

English: Kids' language of choice // Immigrants' children are abandoning native tongues

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Body

Erik Gonzalez just finished his second year of high school Spanish, struggling with bewildering verb forms in the language his parents brought from Cuba.

"I feel more American, but Cuban in a way, too - especially at holidays," says Gonzalez, 16, who wants to be a doctor. "I'm 50-50."

More comfortable speaking English than Spanish, this Miami-born son of immigrant parents is far from alone.

Children of the USA's most recent immigrants - Latin Americans and Asians - not only prefer English, but many are abandoning their parents' native tongue, according to a major new study.

"English is alive and well," says study author Alejandro Portes, a sociology professor at Johns Hopkins University. "What is in danger is the parental language."

Despite fears by some that waves of immigrants will engulf the primacy of English, Portes found that 99% of second-generation youngsters in Miami speak the English language well or very well.

In San Diego - the other location surveyed - 90% reported the same level of competency.

"It's a pleasant surprise," says Bill Anderson of U.S. English, dedicated to preserving English as the USA's dominant language. "We're charged by our opponents as being racists and culture-killers . . . but culture is much deeper than language, and this (study) would indicate that's true."

But Portes says his study of 5,000 eighth- and ninth-graders also uncovered some distressing trends.

Reports of discrimination were rare among Cuban-American youngsters in heavily Hispanic Miami, but other immigrants' kids weren't as lucky:

In south Florida, 66% of Haitian youngsters reported discrimination.

In San Diego, 65% of Mexican children felt discrimination. For Filipinos, it was 63%. For Vietnamese, 66%.

Portes says for many Cuban-American youths in Miami, the researchers' question about discrimination was an alien concept.

"Never," says Gonzalez, about experiencing discrimination. "Not at all."

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But when researchers asked the same question in schools in Little Haiti, the concept was all too familiar, Portes says.

"There was laughter," he says. "The children were telling us, 'What planet do you come from?'"

Some students say prejudice has at times forced them to pretend they're not Haitian-American.

But Gonzalez was incredulous at the notion of denying his parents come from Cuba: "I'm proud of it," he says.

Says Karen Denis, 13, who'll start eighth grade at Miami's St. Mary's school next fall: "If you tell some people you're Haitian, they might turn against you, or have nothing to do with you. Sometimes, kids will laugh at my parents or call them names. They say we do voodoo or something."

She and her friends prefer English, at times to the dismay of their Creole-speaking parents: "They think because I speak English at home, that I've changed, that I don't appreciate being Haitian," says Samantha Charles, 13.

Adds Denis, who dreams of going to college and becoming a business executive: "Creole is a complicated language. I don't speak it as well as my parents do."

Says sociologist Portes, who was 17 when he came to the United States from Cuba in 1960: "Bilingualism among the second generation is on the way out."

English and immigrants Children of immigrants know and use English more than the languages of their parents' homes, a new study found. Johns Hopkins professor Alejandro Portes interviewed 5,000 8th- and 9th-graders with immigrant parents in New York and San Diego:

Good knowledge of English

Cuban-American (1)	99%
Haitian-American	95%
Filipino-American	97%
Mexican-American	97%
Vietnamese-American	61%

Good knowledge of parents' language

Cuban-American (1)	89%
Haitian-American	31%
Filipino-American	29%
Mexican-American	80%
Vietnamese-American	42%

Percentage preferring English

Cuban-American (1)	94%
Haitian-American	87%
Filipino-American	88%
Mexican-American	44%
Vietnamese-American	61%

Notes

THE USA; MELTING POT

Graphic

GRAPHIC, b/w, Sam Ward, USA TODAY, Source: USA TODAY research. (Bar graph); PHOTOS, b/w, Tom Salyer

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