



Western Washington University
Western CEDAR

WWU Honors College Senior Projects

WWU Graduate and Undergraduate Scholarship

Winter 2023

Language Barriers Among Immigrant Communities

Rosia Aning

Follow this and additional works at: https://cedar.wvu.edu/wwu_honors



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#), and the [Social Justice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Aning, Rosia, "Language Barriers Among Immigrant Communities" (2023). *WWU Honors College Senior Projects*. 638.

https://cedar.wvu.edu/wwu_honors/638

This Project is brought to you for free and open access by the WWU Graduate and Undergraduate Scholarship at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in WWU Honors College Senior Projects by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

Vocab Slide 2

Immigrant: An immigrant is a person who moves from their home country to another country to live there permanently or for an extended period of time for a variety of reasons, such as seeking better economic opportunities, joining family members who already live in the new country, or escaping persecution or violence in their country of origin. Included within this group are individuals who have acquired citizenship through naturalization, individuals who have been granted permanent residency status, individuals who are in the country on student or work visas, as well as those who have been admitted under refugee or asylee status.

Destination Country: Refers to the country to which a person or group of people are traveling or moving to with the intention of residing there either permanently or temporarily. It is the country of final destination for travelers or in case immigrants.

Limited English Proficient: Limited English Proficient (LEP) refers to individuals who do not speak English as their primary language and have a limited ability to read, write, speak, or understand English.

Slide 3

The chart in the slide shows the number of immigrants who have been living in the United States, as well as their percentage relative to the overall population of the country, over a specific time period. This data can provide valuable insights into the social and economic implications of immigration in the United States, such as how it affects cultural diversity and the workforce. By examining this data, one can observe trends and changes in the immigrant population in the United States, which can help in understanding the impact of immigration over time.

Around 20.7 million immigrants, which is roughly about 46 percent of the total 44.6 million immigrants aged 5 and older in the United States in 2019, had limited proficiency in the English language (LEP). The immigrant population accounted for a significant portion of the country's LEP population, making up 81 percent of the 25.5 million individuals with LEP in the United States. These statistics highlight the importance of providing language assistance services to the immigrant population to ensure that they can access and understand essential information such as medical or legal advice, educational materials, and public services.

Slide 4:

In 2021, 78 percent or roughly 245.5 million residents aged 5 and above in the United States reported speaking solely English at home, regardless of their place of birth. The remaining 22 percent, comprising approximately 67.8 million individuals, reported using a language other than English at home. Of those who reported speaking a non-English language at home, 61 percent spoke Spanish, followed by Chinese (including Mandarin and Cantonese) at about 5 percent, Tagalog at almost 3 percent, and Vietnamese, Arabic, French (including Cajun), and Korean at about 2 percent. These figures reveal the linguistic diversity of the US population, highlighting the importance of providing language assistance and support to those who need it to ensure equitable access to information, services, and resources.

Slide 5

The chart shows that with the exception of three states, Hawaii, Maine, and Vermont (French), Spanish was the most widely spoken language, apart from English, at home in all other US states. Additionally, other languages besides English and Spanish that were commonly spoken at home included Chinese, German, French, and Vietnamese. These findings highlight the linguistic diversity of the United States and emphasize the importance of promoting multilingualism and providing language assistance services to ensure that individuals who speak languages other than English or Spanish can access essential information and services.

Slide 6 - Challenges Immigrants Face In Destination Countries

- - **Discrimination and prejudice:** Immigrants may face discrimination and prejudice in their destination countries, which can make it difficult to feel welcomed and accepted in their new home.
 - **Employment and economic challenges:** Finding employment and economic stability is often a challenge for immigrants in destination countries.
 - **Cultural adjustment:** Adjusting to a new culture can be challenging for immigrants. They may struggle with different customs, values, and social norms, which can impact their ability to integrate into the community and form meaningful relationships.

- **Legal and administrative challenges:** Immigrants may face legal and administrative challenges in their destination countries. This can include navigating complex immigration systems, dealing with paperwork and bureaucracy, and understanding their rights and obligations under the law.
- **Language barriers:** Also one of the biggest challenges immigrants face in destination countries

Slide 7

This is a YouTube video about the responses obtained from asking immigrants with diverse backgrounds to share their perspectives on “Speak English” to reveal the complexity and uniqueness of human experiences and viewpoints. This video shows a greater appreciation and understanding of human diversity and promotes empathy and respect for others' experiences and perspectives.

Slide 8 - Linguistic Human Rights and Why They Are Important

1. The right to speak, read, write, and otherwise use one's language of choice without interference or discrimination from others.
2. The right to use one's language in public and private settings, including in education, government, media, and commerce.
3. The right to receive public services and information in one's language of choice, and to have access to translations or interpretations when necessary.
4. The right to maintain and develop one's language, including through education, media, and cultural institutions.
5. The right to use one's language in legal proceedings and other official contexts, including the right to an interpreter or translator if necessary.

Language rights are considered an important aspect of human rights, as language is often central to one's identity, culture, and social participation. The presence of language barriers presents major obstacles for immigrant communities on a global scale. Immigrants who relocate to a new country often encounter hurdles in communicating with native speakers due to linguistic differences. This inability to communicate effectively can result in a wide range of negative consequences, such as restricted access to essential resources and information, economic

disadvantage, social exclusion, and disparities in healthcare. I will be talking about the diverse ways in which language barriers affect immigrant communities and propose potential strategies that could help this issue.

Slide 10 - Negative Impact of Language Barriers

1. Education:

One of the most significant ways in which language barriers affect immigrant communities is in the area of education. Children from immigrant families who speak limited English may struggle to understand classroom instruction, communicate with teachers and peers, and participate fully in school activities. This can lead to poor academic performance and limited opportunities for social and developmental growth. In addition, schools may struggle to provide targeted support and services to students who speak multiple languages, especially in communities with a high concentration of non-native English speakers. Schools may lack the resources to offer specialized language instruction or hire translators to communicate with parents who do not speak English fluently. As a result, students may not receive the support they need to succeed academically.

In *Finding Courage In The Unfamiliar*, Japhety tells a story about the hardships he faced with his family when they moved to the United States. He was born in a refugee camp in Tanzania where his family had fled to escape the civil war in Burundi, East Africa. His family immigrated to the US in 2009 and he talks about the hardships he faced in school and how he had to adapt to a lot of things. In this story, he mentions that after completing his first year of school in the United States, he was unable to progress to the third grade due to language barriers, resulting in him being held back to repeat the second grade. Though initially frustrated, he was determined to prove his academic capabilities to himself and excel in the classroom. Due to the language barrier, he may have felt isolated from his classmates and unable to fully engage in classroom activities. Overall, being held back in school due to language barriers can be a challenging and discouraging experience for students, especially those who are determined to succeed academically.

Slide 11

2. Employment:

- Workers who do not speak the language of their host country fluently may struggle to find work, particularly in fields that require strong communication skills.
- Employers may be hesitant to hire workers who do not speak the language of their workplace fluently. This is because they may be concerned about communication difficulties or misunderstandings that could lead to errors or conflicts. As a result, immigrants may face discrimination during the hiring process and have limited opportunities to secure meaningful employment.
- Immigrants who do not speak the language of their host country fluently may be limited to jobs that require minimal communication or interaction with others, such as manual labor or cleaning jobs. These jobs often pay lower wages and offer limited opportunities for career advancement.
- Workers who do not speak the language of their workplace fluently may not be able to understand important information about their rights as employees, such as minimum wage laws, safety regulations, or workplace policies. This lack of understanding can make it difficult for them to advocate for themselves or seek help if they are mistreated or exploited by their employer.

Slide 12

3. *Healthcare:*

- Language barriers can limit access to quality healthcare for immigrants as patients who do not speak the language of their healthcare providers fluently may struggle to comprehend important medical information, such as medical instructions or prescriptions.
- It creates difficulties in accessing healthcare services. Immigrants who do not speak the language of their host country fluently may find it challenging to navigate the healthcare system, such as making appointments or filling out paperwork. This can lead to delays in receiving medical care, which can have serious consequences for their health.
- Moreover, cultural misunderstandings due to language barriers can also impact the quality of healthcare provided to immigrants. Healthcare providers who are not familiar with the cultural norms and expectations of the patient's community may not provide culturally sensitive care, leading to miscommunications or misunderstandings that can impact the quality of care provided.

Slide 13

4. *Social Integration:*

- Language rights are essential for immigrants to access information and services in their native language, which can help them participate in their host society and reduce social isolation. When immigrants are able to access information and services in their native language, they are better equipped to participate in their host society. This can help to reduce social isolation and promote a sense of belonging within the community.
- On the other hand, language barriers can prevent immigrants from fully engaging with their host society, leading to social isolation and the formation of ethnic enclaves. Ethnic enclaves are neighborhoods or communities where immigrants cluster together, and they can limit opportunities for interaction with members of the wider community.

Slide 14

5. Family Life:

- When parents and children do not share a common language, it can create communication difficulties and misunderstandings, leading to potential conflicts and frustrations. Children may be forced to take on the role of translators for their parents, which can put pressure on them and may interfere with their own academic and social development. This can also create a reversal of roles where the children become the primary decision-makers, which can lead to a breakdown in traditional family structures. The story linked in this slide is another immigrant story where Belise from Tanzania mentions that her older sister Serapiya, who was only 8 years old when her family moved to the United States was burdened with adult responsibilities like filling out school forms, paperwork, and translating for her family. This can be a frustrating experience for a child, as they may feel overwhelmed and forced to grow up too quickly. It can also create additional pressure on the child to perform well and meet the expectations of their family, which can lead to stress and anxiety. Being responsible for tasks that are typically performed by adults can affect a child's ability to focus on their own development and education. Therefore, while it is admirable for a child like Serapiya to take on adult

responsibilities, it can be a difficult and challenging experience that may have long-term consequences.

- It can create challenges in accessing resources and services for the family, particularly in areas such as education and healthcare. For instance, parents may face difficulties in communicating with teachers or understanding school policies and procedures, which can negatively impact their children's academic performance. Similarly, parents may struggle to navigate the healthcare system or access medical services for their children due to language barriers, which can have significant impacts on the health and well-being of the family.
- It can also make it challenging for immigrant families to preserve their cultural traditions and pass them down to the next generation. Suppose parents and children do not share a common language. In that case, it can be difficult for them to communicate and participate in cultural practices together, leading to a potential loss of cultural heritage and identity. This can be particularly difficult for immigrant families, who may already need help with adapting to a new cultural environment.

Slide 15 - Potential Solution

1. To address language barriers among immigrant communities, there are several potential solutions that can be implemented. One approach is to provide language training for immigrants, which can help them develop the skills they need to communicate effectively in their destination country. This training can be provided by schools, community organizations, or government agencies, and can be tailored to meet the unique needs of different communities.
2. Another potential solution to language barriers is the provision of translation and interpretation services. Schools, healthcare providers, and government agencies can offer translation and interpretation services to ensure that everyone has access to the information they need to fully participate in society. The range of languages available should be as diverse as possible to cater to the different languages spoken by the immigrants.
3. Employing bilingual staff can also be an effective way to ensure that immigrant communities have access to effective communication with service providers. This can be

particularly important in healthcare, where effective communication can impact health outcomes. Hiring bilingual staff can also help to create a more diverse and inclusive workplace, which can improve the quality of care or services provided.

4. Cultural competency training is another potential solution to language barriers. Training healthcare providers, educators, and other service providers in cultural competency can help them to better understand the needs and expectations of immigrant communities. This can lead to more effective and sensitive care and support, and help to overcome cultural misunderstandings that can arise due to language barriers.
5. Civil and community organizations can work to promote and protect linguistic human rights for all individuals, regardless of their ethnicity or background. This can include implementing policies that promote diversity and inclusion, providing language services to communities that need them, and investing in education and resources for immigrant communities. Community organizations can play an important role in providing support and resources to immigrant families. They can provide language training for both children and adults and work to connect families with resources such as tutoring, mentoring, and after-school programs.
6. Immigrant communities can also advocate for their own rights with the support of allies

Slide 16

This video is a fake scene about a Spanish mother being harassed at a restaurant. I chose this video so viewers would have the opportunity to think of what to do in a similar situation when no one is watching.