

Shirin Hakimzadeh  
 Pew Hispanic Center  
 1615 L Street, NW  
 Washington, DC 20036

direct (202) 419-3628  
 fax (202) 419-3608

### The Pace and Flow of English Language Acquisition Among the U.S. Latino Population

English fluency has been one of the many critical issues in this year’s national immigration debate. In fact, in formulating its immigration bill, the Senate added two language-related amendments, one declaring English the national language and another recognizing it as the country’s “common and unifying tongue.”

While advocates of tighter restrictions contend immigrants threaten the nation’s English-speaking identity, opponents view “English only” and anti-bilingual education legislation as discriminatory. The debate has not been limited to the floor of Congress though. In academia, too, there has been a divisive rift between proponents of an English-only movement, those who assert that large-scale immigration by people speaking a common language gives them less reason to assimilate, and others who contend that English has never been threatened seriously as the dominant language in America nor is it today.

What remains certain, however, is the integral role that English proficiency plays in the process of immigrant integration, especially in terms of labor market outcomes. Spanish is the dominant language of the Hispanic adult population because of the presence of immigrants. Even so, more than a quarter of the foreign-born population speaks some English. The language profile is very different among native-born Latinos. Nearly half of the second generation only speaks English and the other half is almost bilingual. Virtually all Latinos whose parents were born in the United States speak English and none are Spanish dominant.

Much of our understanding of the language characteristics of US Latinos has heretofore been based on Census data. The Census crudely measures English language abilities and provides no information on Spanish language proficiencies. It does, however, gauge Spanish language usage in the privacy of the home, instead of in the public lives of Hispanic adults in the US. Thus, our knowledge of the extent and nature of bilingualism, and the use of Spanish, in the public sphere has been quite limited.

Pew Hispanic Center tabulations of recently released results from the 2005 American Community Survey offer a broader view of English ability by age, race and ethnicity.

English Ability by Age, Race and Ethnicity: 2005								
Universe: 2005 Household Population age 5 and over								
	Under 18				18 and over			
	English only	English very well	English less than very well	Total	English only	English very well	English less than very well	Total
Hispanic	3,055,667	4,891,303	1,930,387	9,877,357	5,024,547	9,648,304	12,813,959	27,486,810
Native Born	3,005,527	4,129,264	1,237,132	8,371,923	4,421,801	6,132,020	1,759,426	12,313,247
Foreign Born	50,140	762,039	693,255	1,505,434	602,746	3,516,284	11,054,533	15,173,563
White alone, not Hispanic	29,480,072	1,351,501	399,732	31,231,305	141,242,494	6,064,764	2,855,324	150,162,582
Black alone, not Hispanic	7,303,030	315,036	99,395	7,717,461	22,207,173	1,035,042	560,253	23,802,468
Asian alone, not Hispanic	714,678	941,296	349,772	2,005,746	1,985,827	3,688,101	3,843,809	9,517,737
Other, not Hispanic	1,721,944	226,646	54,545	2,003,135	3,343,527	645,112	293,016	4,281,655
Total	42,275,391	7,725,782	2,833,831	52,835,004	173,803,568	21,081,323	20,366,361	215,251,252

<b>Percent Distribution</b>								
Hispanic	30.9	49.5	19.5	100.0	18.3	35.1	46.6	100.0
Native Born	35.9	49.3	14.8	100.0	35.9	49.8	14.3	100.0
Foreign Born	3.3	50.6	46.1	100.0	4.0	23.2	72.9	100.0
White alone, not Hispanic	94.4	4.3	1.3	100.0	94.1	4.0	1.9	100.0
Black alone, not Hispanic	94.6	4.1	1.3	100.0	93.3	4.3	2.4	100.0
Asian alone, not Hispanic	35.6	46.9	17.4	100.0	20.9	38.7	40.4	100.0
Other, not Hispanic	86.0	11.3	2.7	100.0	78.1	15.1	6.8	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>80.0</b>	<b>14.6</b>	<b>5.4</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>80.7</b>	<b>9.8</b>	<b>9.5</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Source: Pew Hispanic Center tabulations of 2005 American Community Survey*

<b>English Ability Among Hispanic Foreign Born by Period of Arrival and Age: 2005</b>								
Universe: 2005 Hispanic Foreign-born Household Population age 5 and over								
	<b>Under 18</b>				<b>18 and over</b>			
<b>Period of Arrival</b>	<b>English only</b>	<b>English very well</b>	<b>English less than very well</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>English only</b>	<b>English very well</b>	<b>English less than very well</b>	<b>Total</b>
Before 1990	2,798	35,425	9,089	47,312	349,601	2,257,744	4,430,134	7,037,479
1990 to Before 2000	27,355	459,842	183,297	670,494	146,385	963,847	3,811,053	4,921,285
2000 and After	19,987	266,772	500,869	787,628	106,760	294,693	2,813,346	3,214,799
<b>Total</b>	<b>50,140</b>	<b>762,039</b>	<b>693,255</b>	<b>1,505,434</b>	<b>602,746</b>	<b>3,516,284</b>	<b>11,054,533</b>	<b>15,173,563</b>
<b>Percent Distribution</b>								
Before 1990	5.9	74.9	19.2	100.0	5.0	32.1	63.0	100.0
1990 to Before 2000	4.1	68.6	27.3	100.0	3.0	19.6	77.4	100.0
2000 and After	2.5	33.9	63.6	100.0	3.3	9.2	87.5	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>3.3</b>	<b>50.6</b>	<b>46.1</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>4.0</b>	<b>23.2</b>	<b>72.9</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Source: Pew Hispanic Center tabulations of 2005 American Community Survey*

## **Objective**

This paper will examine the pace and flow of English language acquisition along a range of demographic variables that are critical to understanding the details of this social process. More specifically, the study will determine the effect, if any, of age at entry, time in country, educational attainment, and gender on both the rate and flow of language acquisition. The flow of acquisition refers to the progression of language usage through various stages (i.e. speaking English, reading English, using English at work and/or at home). Additionally, the study will utilize Pew/Kaiser surveys in order to further assess the role of language in shaping Latino’s attitudes towards controversial social issues such as abortion, divorce and homosexuality. The richness of the information collected in the Pew Hispanic Center surveys on language proficiencies and usage will substantially extend our understanding of English language acquisition of Latinos.

## **Methodology**

The study will be based on data drawn from a series of Pew Hispanic Center surveys conducted between April 2002- July 2006. By combining the results from these various surveys, a sample of approximately 10,000 Latino adults is produced. The privilege of having access to such an unusually large sample of Latinos through the Pew Hispanic Center will permit delving into the nuances of English language acquisition heretofore inaccessible.

All of the surveys were conducted among a nationally representative sample by telephone in both Spanish and English using Random Digit Dialing (RDD) methodology. All samples include both native-born and foreign-born Latino adults, irrespective of legal status. Fieldwork for all of the surveys was conducted by International Communications Research (ICR) of Media, PA.

Each of the surveys employed for this project asked respondents an identical series of questions regarding language use. The four questions included the following:

- 1) Would you say you can carry on a conversation in English, both understanding and speaking -- very well, pretty well, just a little, or not at all?
- 2) Would you say you can read a newspaper or book in English -- very well, pretty well, just a little, or not at all?
- 3) What language do you usually speak at home? Only Spanish, more Spanish than English, both equally, more English than Spanish, or only English?
- 4) What language do you usually speak at work? Only Spanish, more Spanish than English, both equally, more English than Spanish, or only English?

Through performing descriptive and multivariate statistical methods, the responses to this set of questions will be analyzed across demographic variables including age at entry, time in country, educational attainment, and gender.

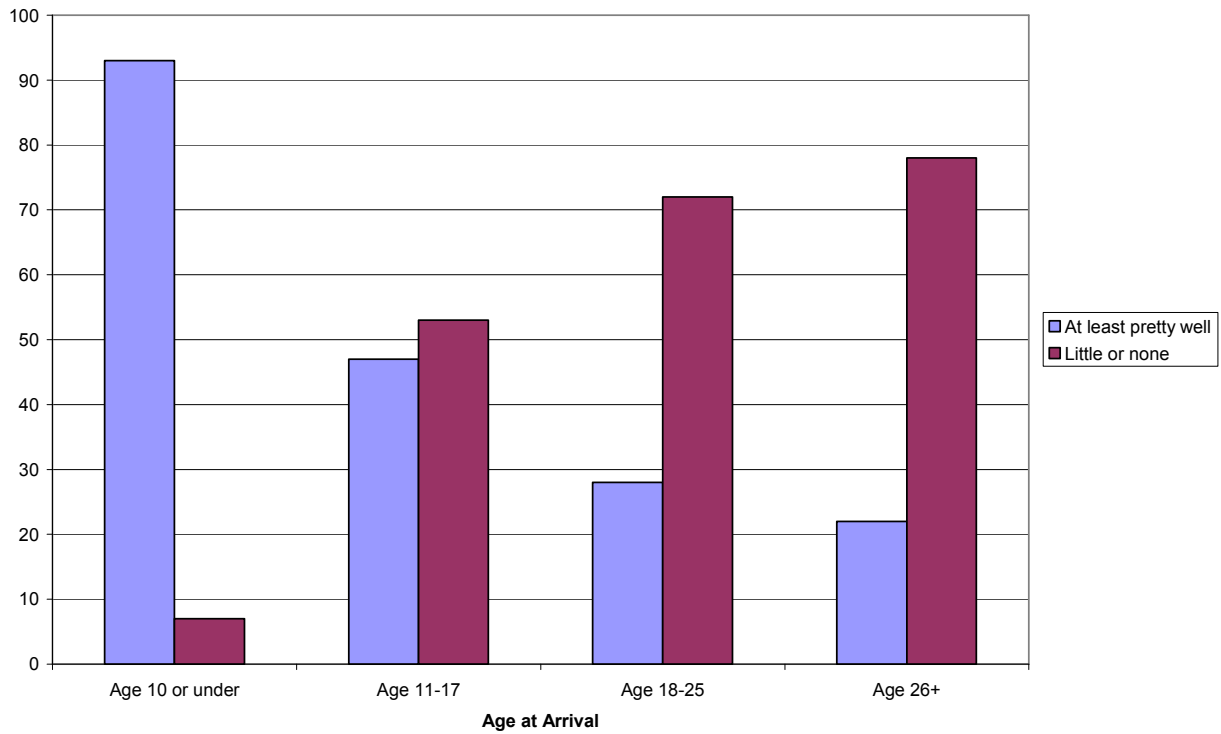
### **Projected Findings**

Though not based on the complete dataset, an initial analysis suggests the following preliminary results, accompanied by selected graphs:

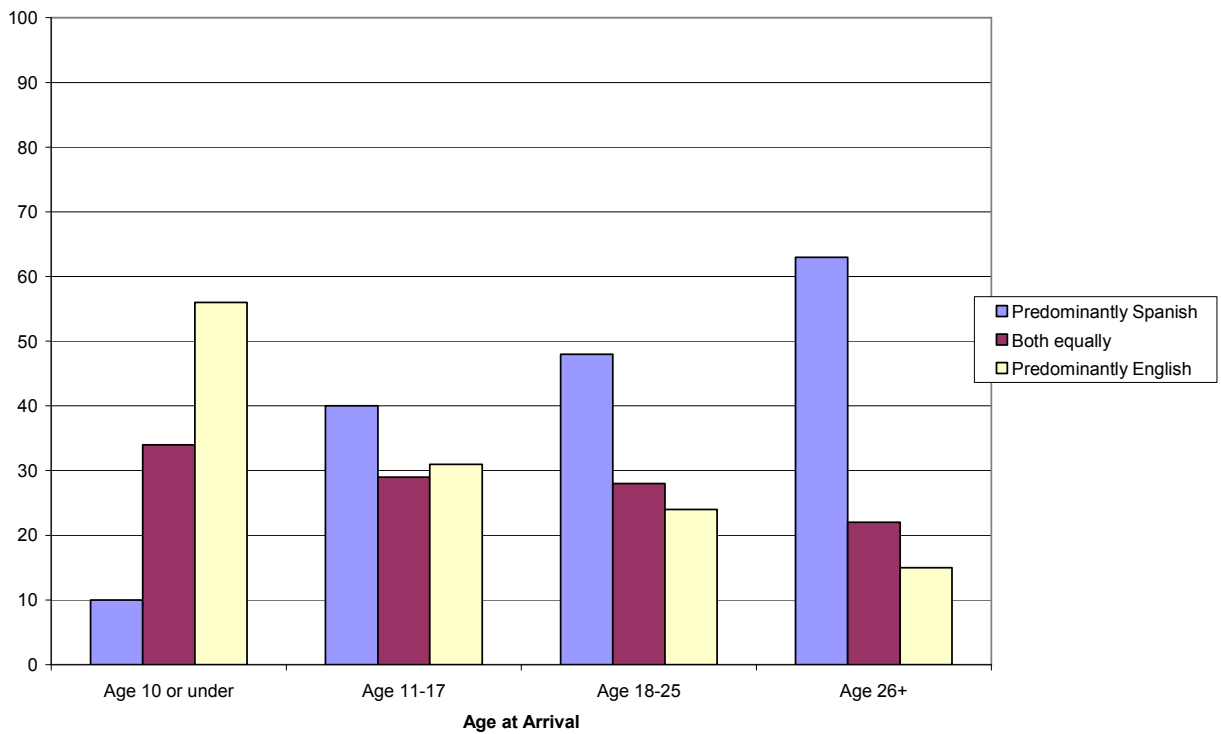
#### **Foreign-born Latinos arriving as children attain proficiency faster**

In accordance with previous studies, children's ability to learn multiple languages fluently is supported by the survey results. In fact, among foreign-born children who entered the US at age 10 or below, conversational English proficiency averages over 90%. This group of youngest immigrants attains similarly high levels of reading proficiency, with more than 60% reporting to speak predominantly English at work, as compared to approximately 30% among the total population of foreign-born Latinos. Even those between age 11 and 17 at arrival speak Spanish at home at higher rates, with over 60% reporting that it as their predominant home language.

**English Speaking Ability Among Hispanic Foreign-Born by Age at Arrival**



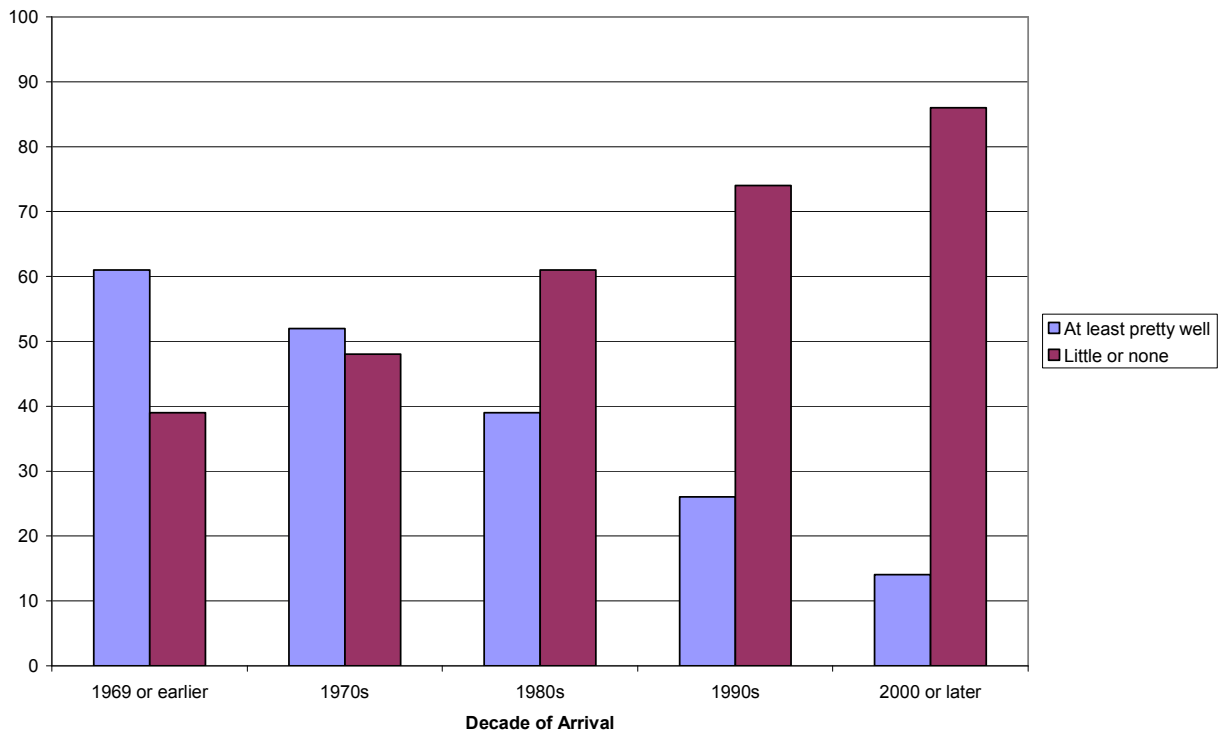
**Language Use at Work Among Hispanic Foreign-Born by Age at Arrival**



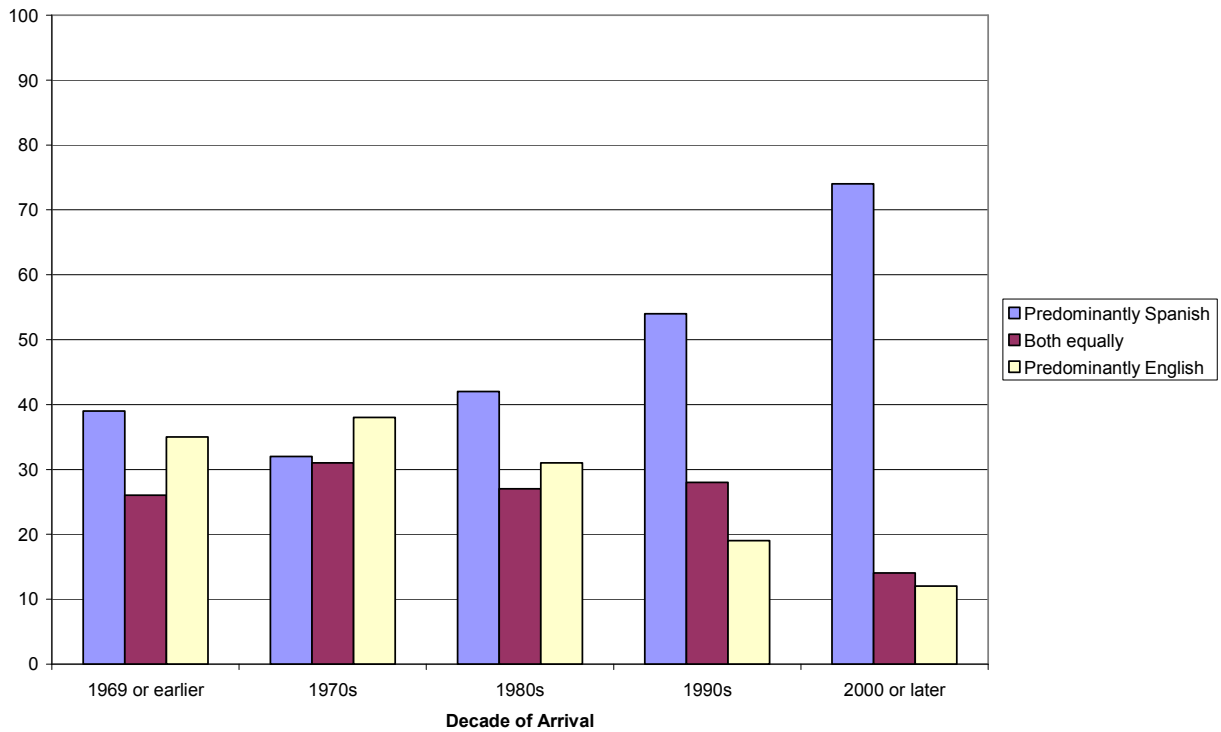
### English proficiency among the foreign-born increases with time spent in country

An analysis by decade of arrival shows that while less than 30% of immigrants arriving in the U.S. after 2000 can carry on a conversation in English, an average of 70% of Latinos arriving before 1970 can do so. Reading proficiency in English also increases over time. Among the most recent immigrants, 23% are able to read English at least pretty well; for those who arrived before 1970, the reading proficiency level is 68%. It is important to keep in mind that comparisons are based on cohort data by decade of entry. As such, it is possible that variations between cohorts, such as educational levels or other factors, may imply a difference where none exists. However, on the whole, preliminary results indicate increasing English use and more bilingualism on the job as time in country increases.

English Speaking Ability Among Foreign-Born Hispanics by Decade of Arrival



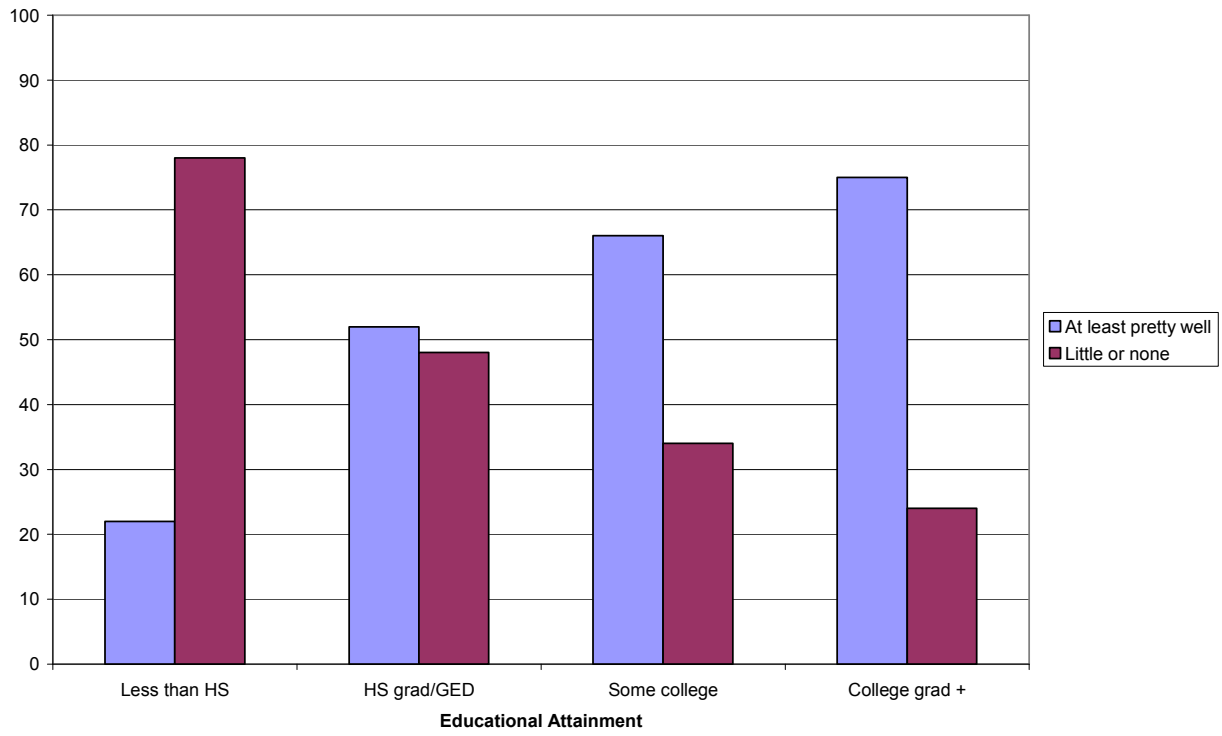
**Language Use at Work Among Foreign-Born Hispanics by Decade of Arrival**



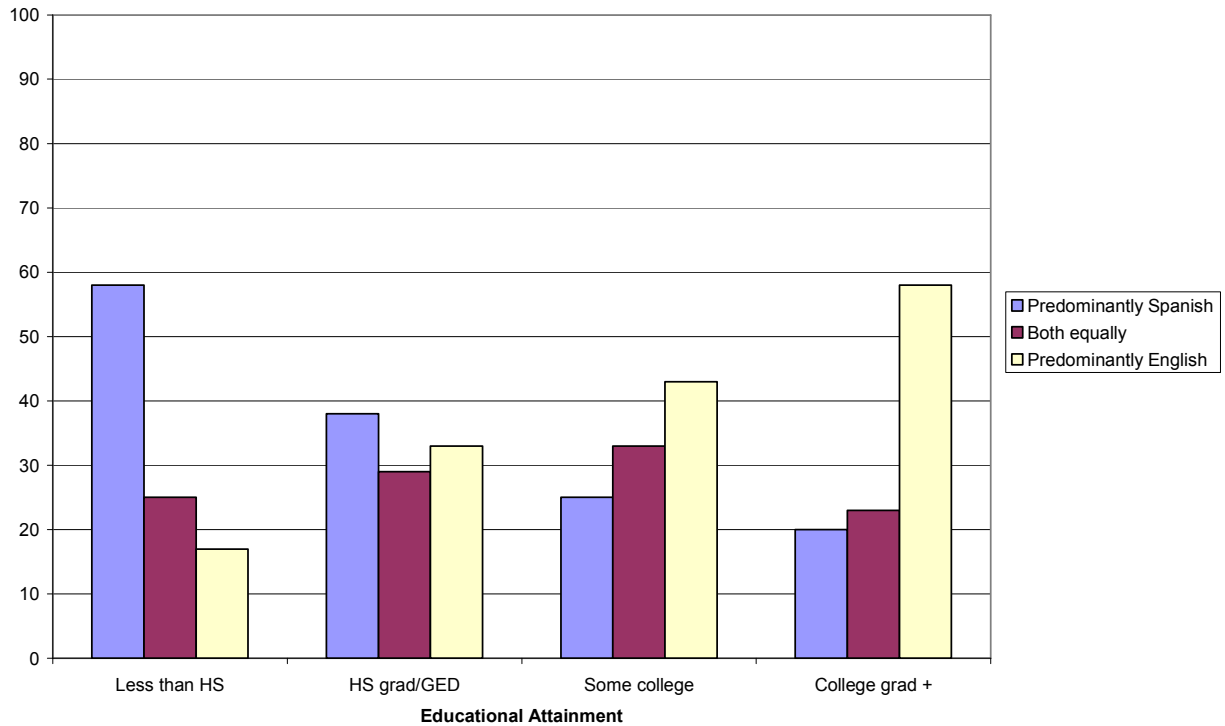
**Educational Attainment is strongly correlated with English ability**

The data suggests a clear correlation between educational attainment and English proficiency. Among foreign-born Latinos who have not completed high school, 24% report conversational English proficiency. As education increases, so does English ability. Approximately 48% of those who have completed high school can carry on a conversation in English, and among college graduates the figure increases to over 75%. A higher percentage of college graduates report proficiency in reading English, with 80% of respondents answering in the affirmative. Educational levels are also correlated with language at work. Among first-generation Latinos who are college graduates, at least 55% use English as their primary language at work, compared with 18% of non-high school graduates. At home, college graduates report higher levels of bilingualism and English dominance, while less educated groups are more likely to use Spanish as their home language.

**English Speaking Ability Among Foreign-Born Hispanics by Educational Attainment**



**Language Use at Work Among Foreign-Born Hispanics by Educational Attainment**



**There is a gender split in language used at work**

Foreign-born Latino men report slightly higher levels of English speaking and reading proficiency than women. About 45% of men and 40% of women can carry on a conversation in English, a difference that is within the margin of error. Reading proficiencies are similarly close. Men and women report nearly identical language usage at home, but the data on language at work points to a notable result. Among foreign-born Latinos who work, women are more likely to speak Spanish, while men are more likely to speak English or to use both languages equally. On average, 62% of Latino immigrant men use primarily English on the job or speak both languages equally, while only 49% of Latina immigrant women do the same.

**Loss of Spanish competence may not be quite so rapid**

Among second generation Latinos 95% report that they can carry on a conversation in English “pretty well” or “very well.” For the third generation, the number climbs to 98%. Reading proficiency follows close behind, with over 90% of second generation respondents able to read English and 95% of third generation able to do so. However, Spanish continues to be spoken at home by a sizeable minority of the Latino second generation. 50% speak predominantly English at home, indicating a growing trend towards spoken bilingualism. Among third generation Latinos, nearly 80% use English as their primary language at home, with less than 5% reporting Spanish dominance. First generation households, by contrast, tend to speak mostly Spanish, with 70% of respondents reporting it as their dominant home language.