

English Usage Among Hispanics in the United States

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Pew Hispanic Center

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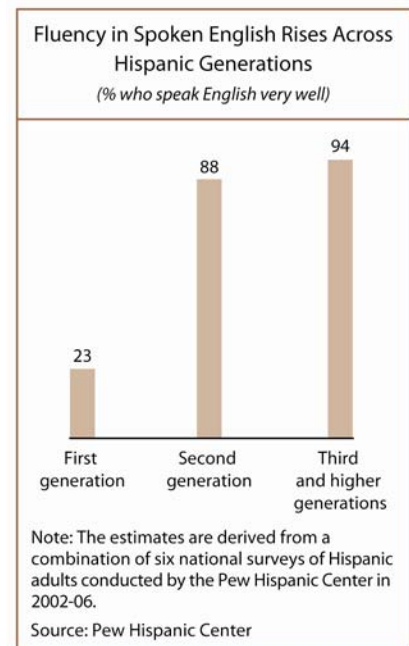
Executive Summary

Nearly all Hispanic adults born in the United States of immigrant parents report they are fluent in English. By contrast, only a small minority of their parents describe themselves as skilled English speakers. This finding of a dramatic increase in English-language ability from one generation of Hispanics to the next emerges from a new analysis of six Pew Hispanic Center surveys conducted this decade among a total of more than 14,000 Latino adults. The surveys show that fewer than one-in-four (23%) Latino immigrants reports being able to speak English very well. However, fully 88% of their U.S.-born adult children report that they speak English very well. Among later generations of Hispanic adults, the figure rises to 94%. Reading ability in English shows a similar trend.

As fluency in English increases across generations, so, too, does the regular use of English by Hispanics, both at home and at work. For most immigrants, English is not the primary language they use in either setting. But for their grown children, it is.

The surveys also find that Latino immigrants are more likely to speak English very well, and to use it often, if they are highly educated, arrived in the United States as children or have spent many years here. College education, in particular, plays an important role in the ability to speak and read English. Among the major Hispanic origin groups, Puerto Ricans and South Americans are the most likely to say they are proficient in English; Mexicans are the least likely to say so.

The transition to English dominance occurs at a slower pace at home than it does at work. Just 7% of foreign-born Hispanics speak mainly or only English at home; about half of their adult children do. By contrast, four times as many foreign-born Latinos speak mainly or only English at work (29%). Fewer than half (43%) of foreign-born Latinos speak mainly or only Spanish on the job, versus the three-quarters who do so at home.



Defining generations

First: Those born outside the United States; includes those born in Puerto Rico.

Second: Born in the United States, with at least one first-generation parent.

Third and higher: Born in the United States, with both parents born in the United States.

The main data sources for this report are six surveys conducted for the Pew Hispanic Center from April 2002 to October 2006. They included interviews with more than 14,000 native-born and foreign-born Latino adults, ages 18 and older, irrespective of legal status. Latinos born in Puerto Rico, many of whom arrive on the U.S. mainland as Spanish speakers, are included as foreign born.

In analyzing the data on English use and prevalence from these surveys, this report relies on four measures based on respondents' ratings of their English-speaking skills, their English-reading skills, their level of English use at home, and their level of English use at work.

Two of these surveys, along with a more recent nationwide survey of Latinos taken by the Pew Hispanic Center in October and November of this year, also provide a clear measure of how Hispanics believe that insufficient English language skill is an obstacle to their acceptance in the U.S. In surveys taken in 2007, 2006 and 2002, respondents were asked about potential sources of discrimination against Hispanics. In all three surveys, language skills was chosen more often than the other options as a cause of discrimination.

Among this report's findings:

- Of adult first-generation Latinos, just 23% say they can carry on a conversation in English very well. That share rises sharply, to 88%, among the second generation of adults, and to 94% among the third and higher generations.
- A majority of foreign-born Hispanics (52%) report that they speak only Spanish at home. That is true of just 11% of their adult children and of 6% of the children of U.S.-born Hispanics.
- Half of the adult children of Latino immigrants speak some Spanish at home. By the third and higher generation, that has fallen to one-in-four.
- Nearly three-quarters of Mexican immigrants (71%) say they speak English just a little or not at all. Respondents born in South America (44%) and Puerto Rico (35%) are the least likely to say they speak English just a little or not at all.
- College education is closely tied to the ability to speak and read English. Among Hispanic immigrants with college degrees, 62% report that they speak English very well. That share drops to 34% among those with high school diplomas and 11% among those who did not complete high school.
- Immigrants are more likely to speak English very well, and to use it often, if they arrived in the United States as children or have spent many years here.

- Most Latino immigrants (67%) report that they use at least some English at work. Just 28% say they speak only Spanish on the job.
- Most Hispanics who are naturalized citizens (52%) speak English very well or pretty well. Most non-citizens (74%) speak just a little English or none at all.
- More than four-in-ten (44%) Latino adults—both foreign born and native born—are bilingual. This is especially true of the adult children of immigrants: More than two-thirds (68%) report that they can carry on a conversation in English or Spanish pretty well or very well.
- Latinos cite language skills more frequently than immigration status, income/education or skin color as an explanation for discrimination against them. In 2007, 46% said it was the biggest cause of discrimination against Latinos.

About This Report

The estimates in this report are derived from six surveys conducted for the Pew Hispanic Center from April 2002 to October 2006. They included interviews with more than 14,000 native-born and foreign-born Latino adults. The report relies on respondents' ratings of their English-speaking skills, their English-reading skills, their level of English use at home, and their level of English use at work.

A Note on Terminology

Unless otherwise noted, this report uses the following definitions of the first, second and third and higher generations:

First: Those born outside the United States; includes those born in Puerto Rico.

Second: Born in the United States, with at least one first-generation parent.

Third and higher: Born in the United States, with both parents born in the United States.

The terms "Latino" and "Hispanic" are used interchangeably in this report, as are the terms "foreign born" and "immigrant."

About the Authors

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Introduction

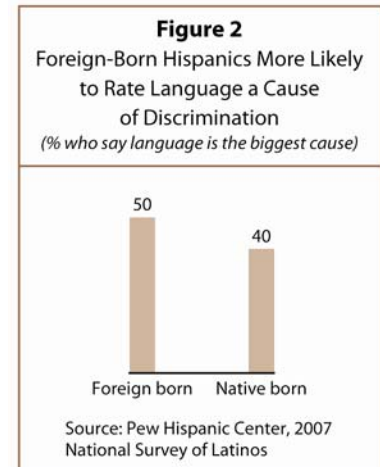
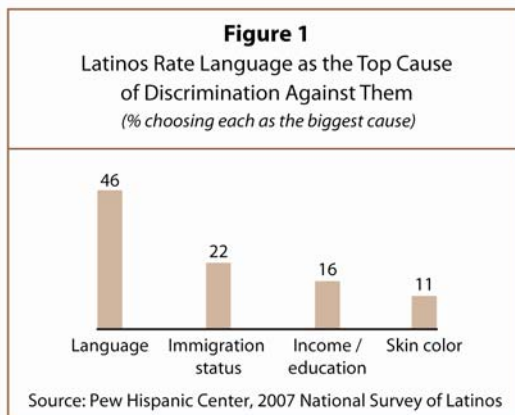
Immigrants who learn English well make their way much more easily in the United States than those who do not. They can obtain a higher level of education and better-paying jobs than people with limited English language skills (Bleakley and Chin, 2004; Carnevale, Fry and Lowell, 2001). They can navigate complex paperwork, understand political debates and introduce themselves to their neighbors. Knowing some English is a requirement for citizenship, the ultimate bond with the United States.

Previous research by the Pew Hispanic Center shows that English use is linked to assimilation (Pew Hispanic Center and Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002). Latino immigrants who know English well and use it often tend to have attitudes and opinions on social values, gender roles and faith in government that are closer to those of non-Latinos than do immigrants who use mainly Spanish.

Latinos believe that English is necessary for success in the United States, according to the same previous research. Asked whether adult Latinos “need to learn English to succeed in the United States, or can they succeed even if they only speak Spanish,” 89% of Hispanics in the 2002 survey said that they need to learn English. Slightly more Spanish-dominant Hispanics (92%) voiced this belief.

The other side of the coin is that many Latinos believe that inability to speak English well is the leading cause of discrimination against Hispanics. And discrimination is seen as a major problem in keeping Hispanics from succeeding in America: It was cited by 44% of Latinos in the 2002 survey, 58% in the 2006 survey and 54% in the 2007 survey.

Both the 2002 and 2006 surveys, using differently worded questions, found that Latinos believe that language is the primary cause of discrimination against them. In the 2007 survey, when all respondents were asked to choose from among four factors that they would consider the biggest cause of discrimination, language was most often cited (46%). (Figure 1) The survey also finds that foreign-born Hispanics are more likely than native-born Hispanics to say that language is a big cause of discrimination. (Figure 2)



The issue of immigrant language skills is a timely one because the United States is in the midst of the largest influx of immigrants in a century. According to the Census Bureau's 2006 American Community Survey, an estimated 37.5 million authorized and unauthorized foreign-born residents live in the United States. That is a record in absolute numbers but still a somewhat smaller proportion of the total population than was the case a century ago. Foreign-born residents make up 13% of the population today, compared with 15% in 1910 (Gibson and Lennon, 1999). These newcomers increasingly arrive in communities that have not seen many immigrants in recent years and may not be ready for them. Small cities and towns all across the country are joining traditional gateway cities such as New York and Los Angeles as destinations for Hispanic immigrants.

The language skills of these foreign-born residents are one flash point in a broader U.S. political debate over immigration. For some, the presence of millions of U.S. residents who do not know English well is an indicator that U.S. society is unable to absorb so many new arrivals. Others assert that there is no threat to the dominance of English, because the second and third generations will learn the language, just as children of immigrants did during previous waves of immigration.

Our analysis finds that the ability to speak English and the likelihood of using it in everyday life rise sharply from Hispanic immigrants to their U.S.-born adult children.

Fewer than one-in-four Latino immigrants (23%) reports being able to speak English very well, compared with 88% of the second generation and 94% of later generations. Reading ability follows a similar trend from one generation to the next. Hispanic immigrants are most likely to speak and read English very well if they are college-educated, arrived in the United States as children or have spent

many years here. Puerto Ricans and South Americans report the highest levels of ability in English, and Mexicans the least.

In general, Hispanic immigrants do not primarily speak English at home or at work. They are, however, more likely to use English on the job than at home. Most of their children primarily speak English at home and at work. Spanish retains its hold on the second generation, about half of whom speak only Spanish, mainly Spanish or Spanish and English equally at home. By the third and higher generations, that falls to one-in-four.

How do the patterns we found resemble or differ from those experienced by the last great influx of immigrants a century ago? The broad trajectory appears to be similar. Researchers generally agree that immigrants who arrived a century ago largely spoke their native language, especially at home. Their U.S.-born children used English and their parents' native tongue. The children of U.S.-born parents—i.e., the grandchildren or later descendants of immigrants—spoke mainly or only English.

It is difficult to compare how quickly immigrants acquired good English skills because there is a lack of consistent data over time (Stevens, 1999). But many researchers agree that education level, age of arrival and length of residence in the U.S. serve as markers—in the past just as in the present—that predict how well an immigrant speaks English. Research on previous generations of immigrants also has found that living in a non-English-speaking enclave delays the learning of English, a finding echoed in more recent research (Labov, 1998).

This report begins by analyzing differences in English ability and use among several generations of Hispanics: Latino immigrants; their U.S.-born children; and the children and later generations of U.S.-born Hispanics. From the first generation to those that follow, we see a nearly complete transition from Spanish to English dominance.

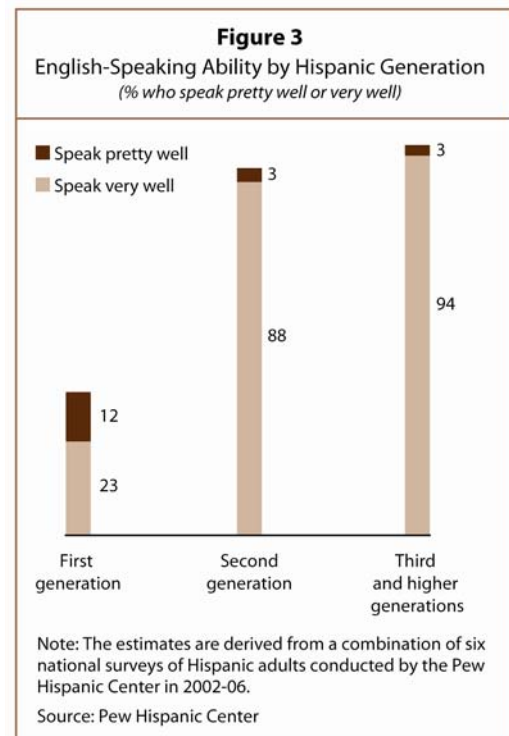
Subsequent sections focus mainly on Latino immigrants, looking at the extent to which their English-speaking ability is linked to the number of years they have spent in the United States, their education level and how old they were when they arrived. We also examine the impact of country of origin.

This report also includes sections on citizenship and language ability, on use of English and Spanish in the workplace and on bilingual speakers.

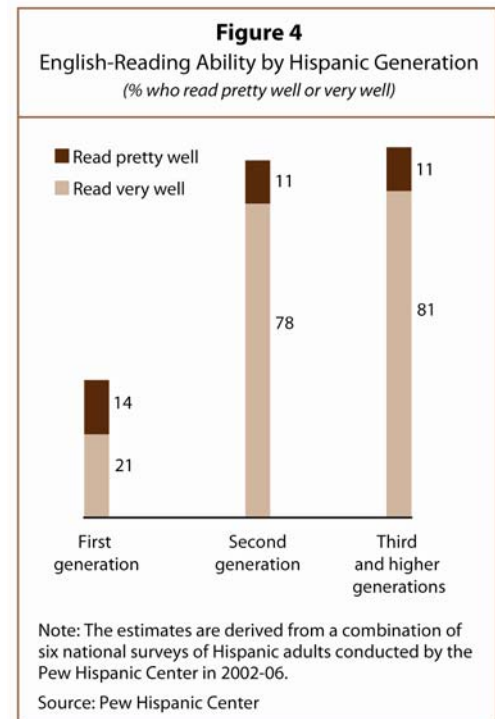
Generations

There are striking generational differences among Latinos, especially between those born outside the U.S. and their U.S.-born children, in the ability to speak or read English. Spanish is the pervasive language of the first generation of adult Hispanics, those born outside the U.S. Their U.S.-born children, the second generation, are comfortable with both English and Spanish but much more likely to speak English at home and at work. By the third and later generations, children of U.S.-born parents, English use is universal and although many know how to speak Spanish, they do not often do so.

Among the first generation of Latino adults, most say they speak little or no English, and only 23% report that they speak the language very well. An additional 12% say they speak English pretty well. By the second generation, 88% report speaking English very well and 3% speak pretty well, and by later generations the proportions are 94% and 3% respectively. (Figure 3)



Reading skill follows the same pattern, at a slightly lower level of ability: 21% of the first generation say they read English very well, and 14% read pretty well. By the second generation, 78% report reading English very well and 11% read pretty well. By the third and higher generations, the shares increase to 81% and 11% respectively. (Figure 4)



Use of English at home is rare among Latino immigrants. Only 7% of foreign-born Latinos report speaking only English or more English than Spanish at home. But about half of the second generation (48%) speak mainly or only English with their families, and the rest speak at least some Spanish. By the third and higher generations, three-quarters of adults speak mainly or only English at home.

All generations are more likely to use English at work than at home. Among the first generation, 29% speak only English or mainly English on the job. By the second generation, two-thirds speak mainly or only English in the workplace. Most later generations of Hispanics (58%) speak only English at work and an additional 22% say they speak mainly English at work.

As English usage gains over generations, Spanish use dwindles but does not disappear. Among foreign-born Hispanics, 95% say they speak Spanish very well. Slightly more than half of the second generation (56%) say they speak Spanish very well, as do 29% of the later generations. But Spanish retains a foothold in the third generation and beyond, with 52% reporting they speak it at least pretty well.

Both native- and foreign-born adult Hispanics report lower reading skills than speaking skills in Spanish. Six-in-ten first-generation Latinos say they can read a newspaper or book in Spanish very well. That share drops to 39% in the second generation and 16% in later generations. Most members of the third and higher generations report very little or no reading ability in Spanish.

Spanish is the language that most foreign-born Hispanic adults (52%) speak exclusively at home. That proportion drops to 11% among second-generation adults and 6% among those in the third and higher generations.

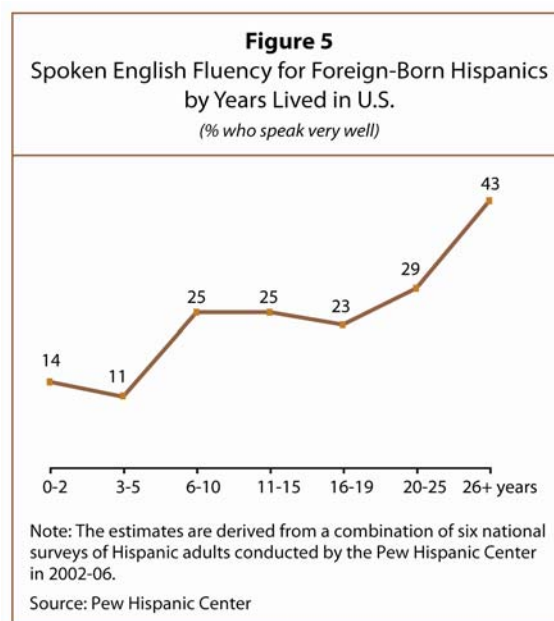
Foreign-Born Hispanics

The next sections of this report look in-depth at how some characteristics of adult immigrants are linked to their skill in using English. In general, immigrants are most likely to speak and read English very well if they have lived in the United States for many years, hold a college degree or arrived in this country at a young age. Puerto Ricans and South Americans report greater levels of ability in English than other origin groups, and Mexicans report the least.

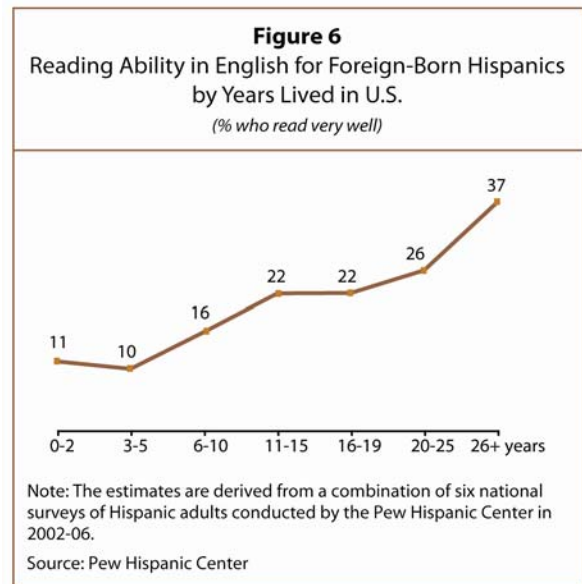
Time in Country

The longer an immigrant has been in the country, the more likely that person's English skills are at a high level.

Among Latino immigrants who have been U.S. residents the longest—for at least 26 years—43% report speaking English very well. Among the most recent arrivals—those who immigrated less than three years before taking the survey—just 14% report speaking English very well. (Figure 5) Some 12% of those who have been here the longest say they speak no English, compared with 33% of the newest arrivals.



Reading ability begins at a lower level: Only about one-in-ten of the most recent immigrants reports being able to read English very well. Among immigrants who have lived in the United States for 26 years or more, 37% say they can read a book or newspaper in English very well. (Figure 6)



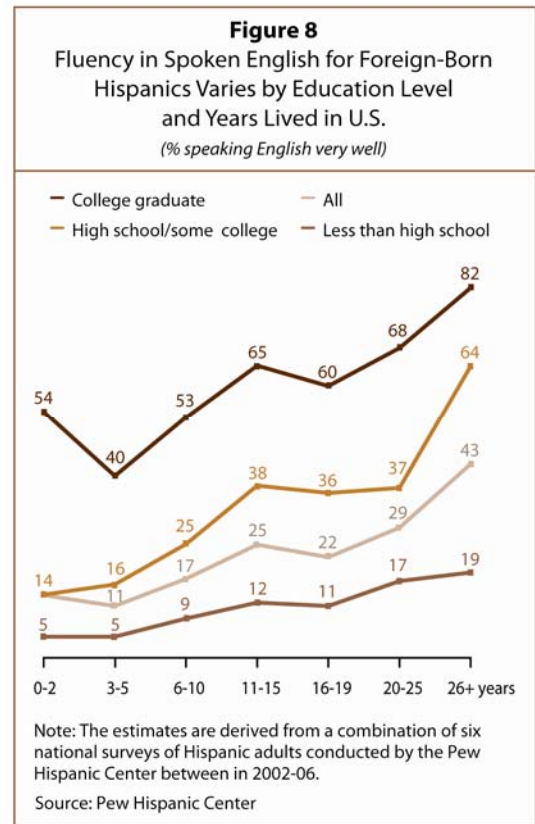
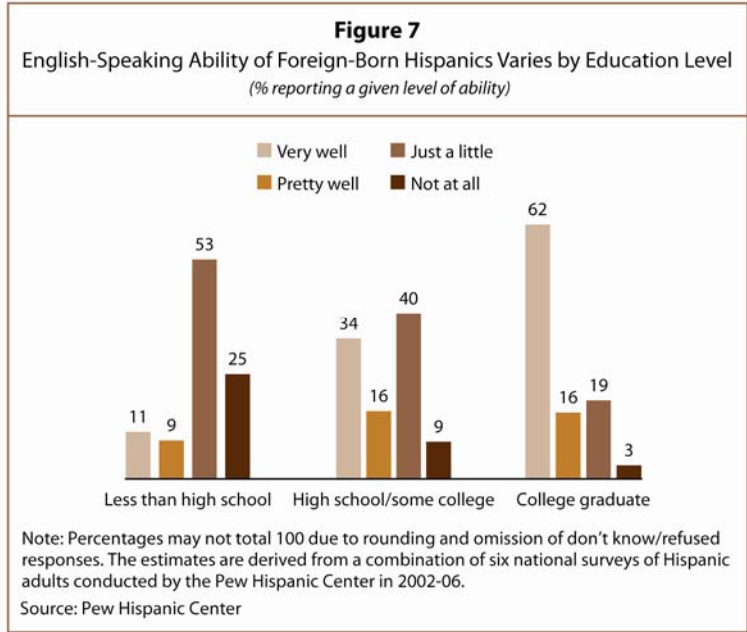
Use of English at work or at home is more common among immigrants who have been in the United States longer. A quarter (24%) of those who have been in the country for 26 years or more speak only English at work, compared with 9% of those who arrived less than three years before taking the survey. Among the Hispanic immigrants here the longest, 10% speak only English at home, compared with 3% of the newest arrivals.

Education

The education level of adult Hispanic immigrants is the key determinant of their ability to speak and read English. As a group, better educated immigrants begin their life in the United States knowing more English than do those with less education, and they maintain that advantage over time. They also are more likely to speak English both at home and at work, reinforcing their use of the language.

Nearly two-thirds (62%) of adult Latino immigrants with college degrees say they speak English very well, compared with a third (34%) of those with high school diplomas. Of foreign-born Hispanics who do not have a high school diploma, 11% report being able to speak English very well. (Figure 7)

Even among newly arrived immigrants, 54% of those who hold college degrees report that they speak English very well. The share rises to 82% among foreign-born college graduates who have lived in the U.S. for more than 26 years. (Figure 8)



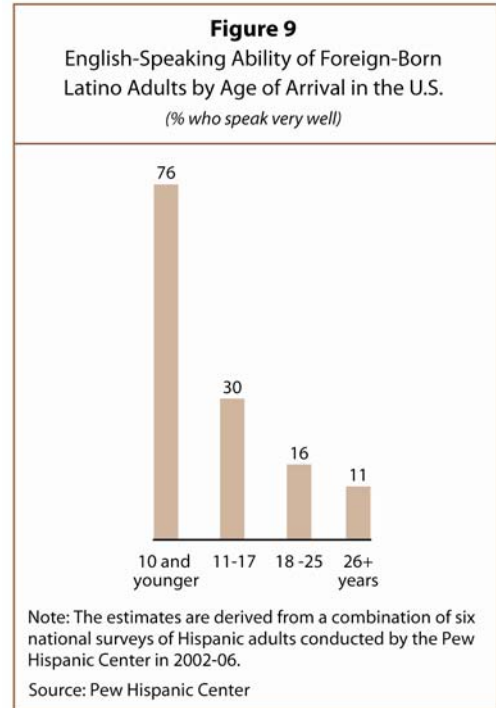
Among newly arrived immigrants who graduated from high school but do not hold a college degree, just 14% say they speak English very well. Immigrants with this level of education who have lived in the United States longer are more likely to report they speak English very well. However, only among those who have been here 26 years or more does a majority (64%) speak English very well. Most members of this group who have lived in the United States 10 years or less answer “just a little” when asked how well they can carry on a conversation in English.

Only 5% of newly arrived immigrants without a high school education report they speak English very well. That share is higher among similarly educated immigrants who have lived in the United States longer. But even among those who have lived in this country at least 26 years, only 19% speak English very well. Latino immigrants without a high school education, from the newly arrived to those who have been here the longest, are most likely to say that they can carry on a conversation in English just a little.

Age of Arrival

Adult immigrants who arrived as young children are more skilled at English than are those who crossed the border when they were older. Three-quarters (76%) of foreign-born Latino adults who arrived at ages 10 or younger report that they can carry on a conversation in English very well. That compares with 30% of those who arrived at ages 11 to 17; 16% of those who arrived at ages 18 to 25; and 11% of those who arrived at ages 26 or older. (Figure 9)

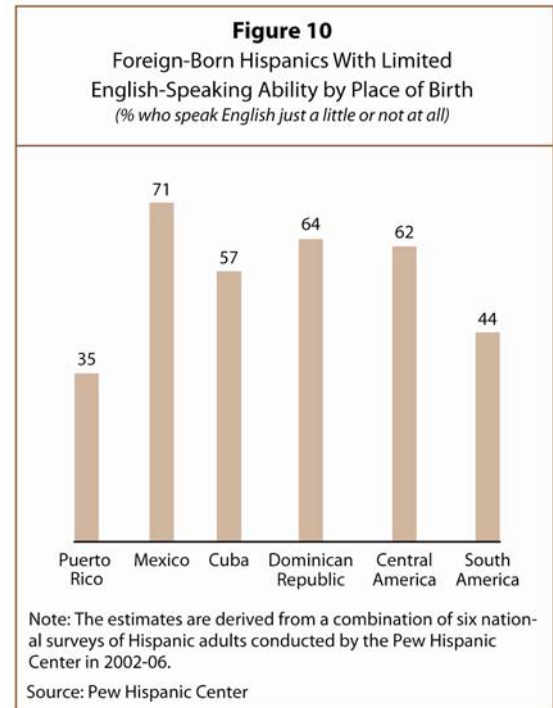
The pattern is the same for reading skill in English. Two-thirds (67%) of adult immigrants who arrived by age 10 report that they read English very well. So do 28% of Latino immigrants who arrived at ages 11-17; 14% of those who arrived at ages 18-25; and 9% of those who arrived at ages 26 or older.



Country of Origin

The likelihood that foreign-born Latinos speak very good English differs somewhat depending on where they were born. Most Puerto Ricans (52%) say they speak English very well, as do 39% of South Americans and 31% of Cubans. Fewer immigrants of Mexican origin than of any other major origin group say they speak English very well (16%).

Nearly three-quarters of Mexican immigrants (71%) say they speak English just a little or not at all. That is also the case with 64% of immigrants from the Dominican Republic; 62% from Central America; 57% from Cuba; and 44% from South America. Among Puerto Ricans, 35% report that they speak English just a little or not at all. (Figure 10)



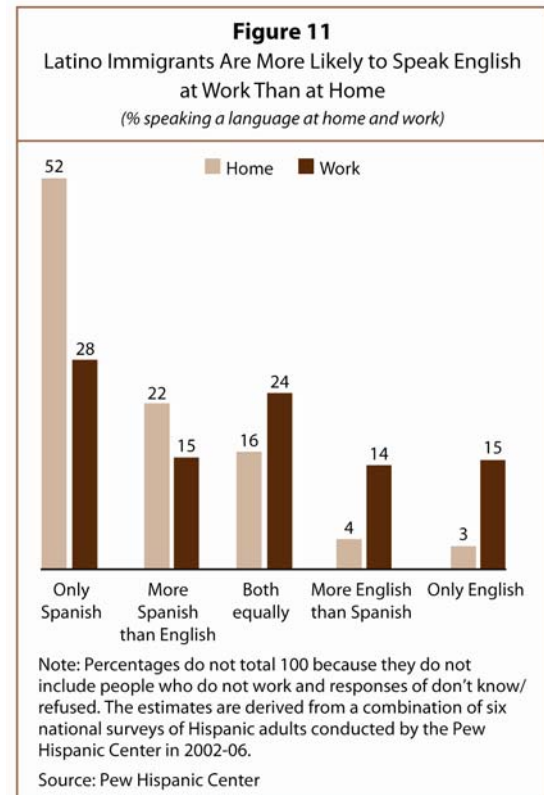
Education explains some, but not all, of these differences. Most college graduates from most countries speak English very well, as do most adult immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries who arrived in the U.S. at ages 10 and younger. The majority of Hispanic adults from most countries who did not complete high school, or who arrived at ages 18 and older, do not speak English very well. One reason for the low share of Mexican-born immigrants who speak English very well is that Mexicans are the least likely among the major country-of-origin groups to have graduated from college. Immigrants from South America and the Caribbean are more likely to have college degrees.

Most Mexicans (56%), Cubans (60%), Dominicans (52%) and Central Americans (51%) say they speak only Spanish at home. By contrast, 32% of Puerto Ricans and 42% of South Americans speak only Spanish at home.

On the job, Mexican and Cuban immigrants are the most likely among the major origin groups to speak only Spanish—a third do. Half of Mexicans speak only Spanish or mainly Spanish at work, the largest share of any major group. At the opposite end, most Puerto Ricans (51%) speak only English or mainly English, the sole major origin group to do so.

Workplace and Home

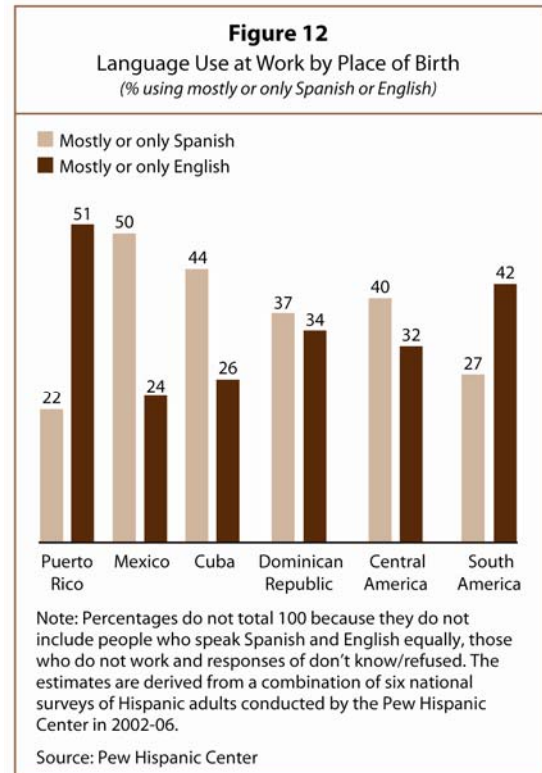
All Hispanics are more likely to speak English on the job, where it may be a necessity of employment, than at home. Among Latino immigrants, 29% speak more English than Spanish or only English at work, compared with 7% who do so at home. An additional 24% speak English and Spanish equally at work, and 43% speak more Spanish than English or only Spanish. (Figure 11)



Most well-educated immigrants speak mainly or only English at work, as do most of those who arrived as young children. So do most people (58%) in the highest-income immigrant households, a finding that could reflect their higher education levels.

Most Puerto Ricans born on the island speak mainly or only English at work, as do 42% of South American immigrants. So do 34% of Dominicans, 32% of Central Americans, 26% of Cubans and 24% of Mexicans. (Figure 12) That is more than double the share of each group that speaks mainly or only English at home.

The U.S.-born adult children of Latino immigrants are much more likely to speak English at work, but not all do. Two-thirds of the second generation say they use



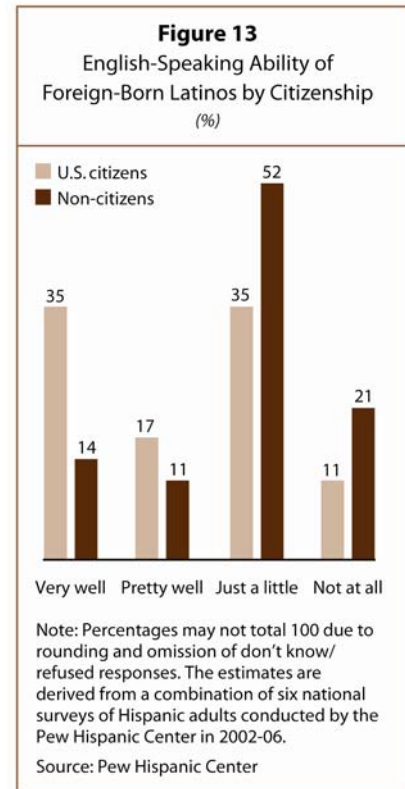
mainly or only English on the job. That rises to 80% for the third and higher generation.

Looked at from another perspective, more than a few native-born Latinos use some Spanish in the workplace. Just 7% speak only Spanish or mainly Spanish on the job, in contrast to the 43% of immigrants who do. But an additional 19% use English and Spanish equally, compared with 24% of immigrants.

Citizenship

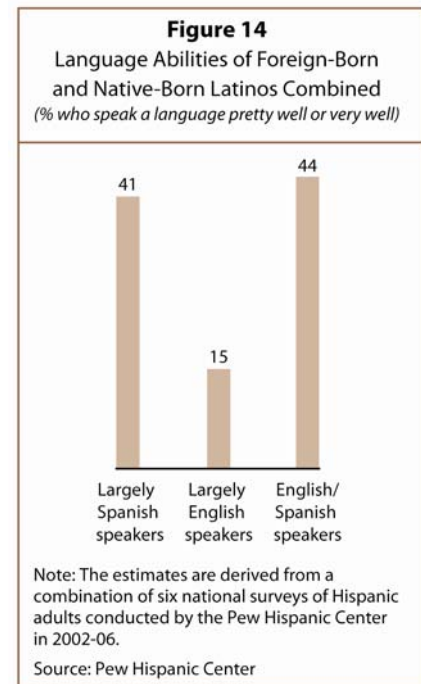
Citizenship is a marker of attachment to society, and registering to vote even more so. Of foreign-born Hispanics, those who have become naturalized citizens are more likely to speak English very well or pretty well than those who are not citizens (52% versus 25%). At the other extreme, nearly three-quarters (73%) of non-citizens say they speak just a little or no English compared with 46% of naturalized citizens. (Figure 13)

Among Latino registered voters born in other countries, 57% say they speak English very well (42%) or pretty well (15%). They rate their reading ability only slightly lower.



Bilingual Adults

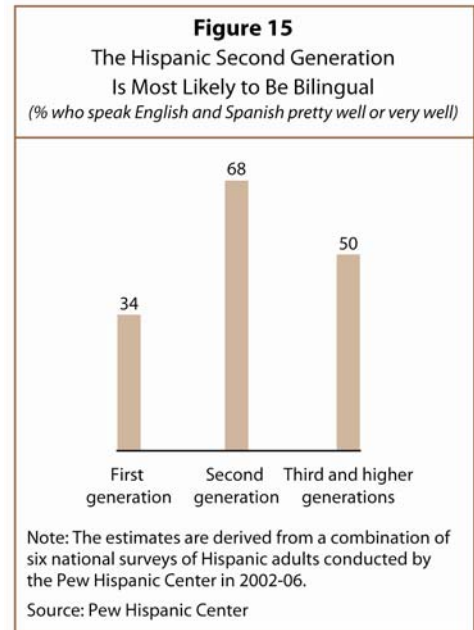
This section looks at the 44% of all Latino adults, both foreign born and native born, who are comfortable talking in both English and Spanish, meaning that they report speaking each language pretty well or very well. They outnumber the 41% of Hispanic adults who speak mainly Spanish, as well as the 15% who describe themselves as largely English speakers. (Figure 14)



Among Latino immigrants, about a third (34%) say they speak both English and Spanish pretty well or very well. About 2% of immigrants are largely English speakers, although they may also have Spanish skills. The remaining 64% speak largely Spanish.

Foreign-born Hispanics who arrived at ages 10 and younger are most likely to be comfortable speaking both Spanish and English: 77% say they are bilingual.

Among native-born Latinos, the second generation is the most likely to speak both English and Spanish: Two-thirds are bilingual. Among the third and higher generations, half are comfortable speaking both English and Spanish. (Figure 15)



Among all Latinos, the most highly educated are most likely to speak both English and Spanish. Just over half (53%) of high school graduates report being bilingual, as do 69% of college graduates. But only 29% of adult Hispanics who did not complete high school are comfortable speaking both Spanish and English.

American Community Survey

A major source of recent government data about English-speaking ability is the American Community Survey, a household survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. Its questions are worded somewhat differently from those asked by the Pew Hispanic Center, and it does not include any questions about use of English or Spanish at work.

Overall, its findings are similar to those in Pew Hispanic Center surveys. (Table 1)

Table 1
Comparing Pew Hispanic Center Surveys
With the American Community Survey

	PEW HISPANIC CENTER SURVEYS, 2002-06 (%)
Speak only English at home	3
Speak at least some Spanish at home	97
Speak English very well	21
Speak English pretty well	13
Speak English just a little	47
Speak English not at all	18
	2006 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY (%)
Speak only English at home	4
Speak at least some Spanish at home	96
Speak English very well	26
Speak English well	23
Speak English not well	31
Speak English not at all	21

Note: Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.
The Pew Hispanic Center estimates are derived from a combination of six national surveys of Hispanic adults conducted by the Center in 2002-06.
Source: Pew Hispanic Center; Census Bureau

In the 2006 American Community Survey, among adult foreign-born Hispanics, including those born in Puerto Rico, 4% speak only English at home. The rest—96%—speak Spanish at home at least some of the time. Of those who speak Spanish at home, 26% say they speak English very well, 23% say they speak English well, 31% say they speak English not well and 21% say they speak English not at all.

The Pew Hispanic Center surveys found that 3% of adult foreign-born Hispanics speak only English at home. The vast majority (97%) speak at least some Spanish. Of those who speak some Spanish at home, 21% say they speak English very well, 13% say they speak English pretty well, 47% say they speak English just a little and 18% say they speak English not at all.

Methodology

This report is based mostly on six public opinion surveys conducted for the Pew Hispanic Center from April 2002 to October 2006, some in partnership with the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. They included a total of 14,057 respondents of Latino background or descent, ages 18 and older. Both foreign-born and native-born adults are included, irrespective of legal status. The surveys were conducted via telephone in Spanish or English, depending on the respondent's preference, by International Communications Research (ICR), an independent research company in Media, Pa. All of the surveys were conducted among nationally representative samples using Random Digit Dialing Methodology.

The six surveys are:

The 2002 Pew Hispanic Center/Kaiser Family Foundation National Survey of Latinos, with 2,929 respondents (2,014 foreign born and 915 native born). The margin of error for the total sample was +/-2.41 percentage points.

The 2003 Pew Hispanic Center/Kaiser Family Foundation National Survey of Latinos: Education, with 1,508 respondents (829 foreign born, 677 native born). The margin of error is +/-3.03% for the total sample.

The 2004 Pew Hispanic Center/Kaiser Family Foundation National Survey of Latinos: Politics and Civic Participation, with 2,288 respondents (1,436 foreign born, 850 native born). The margin of error is +/-2.83% for the total sample.

The 2004 Pew Hispanic Center Latinos on the News Media Survey, with 1,316 respondents (767 foreign born, 549 native born). The survey had an overall margin of error of +/- 3.42%.

The 2006 National Survey of Latinos: The Immigration Debate, with 2,000 respondents (1,546 foreign born, 452 native born). The survey had a margin of error of +/-3.8% for the total sample.

The 2006 Changing Faiths: Latinos and the Transformation of American Religion survey, with 4,016 respondents (3,067 foreign born, 949 native born). The margin of error for the total sample is +/-2.5%.

Each survey employed for this project asked respondents an identical battery of questions regarding language ability and usage, both English and Spanish. The questions included the following:

- 1) Would you say you can carry on a conversation in English, both understanding and speaking: very well, pretty well, just a little or not at all?
- 2) Would you say you can read a newspaper or book in English: very well, pretty well, just a little or not at all?

- 3) Would you say you can carry on a conversation in Spanish, both understanding and speaking: very well, pretty well, just a little or not at all?
- 4) Would you say you can read a newspaper or book in Spanish: very well, pretty well, just a little or not at all?
- 5) What language do you usually speak at home? Only Spanish, more Spanish than English, both equally, more English than Spanish or only English?
- 6) What language do you usually speak at work? Only Spanish, more Spanish than English, both equally, more English than Spanish or only English?

In reporting on beliefs about discrimination based on language use, we also drew from the forthcoming 2007 National Survey of Latinos, conducted for the Pew Hispanic Center from October 3 to November 9, 2007. It was based on questioning a total of 2003 persons of Latino descent, ages 18 and older. The margin of error for the total sample was +/-2.63%.

The methodology for 2007 NSL was the same as for the earlier surveys, except that a sample of people who have cell phones but no landlines was included.

The questions on discrimination included the following:

We know that discrimination can result from many factors. Which of the following do you consider the biggest cause of discrimination against Hispanics/Latinos? Their income levels and education; their skin color; their language skills; their immigration status.

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