How Helping Immigrant Workers Learn English Could Transform the U.S. Economy

A large share of the workforce in American cities struggles with English. Here's why investing in language training should be a priority.

TANVI MISRA | @Tanvim | Sep 26, 2014 | 7 Comments

Jorge Roldan (center), worked in construction for a while and now represents the Local 78 workers union in New York. Improving his English skills really helped him get ahead, he says. (Courtesy Jorge Roldan)

Jorge Roldan's English is animated and sprinkled with laughter. It's also pretty good. But when he arrived in New York City from Ecuador in 1986, he hardly spoke a word.

He was 15 years old, then. Now, at 42, Roldan is in a different place. He's an
apprenticeship trainer at Local 78, a chapter of the Laborer's International Union of America. Part of his success now has to do with the fact that he has mastered English, he says.

"I put my all into learning the language," he told me. "Doors can be opened for people that learn the language."

That doesn't come as a surprise to his boss, Sean Brennan, training director at the union. "Nothing's changed over the last 100 years," he says. The German and Irish immigrants who arrived with limited English proficiency then worked in the same type of industries as immigrants do today. Their children were more likely to speak English, go to college and to branch out into other
professions, he says.

What Brennan has observed is the core of a Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program report released this week—that English proficiency is a "gateway to economic opportunity" for American immigrants. And lately, the number of limited-English speakers in American cities has been exploding. Nearly one-in-ten working-age adults have reported that they speak English poorly—that's 19.2 million people between the ages of 16 and 64. And smaller metro areas are showing the fastest growth.

"If you look at projections in terms of demographics and what our future labor force looks like, almost all of the growth in the coming decades will be from immigrants and their children," says Jill Wilson, a senior researcher at Brookings and the author of the report.

The rise is largely driven by a surge in immigration, of course. But not all
immigrants are limited English speakers, and not all of those who lack English skills are immigrants, Wilson says. An estimated 13 percent of this population was born in the U.S.

Interactive map shows size of population with limited-English speaking skills in various metro areas. (Brookings Institution)

Like Roldan, 82 percent of limited English speakers live and work in big U.S. cities. In fact, the largest population resides in New York and the surrounding metro area.
When Roldan arrived in the U.S., he went straight to the Washington Heights neighborhood. He was really surprised to find that everyone spoke Spanish there.

"It was funny ... I was expecting to see everybody white, blue eyes, (speaking) English all over," he says. "I was in America, but I was really, really comfortable."

Over the next three years, as he started venturing out of the neighborhood more and more, he started feeling the need to learn English. So he started teaching himself by reading newspapers and watching TV shows—*Sesame Street*, he says, was a big help.

It was once he entered the job market that the necessity really intensified.
"My co-workers, those who spoke English were getting more tips because they were having conversations with clients and everything," he remembers from his days working as a waiter at a local restaurant. "I'm like, listen, that could be me."

Roldan (center) with co-workers at the restaurant he worked when he was 17. (Courtesy Jorge Roldan)

The Brookings report backs up Roldan's experience with hard numbers: depending on where they live, working adults who struggle with English earn 25 to 40 percent less than their English-fluent counterparts. And this isn't because they lack education. Actually, most of these adults have a high school diploma, and 15 percent hold a college degree.
When we look at the labor force specifically, the wage gap is acute. Depending on which city they're in, those workers who speak English fluently earn from 17 to 135 percent more, according to Wilson.

Roldan noticed the wage gap quite early over the course of his varied career (he's worked in maintenance, food service, disposal, asbestos removal and construction). He finally invested out of his own pocket to get some formal language training. Once he got his grammar sorted out, he got a G.E.D. and was soon recruited by the union, quickly rising up the ranks to where is now.
Roldan's diploma from the English class he paid for out of pocket. (Courtesy Jorge Roldan)

But not everyone can tread Roldan's path.

While two-thirds of limited English speaking adults in the U.S. primarily speak Spanish, it's those who speak Asian and Pacific Island languages who are more likely to speak poor English.
And of course, not everyone has the resources to invest in formal learning.

Not being able to speak English makes workers vulnerable to wage theft and sub-par wages, says Victor Baten at the Labor Council For Latin American Advancement. And lower wages make it harder to afford English classes in the first place. Government investment and funding for training programs is hard to come by, he adds.

Wilson makes a similar case. She argues an investment in training would "enhance human capital of immigrants" and lead to a more productive workforce. If this investment were made now, the future return would be substantial—not just for the families of these workers, but for the growth of local and national economies.

"Ultimately what is good for immigrants is good for all of us," she says.
About the Author

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