function of time since settlement in the host country. In contrast, we view language assimilation as an ongoing, cumulative process that begins well before settlement with language instruction and use prior to initial departure as well on

earlier temporary sojourns. The process then continues after settlement and the achievement of linguistic proficiency as the host country language comes to be used in an ever wider array of social settings and for the consumption of an expanding range of domestic cultural products. Our model thus distinguishes between pre-migration, post-migration, and intermediate variables and assesses their interplay not only in predicting linguistic proficiency, but in assessing the actual use of the host country language for social and cultural purposes.

This exercise yields five main conclusions. First, language assimilation begins at home, in the origin country prior to departure. Using data from the New Immigrant Survey, we showed that English language ability rises with the accumulation of years of foreign education, the consumption of English media prior to departure, and the taking of classes in English abroad. The inability of models estimated from standard datasets such as the Census or Current Population to control for these and other pre-migration characteristics means that estimates of the effect of time spent in the United States are likely biased and, in general, overestimated.

Second, language assimilation continues over the course of sojourns in the U.S. prior to legal immigration and is partially contingent on the U.S. occupational achievements enabled by experience gained on prior trips. Third, although language ability is the dominant factor predicting the use of English in social situations, other factors are relevant as well, making English ability a necessary but not sufficient condition for social and cultural assimilation---that is, the use of English for social interactions and cultural consumption within the United States. Fourth, the use of English socially is positively predicted by the status and duration of the current U.S. job, by pre-migration experiences such as foreign education, the consumption of English media prior to departure, and by the taking of English language classes at home, as well as by experience accumulated in the U.S. before and after the latest entry.

Finally, we find little evidence of an ongoing process of cultural assimilation among new legal immigrants to the U.S., at least in terms of the consumption of host country cultural products. Consuming English media of any form (reading English newspapers, listening to English radio, watching English DVDs, movies, and television in the U.S.) is not related to time spent in the U.S. and is only weakly related to English ability. The strongest predictor of English media use in the U.S. is English media use at home prior to departure, suggesting that cultural consumption in the U.S. reflects the continuation of habits established abroad rather than indicating integration in the U.S. To a lesser extent, cultural consumption is conditioned by pre-migration characteristics such as age, gender, marital status and region.

We recognize that the current study is subject to certain limitations. Two of the most prominent are (1) we are obligated to extrapolate a measure of English proficiency prior to arrival and (2) we are unable to examine unauthorized immigrants. With respect to the latter point, although we cannot include currently unauthorized immigrants, we do have immigrants in our sample with previous unauthorized experience and we included a control for this effect in our models.

Previous work seeking to gauge the degree of assimilation in the U.S. has often focused on English proficiency as leading inevitably to other dimensions of assimilation. We argue, and have demonstrated, that this focus yields an incomplete picture of the process of linguistic assimilation. Indeed our results suggest that proficiency is a necessary but insufficient condition for both social and cultural assimilation as defined here. In this sense, our examination of the determinants of English use rather than just proficiency, along with our examination of other intermediary outcomes, constitutes a new contribution to the literature.

Although a few studies have recently considered English use, they have generally been limited to one context or have not simultaneously considered proficiency. Our findings suggest that, when possible, researchers develop and analyze data on English use as well as English ability as the latter clearly is not a consistent or exclusive predictor of the former. Overall, we suggest that English use in a variety of contexts (or social assimilation) forms a better indicator of U.S. incorporation than English media consumption (or cultural assimilation).

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Highlights

- Language assimilation begins at home, in the origin country prior to departure.
- Language assimilation continues over time in the U.S.
- Not controlling for pre-migration characteristics yields overestimated effects of time since arrival
- English ability is a necessary but not sufficient condition for assimilation

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

Figure 2.

Pre-Immigration Characteristics and Other Migration Outcomes as Predictors of the Likelihood of Speaking English Well at the Time of the Survey

Note: Standardized factor change coefficients plotted resulting from a logistic regression predicting current English ability. Other included covariates are: religion dummies, an indicator for taking a prior trip without a visa, skin color measure, a dummy for missing skin color information, a dummy for marital status at latest entry, a dummy for female, and the logged 2000 county population size. Standard error bars shown.

Figure 3.

Predictors of the Likelihood of Using English at Work, with Friends, and at Home

Note: Standardized factor change coefficients plotted resulting from a logistic regression predicting the use of English at work, with friends, and at home. Other variables included are: region of origin dummies, religion dummies, skin color measure, a dummy for missing skin color information, age at latest entry, marital status at most recent entry, a dummy for female, and the logged 2000 county population size. Standard error bars shown.

Figure 4.

Predictors of the Use of Any English Media

Note: Standardized coefficients plotted resulting from an OLS regression predicting the weekly frequency of using any English language media. Responses ranged from 0 (never) to 4 (Every Day). Additional covariates are: dummies for religion, the skin color measure, a dummy for missing skin color information, a dummy for marital status at latest entry, a dummy for female, and the logged 2000 county population size. Standard error bars shown.

Table 1

Selected Sample Characteristics (n=5860)

Variable	Mean	Standard
DEPENDENT VARIABLES		
Speaks English Well/Very Well (1=yes)	0.478	(0.500)
Years U.S. Experience Since Latest Entry	4.327	(5.950)
Co-Native Speakers (2000)	351,615	(853,810)
Duration in Current U.S. Job (years)	1.645	(3.178)
Prestige: Current U.S. Job (ranges from 16 to 90)	26.107	(24.962)
Speaks English at Work (1=any)	0.654	(0.476)
Speaks English with Friends (1=any)	0.469	(0.499)
Speaks English at Home (1=any)	0.402	(0.490)
Frequency of Using Any English Language Media in U.S. (per week) ^a	1.014	(1.325)

^a refers to responses that ranged from 0 (never) to 4 (Every Day).

Appendix Table A

Logistic and OLS Regression Coefficients, Standardized Factor Change, and Standardized Coefficients from Figures 2–4

VARIABLES	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Pre-Migration Characteristics					
U.S. Experience before Latest Entry	0.177*** (0.0338) 1.2127	0.103*** (0.0383) 1.1193	0.108*** (0.0320) 1.1247	0.0660** (0.0274) 1.0746	0.0179 (0.0152) 0.0195
Prior Trip without a Visa	-0.0772 (0.1140) 0.9697	0.356*** (0.1260) 1.1523	-0.174 (0.1190) 0.9331	-0.0231 (0.1040) 0.9909	0.202*** (0.0551) 0.0806
Years of Education Abroad	0.0742*** (0.0099) 1.4531	0.0696*** (0.0107) 1.4198	0.0190* (0.0100) 1.1005	0.0101 (0.0087) 1.052	0.00712 (0.0045) 0.0358
Prestige: Last Job Abroad	0.0228*** (0.0029) 1.8884	0.00164 (0.0032) 1.0469	0.00857*** (0.0030) 1.2703	-0.00414 (0.0026) 0.8909	0.00253* (0.0014) 0.0706
No Occupation Reported for Last Job Abroad	1.427*** (0.1580) 2.0156	-0.272* (0.1640) 0.875	0.193 (0.1600) 1.0995	-0.346** (0.1420) 0.8439	0.00622 (0.0731) 0.0031
Took Classes in English in Home Country	0.571*** (0.0756) 1.3194	0.496*** (0.0917) 1.2725	0.206*** (0.0790) 1.1051	0.346*** (0.0690) 1.1827	0.0804** (0.0382) 0.039
Frequency Consumed English Media in Home Country	0.472*** (0.0291) 1.8689	0.180*** (0.0359) 1.2696	0.197*** (0.0293) 1.2983	0.148*** (0.0252) 1.2169	0.484*** (0.0140) 0.6414
Intermediate Characteristics					
Age at Latest Entry	-0.0435*** (0.0035) 0.5331	-0.0368*** (0.0035) 0.5873	-0.0299*** (0.0035) 0.6489	-0.0175*** (0.0030) 0.7761	-0.0118*** (0.0014) -0.1707
Married at Latest Entry	-0.274*** (0.0804) 0.8719	-0.0904 (0.0877) 0.9559	-0.240*** (0.0821) 0.8872	-0.208*** (0.0708) 0.9014	-0.0414 (0.0368) -0.0207
Years of U.S. Experience Since Latest Entry	0.0629*** (0.0077) 1.4552	0.0339*** (0.0083) 1.2237	0.0230*** (0.0078) 1.1472	0.0109 (0.0069) 1.0668	-0.000335 (0.0037) -0.002
Co-Native Speakers (logged)	-0.0788*** (0.0221) 0.8041	-0.128*** (0.0267) 0.7022	-0.106*** (0.0228) 0.7459	-0.0700*** (0.0195) 0.824	-0.00312 (0.0104) -0.0086
Prestige: Current U.S. Job	0.0235*** (0.0018) 1.7987	0.0257*** (0.0023) 1.9004	0.00947*** (0.0018) 1.2666	0.000787 (0.0016) 1.0198	-0.000815 (0.0009) -0.0203
Duration in Current Job	0.0135 (0.0126) 1.0439	0.0491*** (0.0144) 1.169	0.0228* (0.0130) 1.0751	0.0147 (0.0114) 1.0479	0.0137** (0.0062) 0.0435
Speaks English Well/Very Well		2.123*** (0.1000) 2.8883	2.093*** (0.0784) 2.8445	1.511*** (0.0754) 2.1268	0.409*** (0.0424) 0.2042
2000 County Census Population (logged)	-0.0239 (0.0391) 0.9739	0.0526 (0.0451) 1.0599	0.0447 (0.0401) 1.0506	0.045 (0.0346) 1.051	0.0168 (0.0184) 0.0186
Religious Background					

VARIABLES	(1) Logit Predicting Speaks English Well/Very Well	(2) Logit Predicting Whether Speaks English at Work	(3) Logit Predicting Whether Speaks English with Friends	(4) Logit Predicting Whether Speaks English at Home	(5) OLS Predicting Frequency Consumes English Media in U.S.
Catholic (ref: Protestant)	0.244* (0.1420) <i>1.1268</i>	-0.0422 (0.1630) <i>0.9796</i>	-0.0187 (0.1460) <i>0.9909</i>	0.285** (0.1280) <i>1.1496</i>	0.119* (0.0676) <i>0.0584</i>
Orthodox Christian	0.083 (0.1670) <i>1.0267</i>	-0.124 (0.1910) <i>0.9613</i>	-0.0294 (0.1700) <i>0.9907</i>	-0.0133 (0.1500) <i>0.9958</i>	0.199** (0.0797) <i>0.0633</i>
Jewish	1.143*** (0.3730) <i>1.1409</i>	-0.308 (0.4270) <i>0.9651</i>	0.356 (0.3670) <i>1.042</i>	0.0141 (0.2960) <i>1.0016</i>	0.0909 (0.1570) <i>0.0105</i>
Muslim	-0.375* (0.1940) <i>0.9031</i>	-0.0334 (0.2330) <i>0.991</i>	-0.181 (0.1960) <i>0.9521</i>	0.171 (0.1700) <i>1.0476</i>	0.219** (0.0925) <i>0.0595</i>
Hindu	0.148 (0.2370) <i>1.039</i>	0.274 (0.3000) <i>1.0733</i>	0.137 (0.2390) <i>1.036</i>	0.386** (0.1950) <i>1.1046</i>	0.0537 (0.1060) <i>0.0139</i>
Buddhist	-0.987*** (0.2260) <i>0.8172</i>	-0.535** (0.2380) <i>0.8964</i>	0.00187 (0.2250) <i>1.0004</i>	0.0754 (0.2010) <i>1.0155</i>	0.190* (0.1030) <i>0.0388</i>
No Religion	-0.266 (0.1660) <i>0.9174</i>	-0.504*** (0.1870) <i>0.8494</i>	-0.159 (0.1700) <i>0.9497</i>	-0.22 (0.1490) <i>0.9314</i>	-0.0134 (0.0773) <i>-0.0043</i>
Other	0.662*** (0.1770) <i>1.1975</i>	0.0438 (0.2060) <i>1.012</i>	0.202 (0.1810) <i>1.0565</i>	0.374*** (0.1570) <i>1.107</i>	0.108 (0.0842) <i>0.0295</i>
Region of Origin					
Latin America - Caribbean	-3.110*** (0.3290) <i>0.273</i>	-0.743* (0.3810) <i>0.7334</i>	-1.597*** (0.3050) <i>0.5133</i>	-1.008*** (0.2140) <i>0.6566</i>	-0.124 (0.1060) <i>-0.0518</i>
Mexico	-3.184*** (0.3400) <i>0.3185</i>	-1.192*** (0.3910) <i>0.6514</i>	-1.756*** (0.3180) <i>0.532</i>	-1.082*** (0.2280) <i>0.6779</i>	-0.155 (0.1130) <i>-0.0556</i>
Eastern Europe, Former USSR	-2.895*** (0.3220) <i>0.3683</i>	-0.237 (0.3700) <i>0.9215</i>	-1.434*** (0.2960) <i>0.6097</i>	-1.464*** (0.2080) <i>0.6035</i>	0.343*** (0.1020) <i>0.1184</i>
Asia	-2.115*** (0.3190) <i>0.421</i>	-0.268 (0.3710) <i>0.8962</i>	-1.408*** (0.2930) <i>0.5622</i>	-1.169*** (0.2000) <i>0.6199</i>	-0.124 (0.0978) <i>-0.0507</i>
Indian subcontinent, Middle East	-1.639*** (0.3390) <i>0.5566</i>	-0.16 (0.3960) <i>0.9445</i>	-1.100*** (0.3150) <i>0.6747</i>	-0.940*** (0.2220) <i>0.7145</i>	-0.220** (0.1110) <i>-0.0785</i>
Africa	-1.709*** (0.3360) <i>0.619</i>	-0.0771 (0.3960) <i>0.9786</i>	-1.109*** (0.3110) <i>0.7326</i>	-0.788*** (0.2200) <i>0.8016</i>	-0.0839 (0.1100) <i>-0.0236</i>
Demographic Characteristics					
Female	-0.0316 (0.0739) <i>0.9843</i>	-0.240*** (0.0823) <i>0.8869</i>	-0.114 (0.0760) <i>0.9447</i>	0.113* (0.0672) <i>1.058</i>	-0.109*** (0.0355) <i>-0.0543</i>
Skin Darkness	0.0256 (0.0234) <i>1.0666</i>	0.0392 (0.0269) <i>1.1037</i>	0.0415* (0.0241) <i>1.1102</i>	0.00583 (0.0208) <i>1.0148</i>	-0.0109 (0.0111) <i>-0.0274</i>
Missing Skin Color	-0.0933 (0.1190) <i>0.9551</i>	0.368*** (0.1340) <i>1.1987</i>	0.351*** (0.1220) <i>1.1887</i>	0.209** (0.1060) <i>1.1086</i>	-0.0129 (0.0559) <i>-0.0064</i>

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
VARIABLES	Logit Predicting Speaks English Well/Very Well	Logit Predicting Whether Speaks English at Work	Logit Predicting Whether Speaks English with Friends	Logit Predicting Whether Speaks English at Home	OLS Predicting Frequency Consumes English Media in U.S.
Constant	-0.174 (0.4160)	-0.548 (0.4800)	-0.447 (0.4040)	-0.336 (0.3190)	1.209*** (0.1640)

Note: Coefficient presented at the top for each variable, standard error below in parentheses, and standardized factor change coefficient (logit) or standardized coefficient (OLS) in italics beneath.