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LEP Language Disability, Immigration Reform, and English-Language Acquisition[†]

By ALBERTO DÁVILA AND MARIE T. MORA*

English-language acquisition has become an issue of growing debate in the United States, particularly regarding the perceived lower tendency Hispanic immigrants have to acquire this skill vis-à-vis other groups. We note that as this debate develops, attention should be given to the different economic incentives that Hispanics born outside the US mainland have to learn the English language and how these incentives might be shaped by policy. In particular, recent conceptual work (e.g., Dustmann and Gorlach 2015) argues migrants allocate time between home and host areas by maximizing an objective function that includes spatial income and consumption preferences, and that via this process, destination-specific human capital acquisition becomes more economically attractive as the expected duration in the destination area increases. Policies that alter this spatial dynamic, including duration in the United States and other factors impacting work-leisure trade-offs, conceivably impact migrants' English-language investment decisions.

Consider two federal policies that in this conceptual context might differentially impact the English-language acquisition of Hispanic migrant populations: limited-English-language disability benefits and immigration reform. Since the 1979 Medical-Vocational Guidelines of the Social Security Act, the Social Security Administration considers that the inability to

communicate in the English language reduces the employability of individuals; verbal communication thus becomes the education metric under “vocational factors” for the purpose of assessing a disability. This language-disability policy, in theory, discourages limited English proficient (LEP) individuals with a strong preference for leisure from acquiring (or self-reporting) English skills. Arguably, island-born Puerto Ricans as US citizens by birth, and Cuban immigrants as political refugees, would be impacted more by this policy than Mexican immigrants (a nontrivial share of whom are undocumented), as they would have higher eligibility rates. Because they grew up as US citizens, moreover, island-born Puerto Ricans might also have relatively more knowledge about the existence of such public programs.

Mexican immigrants, in contrast, are more likely than Puerto Ricans and Cubans to be affected by immigration policy. Early contemporary immigration reform, spanning from the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act into the 1990s, was characterized by a relatively strong border enforcement and de facto lax interior enforcement strategies (e.g., Dávila, Pagán, and Soydemir 2002). The incentives for undocumented immigrants to stay in the United States for extended periods of time, and thus learn English, increased (e.g., Angelucci 2012). Nevertheless, immigration reform since the 2000s has a stronger interior emphasis by empowering local law officials to enforce immigration law (e.g., Amuedo-Dorantes and Pozo 2015). This enforcement strategy conceptually reduces the expected duration in the United States, lessening the incentives to acquire English-language fluency. However, this might also increase incentives for Mexican immigrants to learn English to reduce the probability of detection, assuming that English fluency proxies for legal status. Early contemporary

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TABLE 1—PERCENTAGE OF MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS, CUBAN IMMIGRANTS, AND ISLAND-BORN PUERTO RICANS AGES 25–64 WHO REPORTED A COGNITIVE DISABILITY IN 2013, BY ENGLISH-LANGUAGE FLUENCY

English proficiency	All			US citizens only		
	Mexican immigrant	Cuban immigrant	Island-Born Puerto Rican	Mexican immigrant	Cuban immigrant	Island-Born Puerto Rican
All	3.6	6.1	11.7	2.7	5.6	11.7
LEP	5.7	11.2	22.6	3.0	6.7	22.6
English proficient	3.0	5.0	9.4	2.4	4.9	9.4

Notes: Individuals with a “cognitive disability” include those reporting having difficulty in learning, remembering, concentrating, or making decisions because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition, as well as individuals reporting whether they have any physical, mental, or emotional condition lasting six months or more that makes it difficult or impossible to perform basic activities outside the home alone. The differences between each group per year are all statistically significant at the 1 percent level.

Source: Authors’ estimates using the 2013 ACS in the IPUMS.

immigration reform, then, increased the benefits of English-language acquisition for immigrants (particularly those at risk for deportation, such as Mexican immigrants), while more recent policies have had an ambiguous impact.

I. English Language Proficiency and the Likelihood of Reporting a Cognitive Disability

With regard to English-language acquisition and the foregoing language disability policy, consider the evidence reported in Table 1, based on adults ages 25–64 in the 2013 American Community Survey (ACS) in the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) made available by Ruggles et al. (2015). Island-born Puerto Ricans on the US mainland were more likely to report a cognitive disability (defined in the notes to Table 1) than Mexican immigrants and, to a lesser extent, Cuban immigrants, consistent with our conceptual discussion. The gaps were particularly pronounced among the limited-English-proficient (LEP), conventionally identified here as individuals who did not speak the English language well. Nearly 23 percent of LEP Puerto Ricans on the mainland reported a cognitive disability in 2013, compared to 9.4 percent of English fluent Puerto Ricans, 6.7 percent of LEP Cubans, and three percent of LEP Mexicans. While the gaps narrow when focusing on US citizens, they remain significant.¹

¹ We used the 2013 ACS because it was the most recent ACS available when this paper was written. However, the results qualitatively hold in earlier ACS years and in the 2000 census. It should also be noted that the results hold

The fact that the three LEP Hispanic groups were more likely to report a cognitive disability than their English-proficient counterparts is as expected in light of the language-disability policy. That the largest LEP/English-fluent gaps in reporting cognitive disabilities occurred among Puerto Ricans fits with our conceptual discussion, as they have higher eligibility rates (and perhaps more awareness) of this program by virtue of growing up as US citizens.

One explanation for how English-language proficiency relates to these differences in reporting cognitive disabilities could stem from occupational distributions and the usage of Social Security benefits that vary geographically. Consider the following model:

(1) *Cognitive Disability*

$$= f(\text{Hispanic Group}, \text{LEP}, \text{LEP Hispanic}, U),$$

where binary variables identifying the specific Hispanic ethnicity are included in *Hispanic Group*, and *LEP Hispanic* interacts the Hispanic ethnic groups with a binary variable equal to one for LEP individuals. The vector *U* contains variables conceivably related to the probability of reporting a disability, including standard demographic information, occupations (including the lack of one), and regional variables (details available from the authors).

when restricting the sample to nonveterans; veterans are disproportionately represented among island-born Puerto Ricans, but veteran status does not appear to explain their relatively high rates of reporting cognitive disabilities.

The probit regression results from estimating equation (1) using the 2013 ACS indicate that island-born Puerto Ricans remained significantly more likely than Mexican immigrants and to a lesser extent, Cuban immigrants, to report a cognitive disability, other things the same; the coefficients (robust standard errors) for Mexican and Cuban immigrants are -0.477 (0.047) and -0.165 (0.056). Moreover, being LEP increased the likelihood of reporting a cognitive disability among island-born Puerto Ricans and, to some extent, Cuban immigrants, but this was not so for Mexican immigrants. The coefficients (robust standard errors) on being LEP, LEP Mexican immigrants, and LEP Cuban immigrants are 0.285 (0.061), -0.352 (0.066), and -0.146 (0.094). These results support the view that island-born Puerto Ricans, particularly the LEP, report higher frequencies of cognitive disabilities, which is consistent with our conceptual discussion.

II. Hispanic Immigrant Language Acquisition

We next investigate the English-language acquisition among these three Hispanic groups employing public-use microdata from the 1990 and 2000 censuses and the 2010 ACS in the IPUMS. We create a pseudo-longitudinal dataset by constructing two synthetic cohorts: (i) the 1990s cohort (individuals ages 25–34 in 1990, and 35–44 in 2000, excluding immigrants who migrated after 1990); and (ii) the 2000s cohort (individuals ages 25–34 in 2000, and 35–44 in 2010, excluding immigrants who migrated after 2000). These cohorts are relatively early in their work life cycles, such that they have more time to reap the returns from their English-language investments. In this analysis, we collapse the English skill categories into a single metric to proxy for a continuous English fluency index; this index ranges from zero (no English is spoken) to one (English is spoken “very well” or the only language spoken at home). We also consider the percentage of the cohort who spoke the English language well or better, as an alternative measure of English proficiency.

Table 2 contains several noteworthy findings on English fluency and acquisition. First, using both measures, Mexican immigrants in the two cohorts had considerably lower English fluency than Cuban immigrants and island-born Puerto Ricans. Second, the 2000s cohort of Mexican

immigrants and Cuban immigrants had lower English fluency than their counterparts in the 1990s cohort. Third, island-born Puerto Ricans had lower English proficiency rates than Cuban immigrants in the 1990s cohort, although this was not the case for the 2000s cohort. Fourth, among Mexican immigrants and Cuban immigrants, the average English proficiency index significantly increased in both cohorts during the following decade. Fifth, the percentage of English-fluent individuals also increased among these two groups between 2000 and 2010, as it did among Mexican immigrants between 1990 and 2000. Finally, the English proficiency among island-born Puerto Ricans on the US mainland remained stable over both decades.

The observation that immigrants acquire English skills the longer they live in the United States is as expected. The seemingly greater English acquisition among Mexican immigrants in the 2000s cohort versus the 1990s cohort suggests they perceived higher returns in the 2000s. Perhaps the risk of detection and deportation induced some Mexican immigrants to learn English, offsetting the possible disincentive of acquiring this skill from a potential reduction in duration in the United States. It might also be that some Mexicans in the 1990s cohort migrated to the United States after 1990 (despite reporting an earlier migration period), thus reducing the estimated acquisition of English in the 1990s. Some supporting evidence can be found in this cohort’s increased estimated population size (from 1.34 million to 1.44 million) between 1990 and 2000. In contrast, the size of the Mexican 2000s cohort was relatively stable, at approximately 2.52 million in 2000 and 2010.

Table 2 further reveals mixed evidence on the differences in English acquisition between the Cuban immigrant cohorts, depending on the measure of English fluency used. These findings underscore differences in English-skill investments across Hispanic migrant groups.

To what extent do other characteristics explain these differences in English acquisition? Consider the following model:

(2) *English proficiency*

$$= f(\text{Hispanic Group}, 10 \text{ Years}, \\ \text{Hispanic Group} \times 10 \text{ Years}, V),$$

TABLE 2—ENGLISH-LANGUAGE FLUENCY OF MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS, CUBAN IMMIGRANTS, AND ISLAND-BORN PUERTO RICANS IN THE SYNTHETIC COHORTS

English proficiency	1990s cohort			2000s cohort			English acquisition differed between cohorts?
	1990	2000	Difference significant?	2000	2010	Difference significant?	
Mexican immigrants							
English index	0.541	0.568	Yes***	0.515	0.557	Yes***	Yes***
Percent English proficient	51.5	55.6	Yes***	48.1	53.6	Yes***	Yes*
Cuban immigrants							
English index	0.851	0.874	Yes***	0.674	0.709	Yes**	No
Percent English proficient	88.2	89.7	No	67.2	72.5	Yes***	Yes*
Island-born Puerto Ricans							
English index	0.779	0.783	No	0.814	0.822	No	No
Percent English proficient	81.5	81.7	No	85.0	85.3	No	No

Notes: The 1990s cohort includes individuals ages 25–34 in 1990, and 25–44 in 2000, excluding immigrants who migrated after 1990. The 2000s cohort includes individuals ages 25–34 in 2000, and 25–44 in 2010, excluding immigrants who migrated after 2000. The unweighted and weighted sample sizes can be obtained from the authors.

***Significant at the 1 percent level.

**Significant at the 5 percent level.

*Significant at the 10 percent level.

Source: Authors' estimates using the 2013 ACS in the IPUMS.

where *10 Years* represents a binary variable indicating the end of the cohort period (i.e., the year 2000 for the 1990s cohort and the year 2010 for the 2000s cohort). Vector *V* includes other characteristics (listed in the notes to Table 3) related to English-language acquisition. We estimate equation (2) first as an ordered probit model using the English proficiency index as the dependent variable, and then as a probit model using the binary English fluent measure.

Table 3 contains the regression results for the key variables of interest; the remaining results (not shown to conserve space) can be obtained from the authors. Unlike in Table 2, island-born Puerto Ricans in both cohorts acquired English-language proficiency as they aged on the mainland when controlling for other characteristics related to such acquisition. However, Mexican immigrants had a higher rate of English acquisition than island-born Puerto Ricans in both cohorts when using the binary English-fluency measure, and in the 2000s cohort when using the pseudo-continuous measure, *ceteris paribus*. Cuban immigrants also appeared to acquire more English than island-born Puerto Ricans in the 2000s cohort. These findings suggest that island-born Puerto Ricans on the US mainland may have lower incentives to learn English than Hispanic immigrants, a finding predicted by the conceptual

framework above. Moreover, among Mexican immigrants, as we previously discussed for the results in Table 2, the English acquisition was significantly higher in the 2000s cohort than for the 1990s cohort even after accounting for other observable characteristics.

III. Discussion

Given the foregoing results, two issues come to mind. First, do the observed differences in English-language acquisition reflect actual changes in English fluency or do they indicate changes in the tendencies to self-report English fluency? We noted in our conceptual discussion that Hispanics might be influenced by policy to invest in English skills, but the same can be said about the influence of policy on self-reporting English proficiency. That is, in the case of Mexican immigrants seeking to reduce their detection odds and potential deportation, they might report higher English-language skills. In the case of island-born Puerto Ricans on the mainland seeking language disability benefits, this logic suggests they may have an incentive to under-report English fluency. Self-reporting characteristics in most national datasets is legally nontractable information, but as Antman and Duncan (2015) note when studying changes in self-reported race/ethnicity

TABLE 3—SELECTED REGRESSION RESULTS FOR THE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY OF MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS, CUBAN IMMIGRANTS, AND ISLAND-BORN PUERTO RICANS IN THE SYNTHETIC COHORTS

Characteristic	Ordered probit results (dep. var. = English prof. index)		Probit results (dep. var. = 1 if English prof.)	
	1990s Cohort	2000s Cohort	1990s Cohort	2000s Cohort
Ten years later	0.679*** (0.150)	1.072*** (0.204)	0.756*** (0.190)	1.334*** (0.279)
Mexican immigrant	−0.291*** (0.035)	−0.550*** (0.016)	−0.352*** (0.044)	−0.621*** (0.020)
Mexican immigrant ten years later	0.034 (0.038)	0.151*** (0.042)	0.104** (0.048)	0.203*** (0.055)
Cuban immigrant	0.357*** (0.052)	−0.275*** (0.025)	0.331*** (0.066)	−0.391*** (0.029)
Cuban immigrant ten years later	0.099* (0.057)	0.135** (0.067)	0.036 (0.072)	0.230*** (0.086)

Notes: The parentheses contain robust standard errors. Only civilians are included. Other control variables include the percentage of Spanish speakers in the public-use microdata area; education; potential experience; experience²; gender; recent Mexican or Cuban immigrant (those who arrived to the United States within five years of the cohort start); and occupational binary variables (professional, executive, and managerial; health care and technical support; office and administrative support; sales and services; agriculture; blue collar (base); and none reported). Additional results, the ordered probit “cut points,” and the unweighted and weighted sample sizes can be obtained from the authors.

***Significant at the 1 percent level.

**Significant at the 5 percent level.

*Significant at the 10 percent level.

Source: Authors' estimates using IPUMS data from the 1990 and 2000 decennial censuses and the 2010 ACS.

resulting from Affirmative Action policies, identity self-reporting via these data might represent lower-bound tendencies in tractable decisions.

Second, to the extent that immigration policy affected the English-language acquisition among Mexican immigrants, this acquisition may have occurred because some immigrants want to avoid detection, deportation, and the potential monopsonistic penalties they incur (as suggested by Viscusi (1978) for workers with relatively inelastic labor supplies) and because of the human capital incentives that such skills provide in the labor market. Clearly, our empirical framework and data do not allow us to test for these self-reporting and English returns possibilities. Future research with more specific data on actual (as opposed to self-reported) English-language proficiency might be able to test for these interesting possibilities.

IV. Concluding Remarks

The English-language acquisition (or self-reporting) tendencies seemingly differ across Hispanic groups. While the results here might be driven by other factors (such as differences

in the “quality” of migrants not captured by differences in observable characteristics), these analyses serve as an application of the temporary migration framework and suggest how policy can impact the English-language investments (or self-reporting tendencies) of Hispanic groups.

Recent developments in both language-disability and immigration reform policies might further impact the English-language acquisition of Hispanic populations. For example, Senator Jeff Sessions (Republican, Alabama) raised concerns that the Obama administration was broadly applying the education rule under the Social Security Act to allow individuals to receive disability payments solely because they cannot speak English. Also, more invasive immigration enforcement strategies have been phased in through Secure Communities, which allow municipal law enforcement authorities to report undocumented immigrants to federal law enforcement officials, increasing undocumented-worker detection odds. It will be of interest for future research to investigate how these changes will impact the English-skill acquisition as well as the Spanish-language retention of Hispanic populations in the future.

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