

What drives the language proficiency of immigrants?

Immigrants differ in their language proficiency along a range of characteristics

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ELEVATOR PITCH

Language proficiency is a key driver of immigrant integration. It increases job opportunities and facilitates social and political participation. However, despite its vital importance, many immigrants never reach adequate proficiency in the host country language. Therefore, insights into the underlying processes and associated factors are crucial for designing measures to improve language acquisition. Empirical evidence shows that immigrants differ in their ability to learn languages, in their experience of everyday language usage, and their incentives to learn host country languages. This offers a range of opportunities for public policy intervention.

KEY FINDINGS

Pros

- ⊕ Immigrants arriving during childhood effortlessly acquire the primary language of the host country.
- ⊕ Language skills increase with time spent in the destination country through exposure and learning by doing.
- ⊕ Higher wage returns and better job opportunities create incentives to invest in the acquisition of languages.
- ⊕ Point-based immigration selection rules, language classes, and citizenship incentives are policy options that can be used to encourage language acquisition.

Cons

- ⊖ Greater linguistic distance between the native language and the host country language increases the difficulty and cost of language acquisition.
- ⊖ Living in ethno-linguistic enclaves reduces exposure to the host country language and thus opportunities to use it regularly.
- ⊖ Circular migration and short expected durations of stay decrease incentives for language acquisition.
- ⊖ The efficiency of language acquisition is also influenced by characteristics that are not observed in the data and can only be approximated, such as motivation and cognitive abilities.

AUTHOR'S MAIN MESSAGE

Immigrants who fail to achieve adequate proficiency in the host country language generally fail to achieve economic and social integration. The language skills of immigrants differ along a range of observable and unobservable characteristics. Language skills increase with the time spent in the host country and in response to higher wage and job incentives. Insights into differences in immigrant characteristics offer opportunities for public policy intervention to improve integration through better language acquisition. Promising policy options include point-based immigration selection rules, language classes, and citizenship incentives.

