The Implications of English Proficiency for Non-Native English Speaking Immigrants

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The Implications of English Proficiency for Non-Native English Speaking Immigrants

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April 2002
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April 8, 2002
Abstract

This study examines non-native English speaking immigrants, a group that has been overlooked by researchers in the past. They are confronted with a large amount of change and stress; and are forced to deal with many universal issues. This study investigated the role the English language has in their adjustment to the United States. The methods and reasoning behind why and how immigrants learn English is also discussed. Fifteen immigrants from Asia, Europe, and South America were interviewed. Surprisingly, the respondents had mixed responses as to what factors were the most influential to adjusting to life in the United States; this specifically applies to English ability. The individual cases of respondents are used as examples to give a depth of understanding into the immigrants’ position and situation. This study provides a beneficial insight to the lives of non-native English speakers and their mind set to coming to the United States and learning the culture and language.
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The Implications of English Proficiency for Non-Native English Speaking Immigrants

Background

The United States has no official language, yet during the country’s development, specifically during the First and Second World Wars, patriotism demanded speaking only English. To speak other languages was seen as “un-American,” which added to the pressure on non-native speakers at that time to learn English (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990). Even while the country was being founded there was a push to make English the unifying voice. It was the concept that a country was defined by a common language. American English stood for the democratic and rational nature of the nation and the acquisition and use of English was comparable to a litmus test for citizenship (Portes & Schauffler, 1994). This mentality progressed from a view of national unity, to a reason question of foreigners’ intelligence, to an attitude that English is something all people within the United States borders should know, especially since the country is not going to cater to the needs of all foreigners (Portes & Rumbaut, 1990).

Portes and Rumbaut (1990) argue that, “learning English is a basic step to enable [immigrants] to participate in the life of the larger community, get an education, find a job, obtain access to health care or social services, and apply for citizenship” (p. 180). Throughout this study immigrant will specifically refer to those people who have come to the United States and English is not their first language. In order for immigrants to become functional in this society, they must learn enough English to function in
occupational and educational scenarios, and regular transactions including paying bills and day-to-day interaction at stores or meetings.

The most common way for immigrants to become American is through assimilation. Rumbaut credits Park and Burgess with defining assimilation as, “a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons and groups and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life” (1997, p. 20). Another process that Rumbaut notes is accommodation, in which the person or group is highly conscious of the process of adapting and adjusting to the situation. He continues, accommodation is the way the older people of the first generation adapt, and assimilation is the more prevalent way for the second generation (Rumbaut, 1997). The term first generation refers to the people who were born in another country and came to live in the United States. Second generation is the name given to the children of the immigrants. The term can be applied if the child was born in the United States, or if the child was born in the native country and came with the parents; usually this term only includes children who moved before they were teenagers. The term third generation is given to the children of the second generation in the United States.

The language barrier appears to be the most pressing issue for immigrants. Accents and poor English skills are obvious indicators of a person being foreign. The issue of language is mainly prevalent for the first generation because the parent language is usually completely forgotten by the third generation in the United States. The first generation immigrants learn enough to get by economically. The second generation may be bilingual in English and their parents’ language. The parents’ language is used at
home, but in the workplace, school, and public life, English is used. Eventually the use of the parents’ language lessens and then dropped from use. The third generation uses English at home and English continues to dominate from then on in all areas (Portes & Schauffler, 1994).

In a study in Miami, “only age, national origin, and length of U.S. residence are significantly related to English proficiency” (Portes & Schauffler, 1994, p. 6). The strongest variable was length of stay. Another factor that emerged from the study was the parallel relationship between parental status and the children’s English; the higher the parent’s status the better the English. Children raised in areas where there is an English-speaking majority or surrounded by a wide variety of immigrants experience a faster process of loss of the parent language and rapid conversion to English monolinguals (Portes & Schauffler, 1994).

Even though there are obvious advantages for being bilingual, it is a very difficult skill to maintain. The use of the parent language, over time, disappears from use in all cases even in ethnic groups, regardless of the size and economic power of the group. It is an interest of researchers to figure out what factors really define person as a true American.

In the article, “Do we really want immigrants to assimilate?” Peter Skerry refers to, Peter Salins’ ideas on what elements would need to be present for immigrants to be accepted as full members of American society. The three points that Salins addresses are the immigrants: (a) have to accept English as the national language, (b) are expected to live by the Protestant work ethic, and (c) are expected to take pride in American identity and believe in America’s liberal democratic and egalitarian principles (Skerry, 2000).
Portes & Schaufler (1994) found:
[Immigrants] from advantaged educational and occupational background tend to do better on the average, but often individual resources interact with the social context that receives them. Hence, immigrants who face unfavorable governmental or societal reception may find their human capital (such as educational and occupational advantages) seriously devalued. (p. 4).

Results presented by Portes and MacLeod supported this finding. Chinese and Korean immigrants are known for high levels of education and strong entrepreneurial qualities, hence have a favorable context of reception. Filipinos, who are not known to be as strong economically, generally arrive speaking fluent English. These factors contribute to their favored reception (Portes & MacLeod, 1999). Parents who are successful and self-confident expect that their children will succeed, while poor parents fear that their children will drop into deeper poverty and assimilate into the “bad crowd” that is involved in drugs and crime. “Academic success or failure of second generational youth emerge from these studies as a seeming self-fulfilling prophecy, based on the context of reception and settlement history of the parents” (Portes & MacLeod, 1999, p. 21).

English an advantage not only in education, but in the job market as well. When an immigrant first comes to the United States the wage received is lower than the natives. “Over time, the immigrant becomes proficient in the English language, learns about alternative job opportunities, and acquires skills that are valued by American employers” (Rumbaut, 1997, p. 22). As the immigrants adapt to the American way of life and assimilate to be like the natives their wages begin to equal those of native workers (Rumbaut, 1997). English is a real asset concerning the economically advancement. Immigrants who are highly educated, and professional, are more likely to speak English
and live in the suburbs (Rumbaut, 1997). On the other hand there are employers who prefer non-native, non-assimilated workers.

There is a definite trend in the United States to extinguish the use of other languages and minimize the expression of cultures that do not seem American enough. Immigrants acquire English and become functional if not fluent in the language. Their native language disappears from use after the third generation.

*Research Issues*

There are many studies on the second and third generations and the struggles they have socially, economically, and even psychologically. A majority of the information centers on the second generation immigrants. This trend in research is attributed to the ever-increasing size of the second generation, and the fact that most are still school age, and therefore easier to study (Portes & MacLeod, 1999). This group is also given more attention because they will soon be a vital part in the work force and other economic and political factors.

Despite this extensive research on second and third generation there is not a large amount of information about the first generation and their position and situation in society. This group is affected the most by culture shock and has to make the greatest effort to adapt and change. Most of the articles did not consider English proficiency in relation to other societal factors. A couple of the articles examined English as a factor, but most did not treat the issue with much detail or take it into serious consideration.
This study focuses on the first generation immigrants and the issues that they faced when coming to the United States and what they think now reflecting back on their life in this country. The questions focused on in this research are what factors make English acquisition easier, what factors are most difficult when adapting to life in the United States, and what degree English plays in the work force and in daily life.

Methods

This study is different than most of the research in this field because this study is qualitative and focuses on the first generation. I interviewed 15 immigrants. (See Appendix A for the interview schedule.) I asked open-ended questions which provided important insights. The questions were grouped into six basic groups: demographics, English proficiency, environment, jobs, education, and impressions of the United States. In most of the categories questions dealt with time before they came; their first few years in the U.S., and now. The section labeled environment focused on the social environment in the U.S. concerning how much English surrounds them as opposed to their native languages. Respondents were allowed to expound on any topic, usually triggered by the questions. They shared stories that were not specifically asked for but the stories were interesting and exciting; some pieces of them will be shared in this research.

To collect the sample I used the snowball sampling technique as described by Earl Babbie in this text, The Practice of Social Research (p. 180). First, I contacted the immigrants I knew and asked them if they knew anybody else who would be a good contact. This was very helpful and effective. I tried to gather people from different parts
of the world; I hoped this would help create an accurate picture of the immigrants’ situation of coming to the U.S. from all over the world. I interviewed five Asians, seven Europeans, and three South Americans. The Asians were from Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines. Four of the respondents were from the Basque Country in Spain another was from eastern Spanish. Also from Europe were an Italian and a French woman. The last three were from Mexico yet different areas of the country. There is also a variance in the ages of the respondents. The youngest was still in grade school. Two respondents were in their thirties, and another two were in their forties. The majority of the sample (six) were in their fifties. Two respondents were in their sixties and three were in their seventies.

Thirteen of the 15 respondents were female. One of the males the husband of one of the women I interviewed and the other was the son of another. Out of the sample there was on mother-daughter pair. The daughter is an adult and has a family of her own. For some topics I will include the daughter, son, and husband as part of the whole group and at other points, when specified they will be reported separately.

Two-thirds of the sample was married. Three were widowed. One was divorced. The son who was in grade school was obviously single. Eight of the women were married or engaged to American military personnel before they came to the United States. This factor was the reason these particular women came to the U. S. In all of these cases, the man was stationed at an Air Force Base in the woman’s native country. They had plans to get married or were married when the man was stationed somewhere in the United States. The women then went wherever the Air Force sent their husbands.
The other section of the sample had other reasons for coming to the United States. Three came after their husbands had found work in the United States. The children of immigrants I interviewed said they came to the U.S. because their family did. Only two came with the purpose of finding work. One of these was the husband, and the other was a Mexican woman.

The respondents came to the U.S. between the long span of 1948 and 2000. Each tick mark on this timeline indicates when one person came to the U.S. the first time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeline 1</th>
<th>Years respondents came to the United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>1952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>1961</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>1974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>1976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>1978</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A majority of the group came in their twenties. Three were 21 years old, two were 25 years old, three were 26 year old, and one was 27 years old. One was 30 years old and the oldest was 35.
Results

Limitations

It is important to keep in mind throughout this study that it is limited. It only covers 15 people who live in the same town. Many of their thoughts and feelings may be true across-the-board for immigrants, but this study can only express the fifteen respondents' thoughts and feelings. As mentioned, about this study are predominantly women and most have a connection to the U.S. Air Force. This will give these stories a particular flavor. However, their stories are not the stories of every immigrant; still much can be learned from these insights and stories of these particular people.

Language

Studying the influence language was an important factor in my research. Sixty percent of those interviewed said they knew one other language than English and forty percent said they knew two languages other than English. In most cases the respondents knew no English when they came to the U.S. but now they have a firm grasp of the language. I asked the individuals how much English they could speak, read, and write before they came to the U.S. and how they thought they rated now. Previous studies have shown that self-evaluation of language ability is reliable and valid (Portes & Schauffler, 1994). It is important to break down English knowledge in these three groups because generally when people acquire a language they learn to speak first, then to read, and
finally to write. The distinctions of the three categories are especially striking when analyzing their English skills now.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Level of English Before Coming to the United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in the Table 1, the numbers are higher in the columns of “Not at all” and “Not well”. Nine of the respondents did not know any English before they came. Some said they knew a bit of English but were not comfortable speaking, even what they knew. From that point the numbers taper off quickly, especially in the reading and writing categories. The number of people who knew or could use the language was few.

The information columns spanning from “Somewhat” to “Very Well” come from individual cases. Only one person felt she knew English well enough to speak, read, and write before coming to the United States. This particular woman said she learned the language from an American friend who lived in her native country. She taught her friend her native language, Korean, while he taught her English. The others respondents that were recorded in the “Somewhat” to “Very Well” column were in situations where they took English in school but only had limited memory, experience, or confidence using the language. The “Well” column may seem strange or backward compared to previous information. The entire column shows the responses from one woman. She is from the Philippines, where they study English in school. However, like most Asian countries, the
focus is on written English rather than spoken. The same person answered “Somewhat” to reading, writing, and speaking. This was the French woman, who had three years of English in school but had not used it since. This data is logical because different parts of the world teach English different ways, yet in all cases if the language is not used it is forgotten.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Not Well</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Well</th>
<th>Very Well</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After many years in the United States, English proficiency improved in all cases. All respondents can speak, read, and write to some degree. The most solid area is speaking, where no one reported lower than the “Somewhat” column. Reading responses, as well, gravitates toward the “Very Well” end of the table. Only one respondent claimed their reading skill was “Not Well”. The most variety is in the writing category. Most respondents said writing was much more difficult, even if they rated themselves in the “Well” or “Very Well” categories. This is understandable because in everyday interaction speaking is primary, then reading, and finally writing.

--Writing, that is a different language.
--I can speak English now...No, not write, no I don’t have time to write.
--I do not know how to write good English.
In the interview the respondents were asked what they found most difficult about the English language. For some their first response was “everything,” they usually thought of more specific cases. There was a wide range of responses but most were similar answers that all people learning English have. Some of the issues revolved around pronunciation. For example respondents mentioned pronunciation issues they found particularly difficult, the following were some of their replies:

--If [the letters] are silent take them away.

--“H” and “w” two letters we do not have in our alphabet. (Italian)

--The “th” sound.

--The “k”…”ph” too is very, very difficult.

--[Vowels that change pronunciation like] “I” is sometimes pronounced “e” and sometimes “i”.

Another area that gave several respondents problems is grammar. The respondents reported the area of word order, articles, and abbreviations. For example:

--I still have problem adjective before than after.

--The little words between...connection of words.

An area that came up several times was homophones. It was pointed out by several respondents that it is cumbersome to hear and distinguish words that sound exactly the same but have different meanings. Another area of the language that was said to be challenging was slang words. A huge barrier for non-native speakers is using a telephone, because they cannot see the other person.

--Hear the same for me, but not the same, different word.

--Written down different way that you say it.

--A joke in slang I still don’t get it.

--Slang hardest—different regions.
Respondents noted that situations that do not occur in everyday interaction gave them problems. For example legal or business matters as well as hospital and medical jargon are particularly challenging and frustrating because they are important.

--I had a friend who took me to the clinic one time, and the doctor told me only take a couple pills every 8 hours, and then they lady [her friend] got it wrong and I took it every 2 hours...I was so sick that time...I pay more attention to doctors, one reason I started to talk, learn [English].

--The language of lawyer, business...everyone different language—very, very difficult.

There are elements of English that the respondents identified as easy to learn; things such as greetings, and phrases commonly used on television or movies. Those whose native languages were based in Latin said the alphabet, numbers, and grammar came fairly easy to them. The words that were similar to words in their native language were of minimal difficulty. Another class of words that respondents said the picked up quickly were curse words.

--I only knew one word when I came over to the United States. That was a bad word. I learned it from my fiancée and his friends because they used it often. I saw this big old line for customs...and the other line was short. I said, “Why I stay in the long one when I can move to the short line...The police guy said no, you are not American, you have to go backing the other line. And back to the line I was in before, had to go in the back of everybody...I said that word in American [a curse word]... (Now two Italian brothers traveling on that flight and offered to help her so they took her back to the short line.) [They told the custom agent] This lady doesn’t speak English...[the guard replied] “Who say she doesn’t speak English, because she say that word” Now these two brothers almost embarrassed too, took me aside and they said “A lady doesn’t use that word.”

--The only words in English I knew when I came to the U.S. were bad words, so I used them, I didn’t know they were bad. Somebody finally asked me if I knew what I was saying...

--When I work with the sheep I learned all the bad words.
Immigrant English 14

--(When told she was using a bad word) “—oh, somebody told me that was a good word—sorry, learn something else...easy part for everybody, I think...I don’t know why, maybe because in the movies, it is the same word all the time.”

Each of the respondents came to the United States at different places in their lives and had different levels of the language. Each person used a different combination of strategies to pick up the language. Some tactics were more common than others among this group. Five of them took some sort of English classes. Three respondents had their children teach them what was taught in school that day. Three also learned from television programs. Two learned by reading newspapers and looking up words. Several took classes that required certain levels of English to pass like the GED and citizenship classes. Some took a more individual approach and had private lessons, tutors, or self-taught tapes. Others especially the children learned by going to school. Many learned through their job and day-to-day interactions. Almost all of the respondents learned by talking or just listening to friends and those around them.

--First was hard...he [the boss] put me with helping the cabinets, and the cabinets would need nail. [They would say] “Bring me....nail” I didn’t know what he was saying. They take one nail and throw it at me and I caught it in the air...Ah nail!

--I had to learn quite a bit of reading and writing on my own. I had had a big dictionary, so every time I was cooking I look at recipe, I look words up in dictionary, so pretty much learned that way.

--I watched TV, I Love Lucy Show that was easy you didn’t have to understand too much.
Social Environment

One question raised in this situation is how much contact do the respondents have with English speakers as compared to speakers of their native language. It appears that the majority of the respondents have strong connections with people from their own language tradition. The number of American friends is significant as well. Table 3 shows all respondents have at least a few American friends. Enrique said things were easier the more people he met, especially in the realm of language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Friends in the United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The situation with the neighbors is opposite of those with friends. Most of the respondents are surrounded by American people. Carmen complained that she did not know her neighbors. If she was in Spain she would have known everybody and had strong connections with them. She is sad that tradition is not practiced in the U. S.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4</th>
<th>Neighbors in the United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood</td>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The respondents were surrounded by English speaking people. Many had close connections with people who spoke their native language. A key question at this point is
do they prefer one language over the other? Four respondents said they prefer their native language. Seven accounted English as their preference. Four respondents said all the languages they knew were important and so they did not prefer one over another.

--[What language I use] depends on who I am speaking to, whatever is best for the other person.

--I think in English.

--I live in America so I should speak that language.

--[I like] English [because] it is to the point and shorter, but I prefer reading literature in French (her native language).

Social Class and Jobs

Most of the respondents said that they considered themselves poor, lower class, lower middle, or middle class in their native countries. Now they consider themselves lower, lower middle, middle, and upper middle. Table 5 compares their social status in their native country at the time of their departure and their current status.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Native Country</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>lower</th>
<th>lower middle</th>
<th>middle</th>
<th>upper middle</th>
<th>upper</th>
<th>other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Now</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most people consider themselves middle class when asked. During the interviews they were asked how their status compared to others around them. One of the respondents that fall under 'other' category said her family bounced back and forth
between very well off to poor depending on how her family fared at the time. Only the widow Mexican woman reported being in lower social class now that when she was in Mexico. She hopes to work her way up to make a better life.

An important factor recall when examining economic status of the sample is that most had connections to the military base. The military income would maintain a person at middle class. Now, only one respondent’s husband is considered active duty status. Five of the husbands are retired air force and two are deceased. Seven of the respondents have no military ties at this time. Most of those were the respondents from the Basque Country in Spain who had no prior connection to the military.

Jobs are an integral part of a person’s status and possible position in life. They are also key to social class. To create a clearer picture of where the respondents came from and are now, they were asked what jobs they held in their native country, their first job in the United States, and all the other jobs they have held in their lives. The information in Tables 6, 7, and 8 organized so that one person’s job career is followed through these three stages.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Native Country</th>
<th>Jobs in Native Country</th>
<th>First Job in US</th>
<th>Other Jobs held in the US</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ensueda</td>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>Housekeeper, Cosmetologist</td>
<td>Hardee's Nursery</td>
<td>Restaurant, Restaurant, Fanning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rah Ma</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Business Sales</td>
<td>Play and sing in band, Manager</td>
<td>Construction, Farming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hwa Hee</td>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>Play and sing in band, Manager</td>
<td>Handmade flowers, Housewife</td>
<td>Sold furniture, House cleaning, Cleaned dining hall on base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tine Bo</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Farm, Garden</td>
<td>Food Service</td>
<td>Food Service, Nursery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mee Lin</td>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Food Service</td>
<td>Farm, Nanny</td>
<td>Nursery</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Always had two jobs -- cleaning and something else*
Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Native Country</th>
<th>Jobs in Native Country</th>
<th>First Job in US</th>
<th>Other Jobs held in US</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clarise</td>
<td>France</td>
<td>Sales clerk, Bar tender</td>
<td>Clean motel</td>
<td>Sales clerk, Vendor for company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veronica</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Nanny, Institution for mother and child, Clothing repair</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>(After husband divorced her)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Beautician</td>
<td>Shoe Dept.</td>
<td>Nursing home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edurna</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Farm</td>
<td>Cooking at sheep camp</td>
<td>Custodian at local schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jochone</td>
<td>Spain (Basque)</td>
<td>Farm</td>
<td>Cooking at ranch</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eduma</td>
<td>Spain (Basque)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Native Country</th>
<th>Jobs in Native Country</th>
<th>First Job in U.S.</th>
<th>Other Jobs held in US</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gloria</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>Store bagger, Clean houses</td>
<td>Babysitting</td>
<td>Field laborer, Clean houses, Secretary for husband’s business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ana</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>Furniture (family business)</td>
<td>Clean houses</td>
<td>Bus tables, Clean hotel, Child care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrique</td>
<td>Spain (Basque)</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>Herding sheep</td>
<td>Construction, Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amaya</td>
<td>Spain (Basque)</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Insurance office, Title office, Own business, Real estate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlos</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The jobs the respondents held are varied and yet each person seems to have common trends in their own lives. Few were able to return to the level or type of job they had in their native country. Many used the same skills they developed in their own country in the United States. Some jobs were in more specialized fields such as sales clerk and farmer. However, most of the respondents found jobs that used skills from a domestic setting, such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare. Jobs that use these skills are common on the tables. Most of the jobs would be considered low-end jobs. Hwa Hee’s list is more extensive and has a wider variety; she is the same person who knew English “Very Well” before she came. Another individual who stands out from the rest is Clarise; she holds a job with more esteem. She rated her self as knowing English “Somewhat” when she came. One other respondent appears to have had more prestigious jobs; Amaya came to the United States just before the first grade and had all of her schooling in the U.S.

This raises an important question in this research: How much does English affect getting a job? It seems easy to assume that there would be a strong correlation between level of proficiency in English and the ability to get jobs in the United States. The respondents were asked, “Did your level of skill in English affect the jobs you have held?” The respondents had a variety of responses:

--Don’t need to know much English—but know job. (Rah Ma)

--[English] had no effect (because it was not difficult). (Hwa Hee)

--Yes, because bilinguals get better jobs. (Gloria)

--Some [people] make fun of the way I talk and they don’t take time to try to understand. (Carmen)
--Didn’t have to know to start, but more talk—more money. (Me Lin)

--Never crossed my mind as an issue, I got jobs through connections. (Endurna)

--[Having more than one language] is handy but not influential. (Amaya)

--Yes, --better jobs, better opportunities, a need for all jobs. (Ana)

--No. (Jochone)

--No. I had the highest education possible for me. I had men who worked under me. (Enrique)

--I don’t write English. In every job you are to write down something, any low job, even, you have to have high school diploma. They don’t offer you the job if you don’t write English. (Veronica)

The responses run the gamut. These are all individual cases. Each person had his or her own background and own prospects for the future. There seemed to be a trend of the people in retirement who had jobs in rural settings did not think that English had much of an effect. While, those who did not have a firm grasp of English and had to get jobs on their own saw English as more of an asset.

*Education and Training*

Education is another factor in immigrants’ success in the United States. All respondents had some form of education in their native country before they entered the U. S. The respondents came from a wide variety of educational backgrounds. However, most education from other countries, even high school diplomas, is not recognized in the
United States. Not having a high school diploma or an equivalent limits jobs whatever the nationality or background.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Education</th>
<th>up to 5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>2 years of college</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Respondents</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table does not include the child immigrant respondents, because they received all education in the United States.

As shown by Table 9, respondents have diverse backgrounds in education. It is important to point out that every country runs its education program differently. Children around the world may be considered in the same grade level, but are learning different subjects at a multitude of levels. It would be a complicated and grueling process to figure out what level education in all other countries would be equivalent specific grades in the United States. Several were taught specialized skills such as home decor, cosmetology, childcare, and sewing in their native countries.

Some of the respondents acquired other training while in the United States. Only two respondents received training in an academic realm when they were in the U.S. They attained their GEDs. Other training included such things as: driver’s education, specific job training, learning to use checkbook, and more personal growth activities like Bible studies.

Citizenship was pursued by eight of the respondents. The reasoning for most of them involved their husband’s circumstances in the military. Some husbands had to leave the country and could possibly be killed, and they wanted their wives to be
provided for if something happened to them. Other respondents’ families were stationed in different countries and they did not want problems when returning to the U.S. so they applied for U.S. citizenship. One respondent said she received her citizenship because she realized she was not returning to her native country and the U.S. was her home now. She thought “If I live here why not vote,” so she became a citizen. The man respondent became a citizen so he could go to Spain to marry and return to the U.S. with his wife. He also said that it was beneficial to be a citizen when a person has a business to run. Seven of the respondents have not received their citizenship. They have not found a need or reason to thus far. One specifically said she was considering getting her citizenship.

*Children*

Most of the research already gathered on immigrants focuses on the second generation. In the interview, respondents were asked about their children. The purpose of this was to get an understanding of how the second generation’s situation is different than the first. All of the respondents have children except the boy who was in elementary school. Two respondents have only one child. Eight respondents, including the husband and wife, have two children, and four respondents have three children each. Most of the children were brought up entirely in the United States.

It is important to stress again that this information is specific to the sample interviewed and is not meant to represent all immigrants or their stories. The connection between the children and their parents is different for every family. Since this study does not focus on this aspect, it gives only limited explanation of the information.
One of the big issues involving second generation is whether or not they know and use their parents’ language. Not all of the children involved in this study learned their parents’ language. Eleven of the respondents taught their children their native language. Two respondents taught their children some of the native language. One respondent stated she did not teach her child any of her native tongue. All of this information was gathered from the parent so they are the parents’ perception of their child’s use of the language. The children involved in this study have a wide range of language abilities. Language ability is the level that the child can comprehend and use their parents’ native language. This ability was not broken down into speaking, reading, and writing, specifically, just a general capability as seen by the parent. Six were said to have high ability. Eight were ranked as having medium ability. Six of the children knew low amounts of the language such as key phrases and words. One child did not know any of the parental language.

The level of language use varies between the children. Language use refers to how much the child actually uses the language. All of the children have a firm grasp of English and most prefer it. Therefore, the amount that they actually use the parental language is influential because if they do not use the language their ability will diminish. Six of the children were said to have high use of their parent’s native language. Three were reported to have medium use and another six were classified as having low use. Five were said to have no use of their parents’ native language. Each family uses the native language at different degrees in their homes.

Most of the children learned the native languages when they were very young because that was what their mother knew, but when they entered school they picked up
English. As noted before sometimes the mothers learned English from their children. As a result, some of the children speak the native language to their mother, rather than English. In some cases the mother is the only person they use the native language with. Another side of this issue is that some parents found it difficult to teach their children their native language. This was not because the children were unable, but rather the societal pull to learn English was so strong, and speaking something different was seen as strange or was looked down upon. The parents concluded that they did not want to push the language and make their child suffer from the burden they saw on their child.

--[After the first day of school] my daughter came home to me crying. She did not know why she was different, why the other kids did not play or talk with her. I wanted her to be happy so I told myself that I would not stress English.

--At school I was distraught. There were no bilingual teachers and I was expected to be at the level of all of the other children. It was very difficult for me and I repeated my first grade year. (Amaya)

Along with the children’s language use and ability, respondents were asked to provide the highest level of schooling that their children had achieved thus far. In the category of Kindergarten and 12th grade, there were six children. Seven have graduated from high school. One child complete classes through the 11th grade and dropped out during his senior year. Three had some college but did not yet have degrees. Eleven have completed their undergraduate degrees, and one has completed at the master’s level.

The children who are out of school hold a wide range of jobs. Each are at different points in their lives as exhibited by the level education. Also, each has individual interests and talents. This is important information to note because there is an obvious difference in types of jobs held by the immigrants’ children as compared to the
immigrants. The children’s jobs tend to have more prestige and generally pay more than what their parents had. For example:

The children’s jobs included:
- Bank teller
- Chief in Navy
- Nurse (2)
- Auto mechanic (2)
- Toyota employee
- K-mart employee

The fields in which other children work include:
- Construction (family business)
- Computer Science
- Forensics
- Handicap children
- Real estate
- Have own business

Most of these jobs or field require some training and skill. These children were brought up in the United States and had the same opportunities that most American middle class children do. These were opportunities their immigrant parent did not have.

**Impressions of the United States**

Before the respondents came to the United States each had their own impressions and thoughts about what it was like. Within the group interviewed there was an array of thoughts about the U.S., from wonderful to dangerous. The question the respondents asked was, “What were your impressions of the United States before you came?”

Answers include:

--Beautiful.
--Clean.
--Big.
--All Americans were smart.
--Americans were beautiful, especially the women.
--There was a button you could push that would do everything [like cook and clean everything.]

--I was told that once when come into the country I would have to [physically] hold on to my husband, or I would lose him.

--High crime rate.
--Americans were messy, savage, drunks, who went around getting girls pregnant (specifically the military base culture).

--I just closed my eyes and came over, live in the present.
--Individual, own way was the way.
--God forsaken country.
--I was scared they would make me a slave, like the Indians.
--Disney World, beautiful, wonderful, different countries.
--Like in a movie, I was in love and didn’t think about it, just follow my love.

The perceptions changed after they first came to the United States. The reality came as a shock. They saw things that they never imagined and other realizations that made the U.S. more tangible and genuine, and not a castle in the sky. The question was, “What was your first impression of the United States when you first arrived?” They responded:

--It was easy to find jobs—lots of opportunities.
--Good life, good family.
--Freedom.
--If really want to do something can do it—have to work hard.
--‘Still’ beautiful.
--Language most difficult.
--Nice people.
--Good when people were patient and helpful.
--Driving was scary the first time.
--Nothing ordinary.
--Women talk too much.
--I needed to learn how to drive.
--[Hardest part was] speak English because I don’t know nothing.
--Same as expected.
--It was best to keep mouth shut.
--Not a pot full of gold.
--Happy to be here.
--Different types of people.
--I wanted to go home.
--Church here was not as social.
--Liked freedom and education.

Some of respondents’ answers were specific to events or structures they had never seen before or had never imagined. Many of these things U.S. citizens would take for granted. The following are a few examples of the comments describing what they found foreign and surprising:

--Beautiful country—open spaces.
--Not used to everyone having cars.
--Wood houses.
--24-hour stores.
--Snow.
--Everything seemed bigger—sky, spaces...
--Laundry machines.
--Individual houses.
--A big surprise were the stores and customs.
--Big stores and houses.
After living in the United States for several years some of the first impressions changed. The wonder and newness wore off and a harsher reality remained. For some people it did not change. Their comments range from the following:

--Work hard ok, but not quick.
--Some laws are not fair.
--Good country but has terror.
--Surprised that [people here] hurt children.
--Did not pay off police.
--People cold and don’t make deep connections.
--Today if you step out of street they sue you. It is a terrible style of life.
--Raising children different here [than native country].
--I wanted to take care of my children—not hungry, and no welfare.
--If you work hard you can get what you want.
--Love freedom, but sometimes too much.
--If love country, don’t do bad.

These people had many hopes and dreams when they came to the United States. Some were impressed that the horrors that they heard about before hand were not as bad as they first thought. Others had several eye-opening experiences and were surprised that the U.S. was not as grand as they thought.

At this point in the study, it is important to look at how the respondents were accepted by the people around them when they came to the United States. On top of the
new surroundings, culture, and language, these people had to face the issue that they were just as different and strange to Americans as America was to them. In the interview respondents were asked, “When you came to the United States, how did you feel?—did you feel accepted?” Again, the responses varied greatly. Each of these people had distinctive backgrounds and had diverse situations when they came to the U.S. therefore; it is not possible to totally compare them. This information is meant to show what sort of responses some immigrants received regarding whether or not they were accepted:

--Some nice, some mean like all places.
--Yes, but nervous.
--I always asked my husband what to do, “if can do something”.
--U.S. [people] were curious and helpful. It was hard to teach my name.
--Yes, because I was a good cook.
--People were friendly and helpful.
--Treated different.
--Laughed at for asking questions.
--Hard to be far from home, easier since had established culture here [in U.S.].
--No tension, no racism.
--[They were thinking] dummy foreigner.
--They looked at you as though not human.
--If knew person—then nice.
--Curious if look funny, never seen people.
--Smart equaled learning English.
--Don’t like Koreans—prejudice.
--They don’t like Mexicans.
--After married, no, seen as not smart.
--For people worked for, yes.

--I don’t have no difficulty...maybe I would say differently if I was black, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Polish. Yes like I way these people they are not very
welcome I can see I can understand...Sure you find always the one so ignorant they don’t accept you they don’t accept anyone than American.

As seen by the responses, some felt they were accepted but others could feel the tension of being different. The next question posed is what about now? Are they accepted more now that they have lived in the U.S. years later? The next responses give an insight to the respondents’ impressions of that issue:

--Proud to be an American.
--About the same, some prejudice, some nice.
--Some good supporting people.
--No problem.
--It is what you make of it.
--People cold, not deep.
--Better as language improves.
--Understand people better.

As seen above, some of the respondents looked to themselves and saw changes in themselves rather than just outside attitudes changing.
Discussion

There is no doubt that the experiences of immigrants are diverse and multifaceted. This study is just a glimpse of what it is like for the fifteen people interviewed, but shows language is a key part of any culture. Several issues that were brought to light in this study are similar to some of the points brought out in previous research, while other issues show a different spin on the topic.

To begin, does knowing English mean that a person is a "real" American? It seems that there are many more factors involved than just the language. All of the respondents spoke English, yet some never became citizens. Those that spoke the language well, and who became citizens still dealt with the prejudices of being a foreigner. Were these people totally accepted as Americans? This is difficult to judge, but the main point is that English is a key factor, but it is not the only one.

Accommodation, as defined by Rumbaut, is the process where a person is highly conscious of the process of adapting and adjusting to the situation (1997). According to Rumbaut’s definition this study holds that statement as true. As noted at the beginning of this study, accommodation is the way most first generation immigrants adapt. The respondents were always aware of what was different and the ways they needed to change to fit in American culture. They were surround by culture shock. In some cases everything was totally different to what they had in their native country. It would be fair to say that most had a desire to melt into the American way of life, so they consciously tried different things to fit in. The results of this study support Rumbaut’s ideas.
Another researcher that this study’s results supports is Peter Salins. Salins proposes three criteria for immigrants to be accepted as full members of American society:

(a) accept English as national language  
(b) live by Protestant work ethic  
(c) take pride in American identity and believe in American’s liberal democratic and egalitarian principles (Skerry, 2000).

The first is held true being that all the respondents have learned English, and even though they are at different levels they realize the importance of knowing the language. Several respondents expressed that they would use whatever language the other person in the conversation wanted to use. However, this fact does not weaken the point that they feel English is important to learn and use in society. The second issue is Protestant work ethic. This is played out in the reoccurring responses of, “if you work hard, you will do well” and “if you work hard you will get what you want”. This is the American assumption that everyone can pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. Lastly, pride in American identity and democracy is evident in this study by respondents thinking about what goes on in U.S. politics, becoming citizens so they can vote, as well as being thankful for being here and happy to be part of the U.S.

Evidence in this study concurs with all the other research that states that usually by the third generation the parent’s native language is lost. When looking at the children’s language ability and use it seems obvious that the native language is not such a key part of life that it will be passed down for many more generations. On the other hand, there was an example that not all families fall into this category. The Basque couple I interviewed speak Basque to their grandson. He knows the language but only use it with his grandparents. They both admitted that it took extra effort to teach him the
language; it was not something that just happened. They also admitted that the language would probably end with him. This shows that there may be extenuating circumstances that the third generation knows the language but it takes a lot of extra work and time.

The main focus of this research concerned what impact English proficiency had on first generation immigrants. An interesting factor that came out of this research was that not all of the immigrants believed English was a significant factor. Especially in the realm of jobs, those respondents were not convinced that knowing more English would have made their job situation better. Most did not pursue more education while in the U.S. and with most of this particular group they did not have to worry about health care or social services because they were covered by the military or by the employers that brought them to the U.S. As a result, this sample overall did not believe English was a major concern. This may be the result with this group because most had an American spouse that took care of everything that was legal or official, and that person also was making money. The situation may be different if both people are immigrants, and they had to deal with everything on their own. The contrast between both parents being non-native English speakers and only one parent would be an excellent topic for future research.

One idea for future research would be a longitudinal and intergenerational study following the complete path of first generation immigrants and their children. Another avenue for future research would be examining the possible differences in national origin relating to the style and method they were taught English in their native country. The study could examine whether those who learn writing first do better than those who were taught with an oral emphasis. An additional area to examine would be the military base
culture as opposed to other cities. Finally, a historical examination of the assimilation and acceptance of earlier immigrants (Italians, Irish, Poles, and Germans) and compare their stories to the immigrants of today. This field of study is limitless and open for exploration.
Appendix A

Interview Schedule

To schedule interviews I contacted the individuals by phone or face-to-face and set up a time to meet. Usually we met in their home or place of work (if they owned their own restaurant). The times were scheduled to be most convenient for them and work within the time frame I was given.

January 3, 2002
  3 p.m. Jochone and Enrique

January 4, 2002
  11 a.m. Veronica

January 5, 2002
  9 a.m. Mee Lin and Tine Bo

January 7, 2002
  2 p.m. Rah Ma
  4 p.m. Ensueda
  6 p.m. Ana and Carlos

January 8, 2002
  10 a.m. Gloria
  7 p.m. Edurna and Amaya

January 9, 2002
  10 a.m. Clarise
  3 p.m. Carmen
References


