

The Long View on Immigrant Students

THE AMERICAN STORY is one of immigration and accommodation, in which groups of people from diverse backgrounds arrive and seek to forge a common destiny. After the peoples we now call Native Americans made their way to these lands, three major human flows—the settlement of the original colonists, the involuntary transfer of African slaves until the Civil War, and the great trans-Atlantic diaspora that began at the end of the Napoleonic Wars and endured until the Great Depression—set the stage for the current realities of immigration to the United States.

Today, immigration is once again a momentous social force, compelling Americans to face the challenge and opportunity of integrating and harnessing the energy of the greatest number of immigrants in the nation's history. By 2005 there were well over 35 million immigrants in the United States—some 12.4 percent of the U.S. population.¹

Many facets of the story of immigration to the United States are well known, captured in endless iterations in family narratives, legends, poems, folk songs, novels, memoirs, films, history and civic textbooks, academic monographs, and research reports. Yet our understanding of the experiences of immigrant children and youth remains limited. This gap in our knowledge is troubling because immigrant-origin children are entering the United States in unprecedented numbers, making them the fastest-growing segment of the youth population.² Today, 20 percent of young people growing up in the United States have immigrant parents, and it is

Approx.
45 million
immigrants
in 2022
(approx.
15% of the
total U.S.
population
today)

projected that by 2040, one in three children will be growing up in an immigrant household.³

How does immigration shape the changing realities and experiences of recently arrived youth? What ambitions do these newest and youngest Americans bring with them, and how effectively are we as a society harnessing their energies? Do boys and girls experience the migration journey differently? These and other questions motivated us to organize a large-scale research project to assess how young newcomers manage their journey to the United States, how the process of immigration changes them and their families, and what obstacles and opportunities they encounter.

Immigration is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon involving many factors and variables that may be viewed through a variety of lenses. We chose to focus on the role of formal education in easing or complicating the transition of immigrant youth for several reasons. Worldwide, schooling has emerged in the last half-century as the surest path to well-being and status mobility. Schooling is now powerfully associated with such beneficial developments as better health, smaller families, and greater economic security. Solving the big problems of the day, whether deep poverty, infectious disease, environmental degradation, global warming, or terrorism, will require the active engagement of well-educated, cognitively flexible, and culturally sophisticated individuals able to work in groups. Schools, then, will need to nurture young minds to be able to synthesize knowledge derived from various academic disciplines, wrestle with social and ethical dilemmas, and work across cultural boundaries with individuals of different races, religions, and cultures. In order to foster higher-order cognitive skills, competencies, and interpersonal sensibilities, schools will have to accomplish more than ever before. If schooling is to be relevant and in synchronicity with the problems and opportunities of the day, it will need to prepare youngsters to deal with the increasing complexity and diversity that characterize their lives.

Schooling is particularly important for immigrant youth. For them, it is the first sustained, meaningful, and enduring participation in an institution of the new society. Today, more immigrant children spend more time in schools than ever before in the history of the United States. It is in schools where, day in and day out, immigrant youth come to know teachers and peers from the majority culture as well as newcomers from other parts of the world. It is in schools that immigrant youth develop academic

knowledge and, just as important, form perceptions of where they fit in the social reality and cultural imagination of their new nation. Moreover, they learn about their new society not only from official lessons, tests, and field trips, but also from the “hidden curriculum” related to cultural idioms and codes—lessons often learned with and from peers and friends.

Relationships are critical to the process, and it is in schools that immigrant youth forge new friendships, create and solidify social networks, and begin to acquire the academic, linguistic, and cultural knowledge that will sustain them throughout their journey. It is not only in the classroom but also in the schoolyard, on field trips, and on the bus ride to and from home that they will struggle to learn the English language that is so necessary for their success in the United States. Immigrant students, new to the American system, will be heavily reliant on school personnel—teachers, counselors, coaches, and others—to guide them in the steps necessary to successfully complete their schooling and, perhaps, go on to college. It is in their interactions with peers, teachers, and school staff that newly arrived immigrant youth will experiment with new identities and learn to calibrate their ambitions. Some will find nourishment for their dreams, while others will have their hopes crushed. The relationships they establish with peers, teachers, coaches, and others will help shape their characters, open new opportunities, and set constraints to future pathways. It is in their engagement with schooling most broadly defined that immigrant youth will profoundly transform themselves.

LISA: The Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation Study

Our study of the pathways that immigrant youngsters trace in their American journey began as a series of conversations and exchanges involving a cultural psychologist with strong developmental interests (Carola Suárez-Orozco) and a psychological anthropologist with a long history of involvement in the field of immigration and refugee studies (Marcelo Suárez-Orozco). During the project, we were joined by cultural health psychologist Irina Todorova, a senior research fellow who came to play an important role in the analysis and interpretation of the vast amounts of data collected for this project.

Previous research had made important inroads in understanding the dynamics characterizing the most recent wave of immigration within the

available data sets and conceptual and analytical frameworks. These studies, however, have not, by and large, addressed the realities of immigrant children and youth, leaving one with the impression that the U.S. economy attracts a huge number of socially disembodied immigrant workers who have no children and families. A close examination of immigration patterns in most contexts suggests that where immigrant workers are drawn, families sooner or later follow.

Those few systematic studies that have examined immigrant children and families often reported variability in the immigrants' experiences with education, finding jobs, and family income, but generally failed to make sense of these differences. Many such studies relied heavily on self-reported data or used protocols of dubious cultural relevance to the new immigrant groups under consideration. Other studies seemed to repeatedly confound the experiences of immigrant youth (that is, the foreign-born who come to the United States) with the fortunes of those of immigrant origins (children whose families have been in the United States for two, and in some cases three, generations). While there are similarities between the experiences of immigrants and those of the second generation, their realities are distinct and must be separately understood.

What do immigrants (those born abroad) have in common with the second generation (those whose parents were born abroad)? Principally, the first and second generation share foreign-born parents. Therefore, they are likely to grow up in households where cultural, linguistic, and social traditions, while in flux, retain some of the distinct flavors that immigrants bring with them to the new country. Both the first and second generations may share challenges and stressors typically associated with lower status, including high levels of poverty, persistent experiences of ethnic and racial discrimination, segregation, community violence, and poor schools.⁴

Second-generation immigrants, however, have certain obvious and consequential advantages over their foreign-born peers. Youth of the second generation will not have to contend with the intense disorientation of arriving in a new country. They do not have to learn from scratch the cultural nuances and social etiquette that make life predictable and easier to manage. Learning the new cultural code is stressful and exhausting, as anyone living in a foreign land for a few weeks can attest. Typically, second-generation youth do not have to struggle with the challenge of learning a new language, which is a reality for the vast majority of immigrants arriv-

ing from non-English-speaking countries. Further, all second-generation children are U.S. citizens, whereas many first-generation children must contend with the realities of undocumented status. There are well over 11 million unauthorized immigrants in the United States—and nearly 60 percent of the nation's largest immigrant group—Mexicans—reside in the United States on an unauthorized basis. According to some recent estimates, approximately 1.8 million children are in the United States without legal papers, and an additional 3.1 million children are born in the United States to undocumented alien parents.⁵

It is not surprising, then, that the second generation tends to have higher academic achievement, better experiences in the labor market, and higher income levels than the newcomers. Yet the foreign-born generation has some advantages over the second generation. For example, there is evidence to suggest that in several areas of well-being and health, immigrants are better off than the second generation. Indeed, babies born to immigrant mothers tend to be healthier than second-generation babies, and immigrant children are less likely to be obese, to experiment with drugs and alcohol, or to engage in a host of other risky behaviors. This is paradoxical because immigrants tend to have higher levels of poverty and less education than their U.S.-born peers. Yet the data suggest that while the second generation has an educational and economic edge over the first generation, such advantages may not spill over to broader considerations of health and well-being.⁶

A number of observers have noted the importance of understanding the long-term adaptations of immigrants, in the second generation and beyond. They point out that in the next dozen or so years, the size of the second-generation cohort will grow. For example, according to one study “almost all (93 percent) children of immigrants under 6 are [U.S.] citizens.”⁷ Among Hispanics, the largest immigrant group, one estimate claims that the “population will grow by 25 million people between 2000 and 2020. During that time the second generation will account for 47 percent of the increase compared to 25 percent for the first. Moreover, the second generation will more than double in size, increasing from 9.8 million in 2000 to 21.7 million in 2020. At that point the second generation will outnumber the first generation, which will total 20.6 million.”⁸

We applaud the efforts to focus on the second generation, but as scholars of immigration we chose to focus on the experiences of newly arrived

first-generation immigrant youngsters. The first generation already in the United States will continue to cause profound changes to our society. The most unsettling debates in the area of immigration today—such as undocumented immigration and the issue of English-language learning—have nothing to do with the second generation. Furthermore, schools all over the country are wrestling with how best to educate newly arrived immigrant children. In 2005, half of the students in New York City public schools came from immigrant homes; 9.5 percent had arrived in the United States within the past three years.⁹ In Los Angeles, the nation's second-largest city, half of the population is foreign-born and more than 73 percent of the students in public schools originate in Hispanic homes—most of them immigrants and children of immigrants.¹⁰ How the first generation adapts will clearly set the stage for how their children—the second generation—will do.

To gain a more complete understanding of the experience of immigration, we designed a study that is unlike any other in the field today. Our study focuses exclusively on the experiences of recently arrived foreign-born youth and their families. It does not confound that experience with the realities of the second generation or of those who arrive as babies or as very young children (the so-called 1.5 generation). All of the participants in our study were born abroad, had parents who were born in the same country, and had developed a clear sense of identity rooted in their national origin prior to migration to the United States. When our study began, our participants had spent at least two-thirds of their lives in their country of origin and spoke a native language other than English upon arrival. This study captures the realities of those youth who are contending with the profound changes of moving to a new country, with all that implies: culture shock, linguistic disorientation, the loss of old relationships, as well as the excitement of blazing a path to a new horizon.

Recently arrived immigrant youth from Central America, China, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Mexico were recruited for the study. These five regions of the world were selected for a variety of reasons. They represent migration from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia—the source of nearly 80 percent of all new arrivals to the United States today. Given the high proportion of Mexicans among immigrants to the United States, no study of recently arrived immigrant youth would be complete without including them. Families from Mexico tend to come for economic reasons as

well as to reunite with relatives who had migrated ahead. We included Central Americans from Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, because many of these families felt compelled to come to the United States in large numbers in the aftermath of the various sporadic Central American civil wars, which intensified in the 1980s and concluded with the end of the Cold War. We included Dominicans and Haitians, because these are two groups of Caribbean origin that are coming at brisk rates into the United States, particularly the East Coast, but have been the focus of relatively little scholarship. We included Chinese immigrants not only because they represent the new Asian migration to the United States, but also because of their sheer numbers: they are the second-largest newcomer group after Mexicans and are currently the fastest-growing group from Asia.¹¹

We recruited approximately eighty participants from each of these regions of the world. In the fall of 1995, we negotiated entrance into seven school districts in areas of Boston (where we recruited Chinese, Dominican, and Haitian participants) and San Francisco (where we recruited Mexican and Central American participants) that have high densities of recently arrived immigrant students. We recruited from fifty-one schools in all (by the end of the study, our participants were spread across over a hundred schools). Participating schools agreed to provide access to students, teachers, staff, and school records. With the help of teachers and staff, we identified recently arrived immigrant students whose parents were both from the same country of origin. Our research assistants were bilingual and bicultural and, in most cases, from the same immigrant origin as our participants—for example, Mexican-origin research assistants worked with Mexican-origin students. The research assistants described the project to potential participants when requesting their involvement. The prospective participants were told that their participation would last for five years, until the summer of 2002, and that we were interested in investigating the experience of immigration for newly arrived immigrant youth.¹²

We began the study with 407 recently arrived immigrant students.¹³ Attrition is always a concern in conducting a longitudinal study; it is all the more so in this case, given the high mobility rates of immigrants. Nonetheless, five years later, in 2002, our sample size was a respectable 309—representing an attrition rate of 5 percent annually.¹⁴ We compared the participants the first year of the study to those remaining in the study at the end in order to determine if we had a selective attrition rate that might bias

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The Challenge of Learning English

ALTHOUGH THE UNITED STATES was founded by immigrants and has as part of its identity the notion that it welcomes the “poor and huddled masses,” Americans are ambivalent about immigration.¹ In particular, when large numbers of newcomers choose one area in which to settle, those who live there already tend to have two main areas of concern: (1) How will the new immigrants affect our economy—that is, will they take away our jobs or burden our social service system? and (2) How will they affect our culture—will they assimilate and, above all, learn English?

Indeed, concerns about immigrants’ supposed unwillingness to assimilate and the “threat” they may pose to the local culture and language are often cited in nativist vigilante meetings where locals mobilize in response to the newcomers’ arrival. In addition, such concerns are fodder for vituperative outbursts on the internet, underlie legislation to make English the official language of the United States, and are even the source of intellectual debate. In a recent controversial book, Harvard professor Samuel Huntington, a political scientist, voices the worries of many. He claims that Mexicans have no desire to learn English and that they are in fact “contemptuous” of American culture and its language. He suggests that large-scale Mexican immigration poses a profound risk of “a bifurcated America, with two languages, Spanish and English, with two cultures, Anglo-Protestant and Hispanic.”²

How grounded are these concerns? At the dawn of the new millennium, English has become the lingua franca of business and diplomacy (as the of-

ficial language of the United Nations). There are over 500 million English speakers across the globe, and English has become the most widely studied second language worldwide.³ In the United States, Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut have shown that by the second generation, 40 percent of a large sample of five thousand no longer felt competent in their parents' language and 95 percent claimed to be English dominant.⁴

What attitudes did the newcomer students in our study have toward English and how did they view the challenge of learning a new language? How quickly did students in our study acquire academic English? And what factors contribute to higher levels of academic English proficiency? As part of our five-year study of the immigrant education experience, we set out to find in-depth answers to these essential questions.

The Importance of Learning English

When we asked students during the first year of the study whether they thought that English was important to learn, fully 99 percent responded affirmatively. During the fourth year of the study, we asked them whether they thought English was important for being successful in school—again, the vast majority agreed (94 percent). Further, 93 percent indicated that they liked learning English. Although it has been argued that positive attitudes toward learning a language are predictive of new language mastery, we did not find a relationship between these positive attitudes and better English-language proficiency.⁵

We asked students to complete the sentence: "English is . . ." Nearly half spontaneously answered in a way that demonstrated their clear understanding of how important it is to learn English. Their responses included: "very important to speak [in this country]"; "a language that I have to learn and to know because it is the most important language in the U.S."; "very important to get a good job"; "important for the future"; "very important for everything, for opportunities"; "important to succeed"; "important to get ahead."

At the same time, many (20 percent) responded with an answer that made it clear they found learning English a challenge: "hard," "very hard," and "difficult" were typical responses.⁶ We also asked students to tell us how much this statement applied to them: "For some people learning English is easy but for others it is hard." Thirty-eight percent responded that

learning English was hard.⁷ (Significantly, students who responded that learning English was hard were more likely to score below their peers on the English-language proficiency test.⁸) We then tracked answers to this question over three years. About a quarter never responded that learning English was hard, whereas 31 percent responded at least once that it was hard; another 28 responded twice (that is, for at least two of the years) that it was hard; and an additional 15 percent responded every year that it was hard. There were interesting differences by country of origin: none of the Haitian participants responded all three years that learning English was hard, whereas 24 percent of the Chinese students did so. There was also a range within the Latino origin groups—13 percent of Dominicans, 14 percent of Mexicans, and 22 percent of Central Americans noted all three years that learning English was hard.

Concerns with learning English were often reflected in the narrative prompts that we asked students to respond to (that is, the Thematic Apperception Test). One picture that showed a boy pensively looking at a violin particularly seemed to elicit stories that belied the students' preoccupation about how difficult it is to learn English. Sometimes, in fact, the participants explicitly superimposed the task of learning English onto the task of learning to play the violin:

The boy is sad. He looks sad. He doesn't look very happy. He has a problem with his parents or someone in his family. Or he is sad because Proposition 227 [ending bilingual education in California in 1997] passed. Perhaps he doesn't know how to speak English. Perhaps now he can't learn English. It becomes harder for him. Perhaps in the future he could speak English. But he can't do math or science in English.

This story is about a boy that had to study a problem in English. Since he did not know English, he asked for help from his mother. She could not help him, so they called a friend of his. He explained and the boy understood. The boy was frustrated, but the story ended well.

There is this boy named Manny who has been in the U.S. for four years. He is in his last year of high school and he thinks that he won't make it to college because he doesn't speak English too well. One day while reading a book, he finds this character, the man, who is going through the same problems and decides to stand up for himself and try to make it in the U.S.

Manny says to himself that that can be him too and applies to college. He still thinks that he won't make it but he has hopes, dreams, and faith that he'll make it. Two months later, he receives a letter from the college that he

applied to that says, "Congratulations, you have been accepted to get into our college and get an education."

In other cases, though the students talked about learning to play the violin, their profound desire to learn English, and feelings of inadequacy about doing well at that difficult task, emerged in their narratives.

There's a person in the picture. He came to the U.S. from China as well. When he was in China, he liked to play violin, and he played well. People liked to listen to him play. But after he came to the U.S., he doesn't know how to read the scale/music. That is why he hates American English and he doesn't play violin anymore.

This person didn't know how to play the instrument. He was thinking of what to do. He asked others to teach him. He practiced often and finally learned how to play violin. He was feeling that it was very difficult in the picture.

This Latino boy really wants to learn his violin well. However, he does not have any talent for it. Also, his parents force him to learn the violin. He feels really overwhelmed. He does not know what to do. He just sits there. Earlier on, this boy was yelled at by his violin teacher. His parents want him to learn. He also wants to learn but he still does not do well even though he has tried hard. He is thinking how he can play it well. In the future, he should play the violin well.

There is a boy who is studying, he was having a lot of problems [a very hard time] studying. His mom told him to try, try harder. Then, he tried harder. Then he was getting better and better and he was learning. Then, he became a professional book writer.

The second year of the study, we asked students, "What do you think are the main obstacles to getting ahead in the United States?" Fifty-six percent spontaneously responded "learning English"—singling out not knowing English as a greater impediment than even discrimination, lack of resources, or not being documented. We then listed a number of obstacles that over the years we have learned are concerns for new immigrants. Fully 90 percent of our participants responded that learning English was a challenge they needed to overcome to get ahead.

In the last year of the study, we also asked students what they perceived were obstacles to getting to college. Of those who thought they would go to college, 45 percent responded that their English fluency presented a prob-

lem. Our respondents were realists: those who were concerned about their fluency scored lower than others on the English-language proficiency test.⁹

Despite their recognition that ~~learning English was both important and difficult~~, newcomer students maintained feelings of loyalty toward their first language: “It is my language”; “It is rich; I like it more. It is my native language and you can express more emotions”; “It is important not to forget from where we come.” Besides being “a language I have to speak at home,” several recognized the practical value of bilingualism: “It is very important since being bilingual is important.” Others noted that their own language had cultural value (“[it is] an ancient and important language”) as well as marketplace value (“[it is] complicated but cool, because everyone wants to learn it.”) Adolescents being adolescents, one even admitted that it was “good to know—you make fun of someone who doesn’t speak it.”

~~Eighty-nine percent of our participants indicated that continuing to speak their native language was important.~~ Most spoke in their native language at home and many continued to speak with their siblings and friends in that language.¹⁰ By the fifth year of the study, a clear gap had emerged between the students’ oral communication skills in their native language and their writing skills. By the last year, when asked in what language they felt they read and write best, 36 percent responded that their literacy skills were better in English than in their native language, 33 percent felt equally adept in both languages, and 30 percent felt their literacy skills were better in their native language.

English-Language Proficiency and Academic Performance

In Chapter 1, we noted that the English-language proficiency score our participants attained on the Bilingual Verbal Ability Tests (BVAT) was strongly predictive of their academic achievement—both on grades as well as on the achievement test scores. But what does this mean? With an average of seven years in the country, were our participants academically proficient in English?

The Nature of Bilingualism

Bilingualism, as we define it, means that a person is able to use two languages at a minimal level of proficiency. It is important to note, however,

that bilingualism is a relative concept.¹¹ Although a person may be a fluent speaker and writer in her native language, in the second language, she may only be able to carry on a simple conversation and may be unable to write or read anything but the simplest text. Conversely, a “dormant” bilingual, while being capable of political discussions and writing sophisticated essays in the second language, may understand his native language but have difficulty expressing anything but the simplest of thoughts in it.¹² Some are best able to express emotions and feelings in their native language but are better able to read, write, and argue in their new language. Still others are “balanced” bilinguals, equally adept at expressing any and all levels of communication in more than one language (although this “native-like control over both languages” is a very rare accomplishment).¹³ Language acquisition is a dynamic, fluid process that is highly dependent on both the context in which it is developed and the range of opportunities that one has to use it.

Another distinction is worth noting. “Elite” or “elective” bilinguals already speak the dominant language of the land and acquire a second language as a matter of choice in order to enhance their general profile of skills.¹⁴ “Folk” or “circumstantial” bilinguals, by contrast, often speak a lower-status language and must acquire the dominant language of their new country as a matter of survival.¹⁵ For these circumstantial bilinguals, the native language is often neglected and atrophies over time. In fact, they are often discouraged from maintaining it, even though it is an important way to communicate and maintain emotional ties with their families. Ironically then, while the children of the elite are encouraged to study a second language as a marker of competence and as a skill for succeeding in the global economy, children who enter the United States adept in the use of another language are often urged to let go of this ability.

It is also very important to distinguish between those language skills necessary to carry on a conversation and to go about taking care of the daily transactions of life, and those language skills required to be competitive academically. The first dimension of language skill—termed basic “interpersonal communicative skills”—can, with adequate exposure, be readily learned within a year or so.¹⁶ “Cognitive/academic language,” however, takes an average of seven to ten years of systematic high-quality training and consistent exposure to achieve.¹⁷ To get to the point of being able, in a second language, to argue about the relative merits of an issue, write a quality essay, read quickly enough to be competitive on a timed test, or de-

tect the subtle differences between multiple choice items on the SAT, simply takes extensive time as well as high-quality education. It is to this academic language to which we now turn.

~~The Bilingual Verbal Abilities Test~~

The Bilingual Verbal Abilities Test (BVAT) was designed to assess bilingual students' academic readiness.¹⁸ The BVAT comprises three individually administered subtests:

1. ~~The picture vocabulary task.~~ The student names a pictured object. This is an expressive language task that assesses the ability to retrieve single words and measures comprehension/knowledge.
2. ~~The oral vocabulary task.~~ The student hears and sees a word, then supplies a synonym or antonym.
3. ~~The verbal analogies task.~~ The student is asked to recognize the relationship between two words and then identify a word that has the same relationship to a third word (for example, hungry is to eat as tired is to sleep).¹⁹

The test is first administered by a bilingual researcher in English, then the test-taker is given the opportunity to respond in his or her native language. The test provides both an English-language proficiency (ELP) score as well as a so-called Gain score, which indicates the student's academic conceptual knowledge when allowed to access both of his or her languages. The ELP score combined with the Gain score yield a bilingual verbal ability (BVA) score. The BVAT, which uses U.S. English-language norms as well as test protocols developed for each of the native languages of our study participants, was the best available instrument to establish cognitive and academic language abilities.²⁰ We administered this test in the third and fifth years of the study.

ENGLISH-LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY SCORES

Strikingly, by the fifth year of the study, we found that only twenty students (7 percent of the sample) scored at or above the normalized mean for English speakers of the same age on the English-language proficiency subtest (the normalized mean was a score of 100). Instead, the mean score

for our entire sample was 74.7 (with students' scores ranging from 31 to 156).²¹ On average, then, our sample had academic English proficiency scores equivalent to the lowest two percentiles of native English-speaking peers. The Chinese students scored, on average, nine points higher than did the students from the other ethnic groups, but this was not a statistically significant difference.²²

More than three-quarters of our participants' scores were more than one standard deviation (fifteen points) below the mean. Only 22 percent of the total sample fell within one standard deviation of the average native English speaker of the same age. Moreover, the country-of-origin differences were dramatic. While 37.8 of the Chinese students achieved a standard score of 85 or above, only 9.3 percent of the Dominican students did so. The other three groups—Central Americans, Haitians, and Mexicans—all scored close to the total sample average, with only 22.6, 17.0, and 18.6 percent, respectively, earning scores of 85 or greater.

Grouping the students by our previously defined academic performance trajectories demonstrated a clear connection between the English-language proficiency score and performance. More than half of the high achievers scored within one standard deviation from the mean score, whereas 22.9 percent of the slow decliners did so. Only 11.3 percent of precipitous decliners, 10 percent of improvers, and 7.3 percent of low achievers scored within one standard deviation of the mean. While the mean score for high achievers was 91.3, the low achievers, improvers, and precipitous decliners scored more than two standard deviations below the normed mean.²³

USING BOTH LANGUAGES: THE GAIN SCORES

We examined whether the assessment of our participants' overall academic cognitive ability changed when they were able to draw on both sets of language skills. Indeed it did. On average, the students' scores rose over a standard deviation when they were able to use both their languages. This gain suggests that the students' conceptual knowledge is greater than it would appear based only on their use of English. Interestingly, there was no statistical difference in the Gain score across the five academic performance trajectory groups (Figure 4.1).²⁴

There were differences in Gain scores, however, when the student's country of origin was considered. The Chinese students demonstrate significantly higher skills when they are able to draw on their native language,

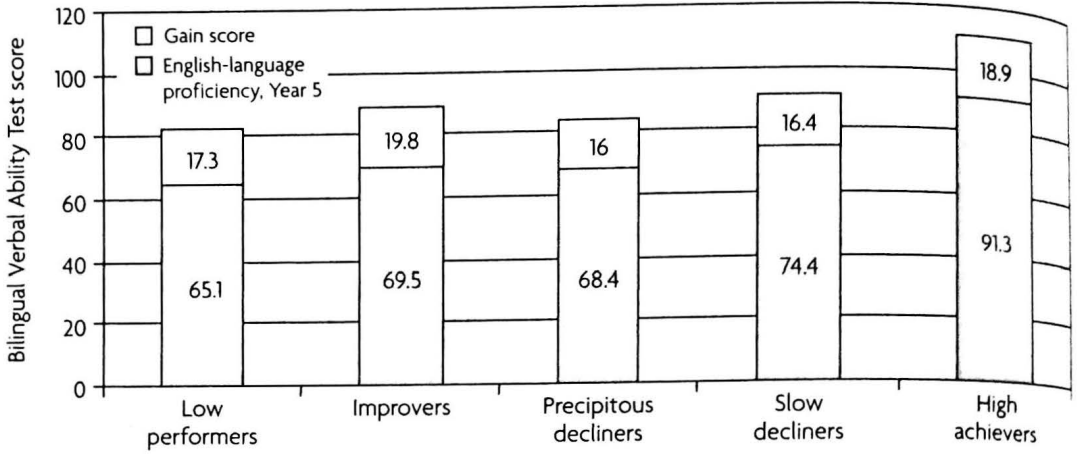


Figure 4.1. Bilingual verbal ability, by academic cluster.

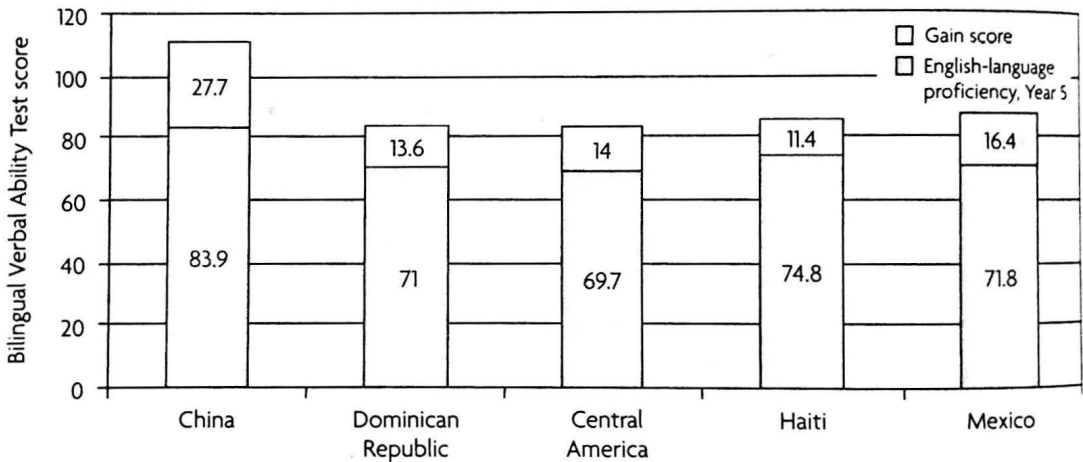


Figure 4.2. Bilingual verbal ability, by country of origin.

whereas the home-language advantage was smaller for the other groups (Figure 4.2).

INCREASES IN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY SCORES OVER TIME

Did our sample students' English-language proficiency increase over time? Indeed, it did—for the total sample, the standard score went up an average of eight points between the third and fifth years of the study. Note that the standard score uses age norms; this increase in fact represents a significant gain. Mexicans demonstrated the greatest increase in English-

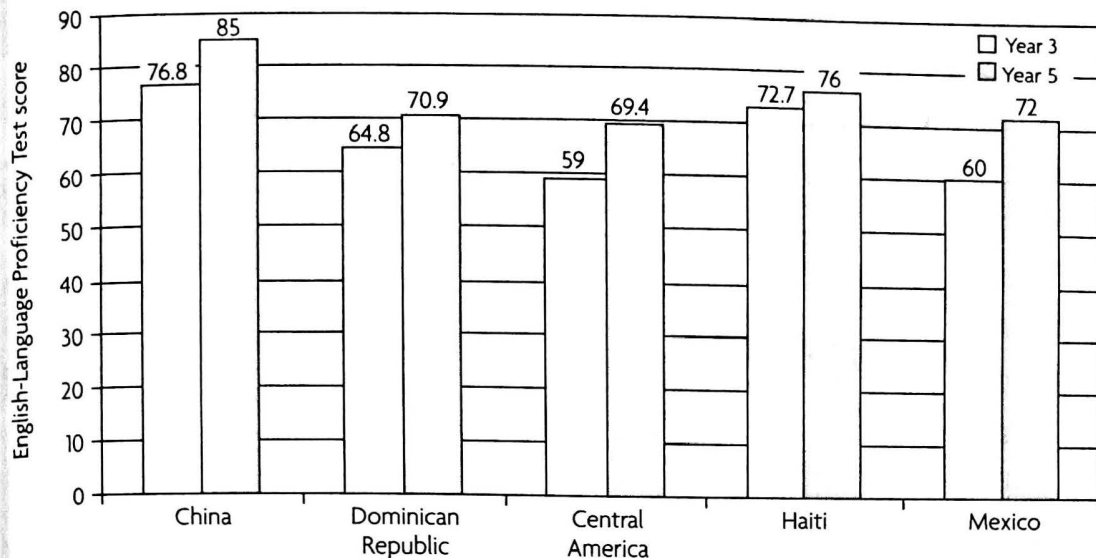


Figure 4.3. English-language proficiency, by country of origin.

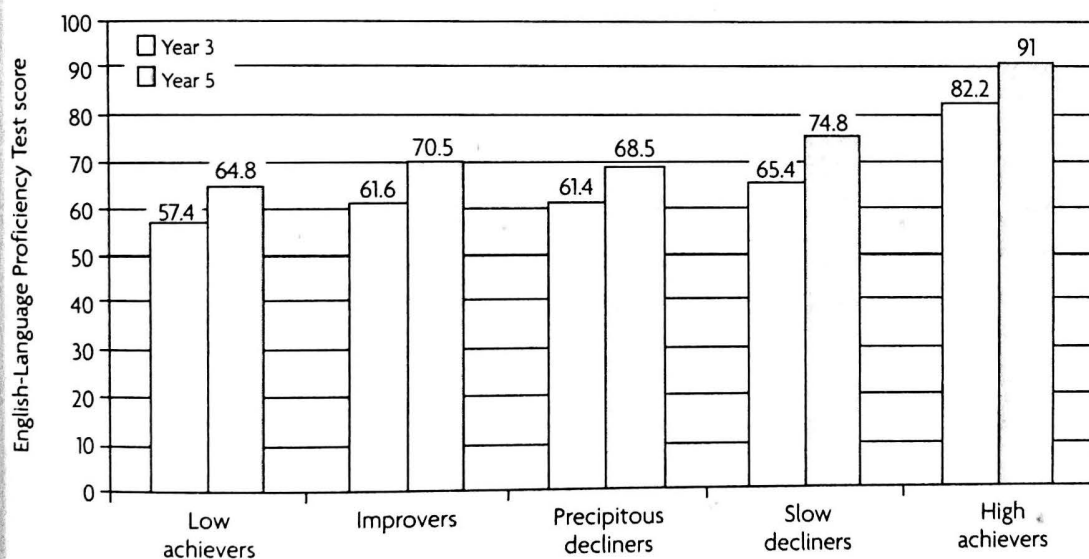


Figure 4.4. English-language proficiency, by academic cluster.

language proficiency over time, while Haitians showed the least improvement (Figure 4.3).²⁵ Interestingly, English-language proficiency increased at the same rate for each of the academic performance trajectories (Figure 4.4).²⁶

While the participants demonstrated a significant gain in English pro-

iciency over time, nonetheless, when compared to native-English speaking students, they still lagged significantly behind in academic English proficiency. Hence it is clear that it takes longer than most would imagine to develop the English-language skills necessary to be competitive academically. By most, we mean those who have not gone through the process of intensively learning another language—the average voter, teacher, or politician—who make naïve assumptions about language learning and impose unrealistic expectations based on a lack of first-hand experience. Researchers in the field of language learning have long known that acquiring an academically competitive level of language acquisition takes a significant period—from seven to ten years of strong academic environments and frequent second-language exposure.²⁷ Our data support these claims.



Challenges to Learning English

There is a fertile field of research addressing the factors that influence second-language acquisition. Drawing from disciplines within and across linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and education, researchers tend to focus on (1) background factors such as prior education and literacy, as well as previous experience with learning another language, (2) aptitude for learning a language, (3) motivation, (4) exposure, and (5) quality of instruction. Some scholars focus on contextual variables that influence learning, while others are more interested in understanding individual differences. Based on our study, we believe that both play an important role in the learning of a second language.

Background Characteristics

There seems to be a clear link between parental education and how well a person learns a new language.²⁸ The mother's education in particular seems to facilitate the child's learning in this area. Children with more educated mothers are advantaged in two ways: they are exposed to more academically oriented vocabulary and interactions at home, and they tend to be read to more often from books that are valued at school. Indeed, home literacy is another variable associated with greater ease in learning a second language.²⁹ There also appears to be a link between the number of years of education in one's home country and the ease of learning a second lan-

guage. When students are well grounded in their native language and have developed reading and writing skills in that language, they appear to be able to efficiently apply that knowledge to the new language when provided appropriate instructional supports.³⁰

Age

A general assumption is that the younger people are when they arrive in a new country, the better they will learn the new language. The evidence on this issue is complex and debated. Older learners, who have developed literacy in their native language and have greater cognitive maturity, seem to learn the rules of language more efficiently than do younger learners.³¹ Indeed, perhaps counterintuitively, assuming an identical quality of instruction, older learners learn a second language more quickly (though younger learners catch up over time). Younger learners generally acquire better pronunciation, however, which makes them seem more fluent and competent in the second language.³² Further, adults must master a larger vocabulary in the second language to appear “fluent.” There continues to be a debate about whether one’s age of arrival is more or less critical than one’s length of exposure to a new language. For adolescents, language learning does not fit neatly into the ongoing debate about age-related capabilities.

For our sample, the age of arrival and time in the United States were significantly correlated—that is, the younger the participants were when they arrived in the United States, the longer they had been in the United States by the fifth year of the study. Both age of arrival and length of residency were correlated with higher levels of proficiency.³³

Cognitive Aptitude

There is no doubt that some people simply have more of a knack for learning languages than others.³⁴ Are they more intelligent? In a word, no; there is no evidence to link traditional measures of intelligence to second language acquisition.³⁵ There do, however, appear to be traits or skill sets that are linked to better second-language learning, such as the ability to discriminate between sounds; the ability to recognize the role and function of various parts of speech; the capacity to detect and generalize grammatical rules; and memory for language.³⁶ While there appears to be a general agreement that these skills facilitate language learning, it is a challenge

to reliably and validly develop sound assessments of these linguistic capabilities.³⁷

Motivation

Some argue that whether or not someone really wants to learn a second language will strongly predict how quickly and how well they will learn it.³⁸ While this concept is intuitively appealing, it is, like aptitude, difficult to measure systematically.³⁹ For example, is the student motivated in a general, casual way (it would be nice to learn another language) or does he feel it is a matter of survival (I must learn another language in order to thrive in my new context)? Researchers studying motivation distinguish between various kinds of motivation, but like with aptitude, there is no consensus regarding either what the components of motivation may be or how to measure them.⁴⁰ As indicated earlier, we learned during our study that newcomer immigrant students arrive convinced that learning English is important for their future well-being. This is hardly surprising given the influence of English fluency on one's social, cultural, and economic experience in the United States.⁴¹ And because their level of motivation was so universally high—across different country-of-origin groups as well as across the various academic performance trajectories—it seems that a student's stated motivation is not a particularly useful indicator for predicting language learning over time.

Exposure to Native Speakers

The maxim “less contact, less learning” succinctly summarizes the arguments supporting students' exposure to quality language models and instruction.⁴² To learn a language well, one must have sustained interactions with educated native speakers of English, as well as good language instruction. Students can only learn the new language in the style to which they are exposed. If an English-language learner lives and talks daily with English speakers in a boarding school in London, she will learn a very different kind of English and sound very different than if she had been immersed in a public school in Atlanta, Sidney, or Toronto. Likewise, someone hoping to improve their Spanish-speaking skills will sound very different after an extended study-abroad stay in Madrid, Mexico City, Santo Domingo, or Buenos Aires.

Regardless of regional differences or styles, however, all language learners benefit from sustained support in a linguistically rich and cognitively engaging environment.⁴³ Students learn more quickly and attain higher levels of academic language proficiency when they participate in high-quality bilingual education than when they are placed in mainstream classrooms without any language support.⁴⁴ Teachers with an in-depth understanding of the needs of language learners are key to the success of any bilingual program, as are the school and social context.

What kinds of exposure to English did our participants experience? Opportunities to listen to radio and watch television varied significantly by language group. Spanish media is a booming industry in many parts of the country.⁴⁵ As a result, we found that many of our Spanish-speaking participants spent more than half of their radio-listening or television-watching time tuned into Spanish media. Indeed, for our Latino participants, watching television was often a family event. Watching the current popular *telenovela* (serial soap operas) was a cross-generational practice—grandmothers, parents, and children would tune in each evening for such hits at *Yo soy Betty, La Fea* (Betty, the Ugly), a twist on the Cinderella theme with a huge viewership that later spawned a U.S. adaptation. In contrast, only about 20 percent of our Chinese participants watched television in Cantonese or Mandarin, and none of our Haitian students watched Haitian Kreyol television (which tended to be local, low-budget talk shows focusing on political concerns). Similarly, significantly more Latino-origin students listened to radio in Spanish than did either their Chinese or Haitian peers.

We asked students to tell us what percentage of their time they spent speaking in English at their schools (which could include classrooms, the playground, hallways, and the cafeteria). Seventy-eight percent told us that they spent more than 75 percent of their time speaking in English at school, while 23 percent told us that they spent less than half of their time interacting in English at school. Almost all students, however, spoke nearly exclusively in their native language to their parents. And in nonfamily and nonschool situations (like work and neighborhood contexts), the students demonstrated a range of language-use patterns. Forty-four percent used English more than three-quarters of the time, while 30 percent told us that they used English more than half the time. By the third year of the study, just under half of the students told us that they spoke primarily in their na-

tive language with most of their friends, roughly a quarter spoke with their peers primarily in English, and another quarter used both languages. More than a third of the students in our sample told us that they had little opportunity to interact with peers who were not from their country of origin, which no doubt contributed to this pattern. Interestingly, we found that students who claimed to have at least one friend with whom they predominantly speak English performed somewhat better than did students who had no friends with whom they spoke primarily English.⁴⁶

Quality of English-Language Instruction

There are many approaches to English-language instruction. The types of programs that are offered depend in part on the beliefs of those who develop the programs about language learning and cognitive development, the composition of the class (for example, if only one or two native languages are used by the class as a whole), and access to resources (such as bilingual teachers). Some believe that language learning and cognition are deeply intertwined, and that to develop second-language skills without attending to cognition places students at a clear disadvantage both short- and long-term. Others take the position that these two aspects of learning are independent, and that immersion in the second language will best facilitate adaptation to the new environment.

Under the rubric of bilingual education we find a wide array of practices and programs.⁴⁷ The vast majority of research on bilingual education focuses on elementary rather than secondary educational practices, contexts, and outcomes, though nearly half the students who need services arrive during secondary school.

English as a Second Language (ESL) programs often consist of limited pull-out instruction and academic support with the rest of the day spent immersed in regular classes; in ESL classrooms, most often there are learners from many different countries speaking many different languages.

Transitional bilingual programs focus on providing academic support while students transition out of their language of origin into English. In one-way developmental bilingual programs, students of one language group are schooled in two languages (for example, English and Cantonese) so that they can keep up with academic material in their native language as they learn English. In structured immersion programs, the curriculum is

simplified and is taught more slowly, and with a great deal of repetition, in English. And in sheltered English programs, all lessons in every subject are at least in part a second-language lesson; thus a science class is also an opportunity to learn new vocabulary.

Dual-immersion classes, the state of the art of bilingual education, involve students' learning half of the time in English and half in their native language (most often Spanish), with half of the class being native speakers of one language and the other half native speakers of the other language. This kind of program offers greater opportunity for students to truly become bilingual—they develop their second language while maintaining their first. They also develop and expand their academic skills by drawing on both languages.

Studies of the relative merits of such programs find that dual-language programs most consistently produce the best results. Excellent results as measured by high performance of students are also found in one-way development programs offered in high-achieving districts.⁴⁸ There is no doubt that in addition to the range of kinds of instruction that fall under the general bilingual education rubric, there is also a great disparity in quality of instruction between settings. While high-quality bilingual instruction yields excellent outcomes, low-quality, erratic instruction leads to far from optimal results.

Nearly the entire sample (93.8 percent) began their education in their new country in some form of bilingual instructional setting (including pull-out programs, sheltered instruction, ESL, and dual-language instruction). Over time, many of the students transitioned out of their bilingual settings, though there seemed to be little rhyme or reason to the transition.⁴⁹ Our study began the year before Proposition 227—the Unz initiative that mandated a transition to a mainstream class after one year—was voted into existence in California. The proposition took many educators by surprise and there were huge disparities among districts, schools, and classrooms in how the initiative was implemented. In Massachusetts there was also a great disparity among districts and schools in how English-language learners received instruction.⁵⁰ Often neither the school records nor the students themselves were clear about whether or not they were receiving bilingual or ESL instruction or language learning supports.

Because of the disparities between programs, the lack of systematic definition of programs by district, the wide range of settings in which our

students received their education, and the poor recordkeeping about the kinds of programs students were actually assigned to, it is impossible to provide hard data on the relative merit of different kinds of English-language-learner programs—it is simply beyond the scope of this study. Ethnographically, however, as we saw in Chapter 3, many of the school settings in which newcomer students found themselves left much to be desired. The schools tended to lack adequate resources and offer a poor quality of instruction, and the contexts of learning were frequently neglectful, disengaging, and even hostile. All too often these were schools in which very few students—whether they were native-born Americans or newly arrived immigrant students—thrived. Further, the bilingual students were segregated from the native-born peers by being relegated to the basement or a wing of the school. The mission of the school was generally not focused on meeting the needs of newcomer students—at best they tended to be ignored and at worst they were viewed as a problem contributing to low performance on state mandated high-stakes tests.

By the fourth year of the study, nearly three-quarters of the students had begun taking classes outside of the bilingual programs and 41 percent were enrolled entirely in mainstream classes. Notably, many students spoke about how difficult it was to make the transition to mainstream classes. Many missed their friends and the nurturing, sheltered environment that had served them well as they were adjusting to a new country and educational environment. Students often lamented that when they first transitioned, they did not know any of the other students and were scared, or missed their friends. Many students also told us how inadequate and “stupid” they felt as they struggled to express themselves and academically compete with a less than fully developed vocabulary and still-evolving grammar skills. As one student shared, “It was harder because of my English. Sometimes the teacher spoke fast and sometimes I couldn’t understand her.”

Other students, however, appreciated the greater rigor of their mainstream classes. “I knew it would help me improve my English, even if it was hard,” said one student. Another told us, “I liked the challenge—the bilingual classes were too easy; you had to start over when new kids came.” Students also appreciated the opportunity to interact with American peers. “[I can] make new friends, like American people,” said one; “[Now] I was talking to different people that don’t speak Haitian,” said another. Students

also appreciated not being singled out: “It just makes me feel normal again.”

While some students ended up doing well in mainstream contexts, clearly others struggled and could have used more support than they received. There seemed to be little rational planning and follow-up regarding placing students in a particular program. There also was a surprising amount of haphazardly moving students among bilingual, ESL, and mainstream classes. Sometimes these shifts had to do with changes in funding or programs within a school; what was available one year was not available the next.⁵¹ Sometimes a student was transitioned into mainstream classes before they were ready and then moved back into a sheltered environment. Other times students were left in ESL courses long after such classes appeared to help them. Sometimes, too, students moved about from school to school and were placed in different kinds of programs depending on what was available in each school. By and large, in most cases, there was no clear strategy to place students into a progressive program of instruction that would (1) identify the student’s incoming literacy and academic skills, (2) provide high-quality English instruction, (3) continue to provide instruction in academic subject areas such as math, science, and social studies in the students’ native languages, so they would not fall further behind their English-speaking peers, and (4) offer transitional academic supports—like tutoring, continued language instruction, homework help, and writing assistance—as the language learners integrated into mainstream programs.

Predicting a Student’s Success or Failure in Learning English

Why do some students learn English more efficiently than others? Based on what the literature in the field tells us, we developed a model to predict our participants’ English-language proficiency score the last year of the study.⁵² We examined the role of several variables: parents’ assessment of their own English skills during the first year of the study; how many years the students had been educated in their country of origin; how many years the students had been in the United States; students’ reports of how much English they used in informal situations; measures of the school’s poverty and segregation levels; and the percentage of students in the school who were learning English. Understanding this combination of characteristics

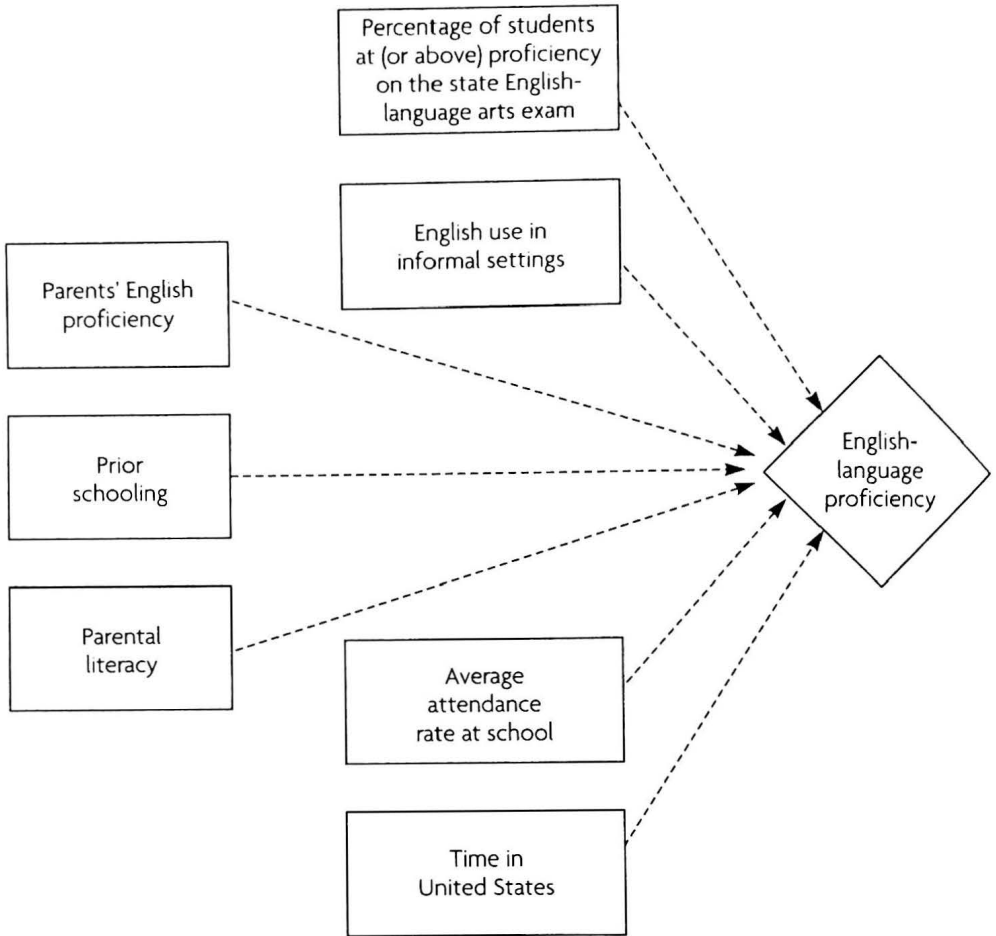


Figure 4.5. Predicting English-language proficiency.

allowed us to predict nearly half of the variance of the last year's English-language proficiency score (Figure 4.5).⁵³

The two school characteristics we included in this model—the percent of the students attending the school who reached at least proficiency level on the state-mandated English language arts exam, as well as the daily average school attendance rate—were highly predictive of the English-language proficiency of our students. Thus students who attended schools where a higher percentage of the students did well on the state's English language arts exam did significantly better than students who attended a school where a substantial number of its students did not reach proficiency. We surmise that in those schools where more of the students performed well on the English language arts exam, the quality of instruction

as well as the language models were substantially better than in school settings where few students performed well. Likewise, schools with higher daily average attendance rates tend to have better school climates and more efficacious monitoring of their students than schools where fewer students come to school regularly. In such settings, newcomer immigrant students have a substantially better chance to learn English.

~~Students' personal backgrounds also mattered.~~ Parental literacy was strongly predictive, as were the parent's English skills. The number of years that the student had been educated in his or her country of origin (an indicator of general educational level and literacy) contributed to English-language proficiency, as did years in the United States (an indicator of exposure to English).

~~The students who spoke with others in English in informal settings~~ had better English-proficiency outcomes. Many of our students, however, lived in ethnically segregated neighborhoods and either attended segregated schools or were segregated within the school. Thus many had limited opportunities to make friends with native English speakers.

~~NEWCOMER students arrive highly motivated to learn English.~~ They recognize that speaking the language of the new land is essential for them to make friends, do well in school, and have a "better future." Consequently, during their first years in the United States, newcomer students are often preoccupied about the challenge of learning a new language. But learning a second language is very difficult, especially when immigrant students feel pressured at the same time to succeed academically and socially at a new school. Sadly, as they approach graduation, many recognize as well that their limitations in academic English proficiency will likely hamper their ability to enter or achieve in college.

We also learned that becoming proficient in English takes a long time. Even after, on average, seven years in the new country, very few of our participants (2 percent) performed comparably to their normed average peers who were native-born English-speakers. Yet while most immigrant students performed well below average when compared to native-speaking peers, all groups showed improvement between the third and fifth years of the study. Our analyses demonstrate the critical interplay of the skills the students bring with them and the linguistic and educational contexts in which they find themselves. The less access that newcomer students had to

rich models of academic English and high-level instruction, the less likely they were to demonstrate strong proficiency in academic English during the last year of the study.

Clearly, if we are to expect newcomer students to learn English, as they and we would like them to, our schools need to do a better job of developing educational contexts that will make it happen. Our focus at the beginning of the study was very student-centered; we considered the resources the students brought with them, the engagement they brought to the task, as well as the educational contexts they encountered. But while these factors certainly contribute to language acquisition, the schools also play a fundamental role in whether students learn English. Our findings parallel those of Gary Orfield, Guadalupe Valdés, Laurie Olsen, and others who have insightfully described the intense physical and linguistic segregation that many newcomer immigrant students encounter.⁵⁴ While there have been some attempts to address the needs of students coming in at the elementary level, there has been a lamentable and disconcerting absence of efforts to meet the needs of English-language learners arriving at the secondary school level.⁵⁵ This gap absolutely needs to be addressed if we wish to harness the energies of all of our newcomer students.

The alternative to supporting immigrant children while they learn academic English is to allow them simply to sink or swim; that is, to stand by while some stay afloat, and many others become weary and drown. Our dilemma is compounded by our culture's emphasis on standardized and often high-stakes exams, which most newcomer students are unable to pass within three years of arrival as is currently required. Indeed, we have become very concerned about the wisdom of using high-stakes tests to assess the progress of newcomer immigrant students. It is important to recall that many newcomer immigrants attend highly segregated and high-poverty schools, where very few of the students—whether native English speakers or immigrant students—are adequately prepared to do well on a standardized English test. Given that even in the best circumstances, with the highest-quality English-language instruction, it can take seven to ten years to gain academic proficiency, how can we expect the average newcomer student to become proficient in just three years? To be fair to them, we must develop alternative strategies of assessment that are linguistically and culturally appropriate.